

FORUM LETTER

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Life is but a parenthesis

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When [God] speaks to a Christian, his name is Alpha and Omega, first and last, that a Christian may, in the very name of God, fix his thoughts upon his beginning and upon his end, and ever remember that as a few years since, in his cradle, he had no sense of that honour, those riches, those pleasures, which possess his time now, so God knows how few days hence, in his grave, he shall have no sense, no memory of them. Our whole life is but a parenthesis; our receiving of our soul and delivering it back again makes up the perfect sentence; Christ is Alpha and Omega, and our Alpha and Omega is all we are to consider. . . . This world then is but an occasional world, a world only to be used; and that but so as though we used it not: the next world is the world to be enjoyed, and that so as that we may joy in nothing by the way but as it directs and conduces to that end; nay, though we have no joy at all, though God deny us all conveniences here, . . . though he end a weary life, with a painful death, as there is no other hope but in him, so there needs no other, for that alone is both abundant and infallible in itself. . . . Yea, if those spiritual afflictions which reach to the understanding . . . do fall upon us, . . . that is, we come to see how much we mistook the matter when we fell in love with worldly things (as certainly, once in our lives, though it be but upon our death-beds, we do come to discover that deceit), yea, when the deceit is so spiritual as that it reaches not only to the understanding but to the conscience [which has] been deceived either with security at one time, or with anxieties, and unnecessary scruples, and impertinent perplexities at another . . . yet to what height soever this deceit or this temptation should come, God comes with it; and, *with God, there is strength and wisdom*, he discerns our distresses, and is able to succour us in them. . . . So then the children of God, are the marble and the ivory upon which he works; in them his purpose is to re-engrave and restore his image; and affliction, and the malignity of man, and the deceits of heretics, and the temptations of the devil himself, are but his instruments, his tools, to make his image more discernible, and more durable in us. —John Donne, *Sermon CXI* [on Job 13.15] in *The Works of John Donne, D. D.* (1839; v. 4, pp. 538f.)

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As theological education turns



Anyone who has been paying attention knows that theological education—or, more precisely, theological education as we have known it—is in trouble. Enrollment, which hit a high water mark during the Vietnam era when draft deferments encouraged many young men to attend seminary, has been declining. The downward drift has not been stemmed even

by the influx of women and second career men over the past couple of decades; those factors led to a more recent enrollment peak about ten years ago, but the numbers have declined pretty steadily since then.

Precise figures are difficult to gather. There doesn't seem to be one place where one can find comprehensive comparative figures across a wide spectrum of theological schools over several years. According to one report, enrollment at the seminaries affiliated with the Episcopal Church has dropped 35% in the past five years. That's a pretty extreme drop; if it is true, it may reflect the current unrest within the Episcopal Church and its continuing membership decline. But the Association of Theological Schools (ATS), the accrediting agency for most mainstream seminaries in North America, suggests that seminary enrollment across the board has been declining an average of one percent per year.

Rising costs

Even more devastating has been the soaring cost of all higher education. Start with the cost to institutions themselves. Luther Seminary offers perhaps the most dramatic example of a serious financial crisis in recent months, but it is hardly the only institution struggling to make ends meet. Deferred maintenance, faculty reductions, program eliminations, institutional consolidations — all these strategies and more have been tried by one school after another. Sometimes the strategies seem to address the immediate problem, but the effects on the long-term quality of education is another question.

Of course these institutional costs are passed on to students, who then have to think twice about whether the prospective indebtedness is a wise decision when, to put it crassly, the job market is shrinking and what jobs there are just don't pay that much. Years ago — it seems like a lifetime ago — students could attend seminary without incurring debt. Many costs were paid by denominational funds as an investment in the future. Those days are long gone.

The times, they are a-changin'

All of this points to the fact that theological education is changing, and changing rapidly. Of course this should not surprise us. The model of

seminary education that has been in place for many decades was itself an innovation back in the 19th century, and it has served the church reasonably well. What is emerging is not yet entirely clear, nor can we be sure how well new models will serve the church.

One trend has been the merger of "stand alone" seminaries with church-related universities. In this model, the seminary comes under the university's umbrella as its "theological school." Two of the eight ELCA seminaries have now made this transformation; Southern merged with Lenoir-Rhyne University last year, and Pacific Lutheran has recently formalized a merger with California Lutheran University.

Pointing back?

It is not just Lutherans who are doing this. Mennonite Biblical Seminary in Fresno, CA, has merged with Fresno Pacific University; Michigan Theological Seminary with Moody Theological Seminary (and thereby with Moody Bible Institute). The Jesuit School of Theology in Berkeley, CA, has become the seminary of Santa Clara University. That last one is a bit ironic, since JST actually started out as a school of the Jesuit university and then became independent. Now it is returning home.

All of these mergers may be pointing us back to a day when much theological education actually went on in conjunction with universities and colleges. There are obvious advantages to this move; the seminary is relieved of considerable administrative overhead, while the university gains an already existing and well-functioning graduate department. There is at least the potential that this could pull some universities which had been church-related in name only back into a more cozy relationship with their Christian roots. That would be a good thing, though I wouldn't hold my breath; the influence could just as well go the other way, with the seminaries becoming more academic and less concerned about training pastors for the church.

New direction

The North American Lutheran Church has been tackling theological education from a somewhat different direction. With the luxury and challenge of being a newly-organized church body, the NALC can think about things in some new ways,

and they are doing so. They've chosen a sort of two-pronged strategy, developed under the heading of North American Lutheran Seminary.

The first component will be the Seminary Center, located at Trinity School for Ministry in Ambridge, PA. Trinity bills itself as "an evangelical seminary in the Anglican tradition," so it is, in itself, something of a new approach, founded in the 1970s by evangelical Episcopalians who were not entirely happy with their denominational seminaries. The NALC Seminary Center will be directed by Dr. Amy Schifrin, who will have a joint faculty appointment with Trinity.

The other prong will be individual houses of study located in a variety of places. There already is such a house at the Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary campus in Charlotte, NC, being directed by Dr. Mary Havens, who lost her job at Southern Seminary in the process of its merger with Lenoir-Rhyne. Dr. Schifrin will oversee the pastoral formation of NALC seminarians, whether at Trinity or one of the houses of studies.

The concept is that of a single seminary with one faculty, one curriculum and focus, but multiple locations. Students will be able to take classes at any of the locations, as well as at "hosting institutions" such as Trinity or Gordon-Conwell. This rather unique partnership with seminaries of other traditions is an interesting experiment; the NALC is beginning a million-dollar fund-raising effort to make it happen.

Plugging in, logging on

No doubt the biggest transformation in theological education is the rise of distance learning, which is mostly done online. The ATS raised some eyebrows last year when it changed its policy to allow some schools to offer M.Div. and other professional degree programs entirely online. Previously there had been restrictions on what percentage of a student's work might be done in this way, but this year some six theological schools were given the OK to offer all-online degrees. None of them happen to be Lutheran, but who would be surprised if Lutheran seminaries continue to move in that direction? Luther Seminary already offers an M.Div. program that can be done mostly online (but with some required intensive courses on the St. Paul campus).

Online classes aren't just for distance learn-

ing programs, however. Increasing numbers of students who are actually in residence at a seminary take some of their classes online for convenience or scheduling purposes. Dan Aleshire, executive director of ATS, recently told *Christian Century* that as of last year, nearly 40% of residential seminary students have taken at least one online class while on campus.

Enthusiasm and skepticism

Many younger people see this trend as not only inevitable, but meet, right and salutary. They are plugged into technology in ways that even the most techno-savvy baby boomers are not, and for them, this is just the way education really should be. It saves the student a good bit of money and hassle because he or she doesn't have to move to a new location, give up a well-paying job, uproot a family.

As you might imagine, though, when I talk to pastors who have been out of seminary for a while, I hear a great deal of anxiety and skepticism about distance learning. Some of this is simply due to ignorance about what it means; they have in their minds some kind of "correspondence school" model where you read the material, send in the assignments, and get a degree. That is not really the way it works.

I've been teaching online courses for Fuller Theological Seminary now for several quarters. In my view, it is neither the panacea that younger people envision, nor the travesty that many older people fear. People ask me how I like it, and my response (depending on the day) is usually something like: "While I still prefer the physical classroom, the online experience is much more satisfying than I anticipated."

What does it look like?

This is usually followed by a question along the lines of: "But how does it work, exactly? What does it look like?" Perhaps that's a question some *Forum Letter* readers have, so let me tell you how it works and what it looks like for me — recognizing that there are many different models and many different experiences.

When I was first asked to consider teaching online, I was invited to take an online class in how to teach online. That's not as silly as it sounds; it was a great opportunity to experience the process

from the point of view of the student. What impressed me immediately – and reassured me, I must say – is that this online class was not at all what I expected. I thought the focus would be mostly about technology: how to deliver content, how to manage the software. It was very little of that. Instead, it was almost entirely about pedagogy: how to make an online class a valuable learning experience for the student. (The downside of this, of course, is that it left me pretty much to my own devices in terms of navigating the technological issues. But I'm not completely inept at the computer keyboard, and the distance learning people are always there with advice and counsel about technical matters.)

Before I taught the first class, I sat down with a friend, a former parishioner, who is doing the online M.Div. program at Luther. I asked her about her experience as a student, and I got an earful.

Disconnected

The most frustrating thing, she said, was feeling disconnected from the professor. Some professors were slow in responding to emails. Some just recorded classroom lectures for you to watch or listen to – sort of like “The Teaching Company,” only not as good. Some gave the distinct impression that online students were not as important as flesh and blood students in the classroom.

With that conversation in mind, I tried to design a course (it was Modern Church History) that would avoid those pitfalls. First, no talking head lectures. The exception is a 15-minute video introduction to the course where I introduce myself to the students and say the usual things a teacher says at the beginning of a course about expectations and general housekeeping matters. (I'm getting better at figuring out how to make it feel like I'm actually looking right at the viewers.) The point of this is to help them see that I'm a real professor. Even though I'm recording in my living room, I wear a tie.

The course has many of the components of a classroom course – assigned readings, exams, a research paper. The instructional content is delivered using a glorified powerpoint presentation with audio. It's essentially the slide presentation I use in the classroom, with an abbreviated audio lecture; an hour's classroom lecture might be reduced to thirty or forty minutes of viewing time.

Facilitation

The trickiest part of the process is facilitating student interaction. This is done through a series of required “posts.” I actually ask for two different responses each week. First, each week starts with a devotional piece which provides a hymn (generally a YouTube video), a brief extract from a sermon or other devotional writing, and a prayer – all from the period or group that we will be studying that week (Puritans, Pietists, Wesleyans, etc.). I invite the students actually to use this as their own devotional exercise – sing along with the hymn, pray the prayer – and then to post a brief response, outlining what moved them, challenged them, puzzled them. My aim is for them to experience the piety and spirituality of the period as a framework for reading about the history.

Then each week they have a primary source reading to do. It might be a chapter from the *Westminster Confession*, or an entry from John Wesley's *Journal*, or a sermon from the Oxford Movement. There is a prompt to which they are to respond; and they are also asked to respond to at least one other student. The hope is that some conversation will go on. Sometimes it works.

My job as the teacher is to read all the posts. I tell them up front I won't respond to every one of them, but I do try to respond to every student at least a couple of times during the quarter. A few weeks in, I also email each of them individually with some feedback about how I think they're doing. There are other components, of course, but that's an overview.

Pros and cons

My sense is that there are some very positive things about this kind of class. One is obviously convenience – not just that students don't have to be on campus to enroll (and I have students literally all over the world), but that they can work on their own schedule and (to some extent) at their own pace. The online experience tends to be helpful for students who are somewhat introverted – you know, those who won't ever say anything in class, but feel free to chime in online. Sometimes the email exchanges I have with students are more extensive than the casual conversations you have in a classroom.

On the other hand, the online environment makes it fairly easy for a student to try to skate (and

in some ways I think it attracts students who think it will be easier). To be a successful student requires somewhat more discipline, seems to me, than in a traditional course. Some students think that because the class is online, they can do all the research they need to do for their paper online as well, and sometimes that just doesn't work. (I encourage students to become familiar with a seminary or university library if there's one anywhere near where they live.) Worst of all, it seems to me that academic integrity issues seem to come up more often in online classes than in the classroom—in spite of the fact that I warn them that if they use the internet to plagiarize, I can uncover their academic sin more quickly than they can accomplish it.

What they'll miss

Having said all this, I also have to say that I think students who do an entire seminary program online miss a great deal. Online conversations can be fine, but they are not as rich as face-to-face encounters. When I think about my own seminary experience, the classroom—as important as it was—was hardly the only learning context. A significant part of my education took place at the refectory, over meals; in the chapel, praying together; even at

Archie's Pub, drinking beer together. I learned so very much walking downtown with a friend to see a movie, or having coffee with a professor. My formation took place in part during those hours in the seminary library, studying together with other students or alone. These are the things that are missing from an online class. Education is not just learning content.

Exciting times

For all the challenges facing theological education, this is an exciting time. New models, new technologies, a new generation. "Theological education," the ATS's Aleshire told *Christian Century*, "is at the front end of a grand diversification in the coming decade." The days are certainly gone when pious young men and women went off to a remote place to study and pray together with other pious young men and women (if those days ever existed). But then before that, the days disappeared when a young man learned to be a pastor by studying for years with a seasoned pastor who had been in a congregation for decades. Things change, and the challenge is to be like the householder who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.

—by Richard O. Johnson, editor

On the pastoral call



Few things are more difficult at a personal level for pastors than considering a new call. A call to another congregation has the potential to pit ministry against family, congregation against congregation, ambition against vocation, what is personal against what is public, and so on down the line. Every relationship in the pastor's life feels the tension, often including his relationship to God. It is a difficult process, and one that pastors have historically handled in drastically different ways.

God or our sinful nature?

My grandfather, whose halo still lingers in the imagination of St. Martin's in Clintonville, WI, took the call there in part to combat pride. He was very urbane by nature, and as the son and grandson of prominent LCMS pastors, he was early on consid-

ered an up-and-comer who could go anywhere he wanted in synod. He received many calls as a young man to the big churches in the big centers of the synod at the time—Ft. Wayne, Milwaukee, Concordia—Bronxville. He declined calls to places he would have loved to go on the theory that it was ambition inclining him to go to those places. He took the call to Clintonville, sight unseen, on the theory that he really, really didn't want to go there, so that call must be God talking, not his sinful nature.

He served the rest of his career there, from 1929 to 1962, and became quite a legend. A local legend, to be sure, but nonetheless legendary for that. He is buried there in the church cemetery in a plot off to the side that is perpendicular to the rest of the plots so that, as he liked to say, on Judgment Day he could take attendance of his flock. In other words,

he wasn't making choices based on what would make him happy in, say, 1950. He had the Last Day in mind.

But for all that, he was not playing to his strengths. He fell into a deep depression the minute he took the call and never quite fit in there, even as the years went by. He always drove to Appleton, the closest place where somewhat fashionable clothes were available, to purchase his shirts and bow ties, and he corresponded with various luminaries of synod despite the obscurity of his particular outpost. He loved his people and used the talents he had to serve them. And that was enough.

Corporate job search

Or was it? A lot is changing in Lutheranism and in the LCMS in particular. When it comes to divine calls, it used to be a matter of prayer and spiritual discernment, with efforts to walk by sight rather than faith considered uncouth. Now the process is becoming more and more indistinguishable from a regular corporate job search. At first it was congregations demanding that prospective pastors "audition" for them as a guest preacher (an obscene practice that reduces the proclamation of God's Word to a cheesy performance art) or otherwise prove they weren't dry, unpersonable, pedantic, or had any such horrible trait that would kill any congregation seeking to be competitive in a consumerist culture.

But pastors also chimed in with obscene practices of their own, haggling and making counter-offers on calls with insufficient salaries and so forth. The whole idea that it is a call from God demanding, if necessary, total self-sacrifice and not a job offer from an employer is falling by the wayside. Fewer people are willing to sacrifice happiness in the years of life granted to them with a vision of Judgment Day firmly in mind.

Taking matters into one's own hands

Part of this creeping change might be a result of the worship wars. Too many churches have been burned by pastors coming in and changing everything with a "we have to kill this church in order to save it" attitude, so they want some assurance beforehand. And part of it may be the relative dearth of available pastoral positions. Congregations are shrinking, costs of education and health care are

skyrocketing, and retirement-age pastors aren't retiring. Thus many pastors who went way into debt for an education that doesn't translate into any other job are sweating it out and starting to take matters into their own hands, rather than sitting around and waiting for an envelope with a call in it to show up in the mailbox. But whatever the reason, congregational call processes and pastoral deliberations of them are increasingly and unapologetically a matter of walking by sight.

Pastor as credibility bringer

I recently had an inquiry from a large congregation wanting to know if I would allow my name to be on their list for family life pastor. The job description had little to do with Word and Sacrament ministry. I was told they wanted a pastor because it gave credibility to the position that a layperson couldn't bring. Part of the job description was to enthusiastically share and support the lead pastor's vision. The inquiry was also accompanied by an application of sorts, complete with personality profile. The lead pastor who phoned me said his assumption was that the Holy Spirit could work just as easily in broad daylight as in the dark, so why not just use every tool available to come to a decision?

Which brings me back to my grandfather, who knew something that everyone used to know. Yes, the Holy Spirit CAN work through a corporate headhunter just as easily as through the casting of lots. But ambition and pride cannot; they need the visible tools. The sinful nature, the demand for ownership and control of the church, can only operate by sight and the assumption that the lead pastor's vision is God's vision. The early disciples showed a lot of wisdom in replacing Judas when they used their God-given reason to narrow the list of candidates to two but then recognized the limitations of their God-given reason by casting lots, which is an act of humility and release of control.

Thy will be done

When it comes to pairing up pastors and congregations, is there anything in between throwing darts blindfolded and doing exhaustive, corporate-style job searches? While I have grave reservations about the natural inclination to walk by sight, I can't say I necessarily endorse my grandfather's thinking, either. I just don't think his way should be

dismissed as unreasonable out of hand. God did great things through it, after all, and certainly pride and ambition are dangerous to ministry and can only thrive when we can see where we're going and have control.

Like congregations considering pastors, pastors considering calls usually try to think in terms of "Thy will be done," with the same problematic issue of how and to what degree to determine God's will walking by sight. But I think the most comforting thing in the catechism for a pastor considering a call is the explanation to the sixth petition. "God tempts no one." When you have two calls, one of them is not the right one that God secretly wants you take and the other a false path put there to lead you down a wrong road. It isn't a matter of discerning which one is REALLY a divine call and which one isn't. It isn't a matter of looking for signs and interpreting coincidences and hoping to guess correctly which one you were supposed to take. No divine call in itself is a temptation. It's more like God putting a choice before you, and promising to go with you down either road. Of course one might offer more bait for pride and ambition, in which it might be the better one to shun for the sake of ministry, but that is the real matter for discernment by the individual.

Asking God to tell you which call to take seems to me to miss the point. Both are good. Both have pros and cons. God will work through either one. He is like a father taking his child for ice cream.

The child, overwhelmed by the responsibility of choosing a flavor and the terrible consequences that may result, might ask the father to choose for him. But there is no right choice. The father doesn't put a poisonous flavor in among the choices.

Please bless it

In this sense, calling congregations and pastors considering calls do indeed do something akin (by imperfect analogy) to marriage. The bride and groom make the choice to marry each other. They are asked, "Will you do this? Will you unite your lives as one?" Yet when they say yes, the pastor announces that God has just joined them together. So who did it — the bride and groom, or God?

Did God call the pastor to the congregation? Was it a match made in heaven? Yes. Did the congregation and pastor choose each other? Was it a match made through human reason? Yes. A good call process and good process of deliberation by the pastor takes both directions into account.

My vicarage supervisor, Pr. Brad Beckman (then of Messiah Lutheran in St. Louis), told me something about call deliberations that has stayed with me. He said pray about it, think about it, come to the best conclusion you can, then take ownership of the choice but give ownership of the consequences to God. He advised me after making my choice, to pray, "Father, this is the choice I have made. Please bless it." That, it seems to me, is wisdom.

— by Peter Speckhard, associate editor

Omnium gatherum



Pacific sea change • Big changes coming for Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary in Berkeley. A merger has now been finalized whereby PLTS will become the theological school of California Lutheran University in Thousand Oaks — an arrangement not unlike that recently accomplished between Lutheran Southern Theological Seminary and Lenoir-Rhyne University. The two California schools are considerably farther apart geographically than the Carolina schools, so that may present challenges. On top of that major change, PLTS President Phyllis Anderson retired December 31 and will be replaced by Karen Bloomquist (whose title in the new configuration

will be dean and chief administrative officer). Furthermore, two long-time faculty members have also left as of the end of 2013. Tom Rogers, homiletics professor for twenty years, has retired; Jane Strohl, Reformation history professor since 1996, is returning to parish ministry. With a small faculty, that's a lot of turnover.

Planning for Advent • I know, I know, we just finished another Advent and Christmas season, and it's way too early to think about next year. But what better time? Ash Wednesday is late this year, so why not use the down weeks of January to do some preliminary planning for next Advent? You'll be

glad when the fall rolls around. With that in mind, you might have a look at a new resource from Sola Publishing entitled *Advent Adventures: A Novel Approach to the Season*. Created by Pr. Paul Koch, this series offers what is essentially a four-chapter novela (written by Pr. Koch; some of the volumes have only three chapters, designed for Advents with fewer midweek services), followed by an Advent reflection based on the fiction. An interesting approach, and one which might work well in some parish settings, or for personal devotions during the season. Order them now (and then try to remember where you put them); available from solapublishing.org.

Among principalities • If you're going to be planning already for next Advent, you surely should thinking about 2014 continuing education opportunities. One that always promises a stimulating time is the annual Pro Ecclesia conference of the Center for Catholic and Evangelical Theology. The 2014 event is once again scheduled for Loyola University in Baltimore, and the dates are June 9-11, 2014. "Life Amid the Principalities" is the theme, and speakers will consider the question: "What are the principalities and powers of our time? How do we understand them as created, fallen, and disarmed? How does the Christian today engage these powers?" The speakers come from a variety of traditions, Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant. For more information visit www.e-ccet.org.

Comfort, comfort • Or, here's yet another continuing education possibility, with an Adventish title, if not entirely an Advent theme. The LCMS's Office of

National Mission: Worship offers a triennial Institute on Liturgy, Preaching and Church Music, and this is the year. Scheduled for July 28-31 at Concoridia Nebraska in Seward, the theme is "Comfort, Comfort Ye My People—Praying, Preaching and Singing the Comfort of Christ to the Troubled Conscience and the Broken Heart." As the title suggests, this is a more "hands-on, practical theology" kind of event, with stimulating keynote, but also lots of workshops on many aspects of parish liturgy. A real bargain if you are an undergraduate or seminary student, for you can register for just \$25. Complete registration information isn't available yet, but we'll keep you posted.

May in Alberta • Still another forthcoming conference, and then I'll stop. The Canadian Rockies Theological Conference takes place in Canmore, AB, with the provocative theme, "The Lutheran Doctrine of Vocation as an Antidote to Today's Lethal Me-Culture." The keynote speaker will be Dr. Uwe Siemon-Netto, former religion editor of United Press International, and the respondent will be Dr. Walter Sundberg of Luther Seminary. For additional information and registration, contact Pr. Phil Gagnon at pastorphil@me.com. (Given the theme, you've got to love his email address.)

Sassy • I still get notes from readers about the question of *Forum Letter's* alleged snarkiness. A recent handwritten note that came with a subscription renewal pled, using more old-fashioned terminology, "Dear Editor: Please continue to be 'sassy' in your views." OK, we'll do our best. —roj

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