

FORUM LETTER

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The devil gladly pretends

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The third temptation is to temporal honor and power, as the words of the devil clearly state. He shows Christ all the kingdoms of the world and offers to give them, if He would worship him [Matt. 4:9]. This applies to those who fall away from faith for the sake of honor and power, so that they may have good days here, or who believe no more than what allows their honor and power to remain. This is how the heretics are who cause sects and factions among Christians in matters of faith, so that they may be haughty before the world and live in honor. This third temptation can be placed on the right side, just as the first [temptation] is on the left side. The first is the temptation of misfortune, by which we are incited to anger, impatience, and unbelief. The third and last is the temptation of prosperity, by which we are incited to pleasure, honor, joy, and whatever is high. The second and middle [temptation] is completely spiritual and uses hidden snares and error to lead reason away from faith. Whomever the devil cannot overcome with poverty, scarcity, need, and misery, he attacks with riches, favor, honor, pleasure, power, and the like, and fights on both sides against us. St. Peter says that he prowls around and around [1 Peter 5:8]. Those he cannot overthrow with suffering or love – that is, neither with the first [temptation] to the left side nor with the third [temptation] to the right side – he goes beyond this again and attacks us with error, blindness, and a false understanding of Scripture. If he wins there, then things go well neither on the left nor on the right. Rather, whether we suffer poverty or have abundance, whether we fight or acknowledge our defeat, all is lost. In error, neither patience in misfortune nor steadfastness in prosperity help, since both points often describe the heretics, and the devil gladly pretends to be vanquished (even though he is not vanquished) in the first and last [temptations] when he has won only in the middle or second [temptation].

– Martin Luther, *Sermon on the Gospel for the First Sunday in Lent*, in *Luther's Works Volume 76: Church Postil II* (Concordia Publishing House, 2013), 373.

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Life over at Forum Online



Recently Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod President Matthew Harrison led a contingent of church officials on a tour of Africa and announced that the LCMS has entered into formal discussion with one of the biggest Lutheran church bodies in the world, the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus (EECMY). So what?

When something new or interesting happens in the world of Lutheranism, there are several places one can go in an attempt to get up to speed. You can go to the official sources, like synodical news releases or websites, which

tend to be heavy on names and short on stuff anyone but the grandmothers of those involved is actually interested in. I could quote the official LCMS press release about the EECMY right here, but I'm warning you, it contains several paragraphs of names with full honorifics and long titles, specific dates, times, and places, and at least two paragraphs taken directly from the LCMS constitution. It doesn't really answer the "so what?" question very well.

Then there are the academic journals, which go into depth about the historical and theological ramifications of the event. These articles tend to come out many months, if not years, after the actual events and are typically very long and boring to everyone but theology nerds (you know who you are — just wear the label with pride). So in about 2016 you will no doubt be able to read someone's master's thesis about how the LCMS/EECMY dialog is or is not changing the face of global Lutheranism as it relates to the theological underpinning of Gerhard's *Sacred Meditations*.

What we do, and why

Then there are the newsletters like what you hold in your hands (or, for some, view on your screen), *Forum Letter*, which offers what has been called "high level theological gossip" — sort of like an opinion show where all the commentators parse the boring news release in terms of its actual significance and do so from distinct perspectives and with the occasional spice of humor and satire, called wit when you agree with it and mean-spiritedness when you don't. We answer the "so what?" question in real terms and in real time. Or close to real time. Somewhat close.

Actually *Forum Letter* isn't so much a category anymore as a lone holdout. Most publications dedicated to dissecting and analyzing (and in some cases skewering) the news of Lutheranism in order to keep readers up to speed with the actual buzz have gone online, which is far cheaper, faster, and more versatile. And I mean drastically so. On all three counts.

But online discussion isn't really the same. We continue to offer the mailed paper version despite the obstacles (like last month's problems with the printer) for several reasons. First, the heart of American Lutheranism is also paper mill country. Second, it's tradition. Third, some people just like

the feel of real paper in their hands and the look of real ink on a page instead of a lit screen. Fourth, some people refuse to buy into the internet craze and are patiently awaiting a return to cultural sanity and are NOT, repeat, NOT simply incapable of following their grand-niece's hand-written instructions on how to find the internet on the computer. No, they could log on any time, but it is the principle of the thing.

Conversation in a bar

But even if all those reasons went away, it would still be true that the change in medium affects the discussion greatly. If *Forum Letter* is like the talk show where people analyze, debate, offer differing perspectives and in some cases poke fun at the official news release, then our own online vehicle, *Forum Online*, is like the discussion in the restaurant or bar — free-ranging, several semi-related topics at once, some shouting and/or heated exchanges, much guesswork and musing out loud, much that is absurd or sometimes extremely insightful or profound (but those people tend not to speak as loudly, so they often get missed in the hubbub). Things rapidly get proposed and explained from every angle and bias with much meandering of subject matter.

This means that online forum posts require a different kind of writing, as different from a *Forum Letter* article as such an article is from an official news release or academic paper. When you're writing an article, you have the floor. You're making a prepared speech, so to speak. When you're posting online, you're doing no such thing. You're interjecting, or trying to interject. You don't get to control the flow of the conversation. People interrupt and demand definitions of terms, offer contradictions of your data, make the point you were just about to make only better, ignore the fact that you just proved them wrong, get irritated with you and start talking smack, and so on.

A different animal

The writing in online posts is less considered and temperate and therefore in some ways more passionate and honest. It is riddled with typos because it is rarely edited. It seldom stays on topic. So *Forum Online* is not just *Forum Letter* in electronic form. It is a different animal altogether, and quite valuable precisely because of the advantages of the medium.

For the sake of the paper readers who perhaps have never ventured over to *Forum Online*, I want to use the topic that began this article – President Harrison’s meeting with the EECMY and the announcement of formal talks – to compare how *Forum Letter* and *Forum Online* handle that news.

At *Forum Letter* we would ask someone to write an article, and that person would have a particular take on the subject but would also hopefully acknowledge the other takes out there. For example, some see this as a big in-your-face to the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, since the EECMY severed some formal ties with the ELCA recently, in large part because of the sexuality decisions of the 2009 Churchwide Assembly. Others see it as President Harrison grandstanding, since in reality the EECMY already has established formal ties with the North American Lutheran Church. Others see it as Harrison selling out, since the prize of establishing fellowship with one of the biggest and fastest-growing Lutheran churches in the world might tempt the LCMS into doctrinal compromise. Others see that last take as another example of the LCMS conservative circular firing squad turning on one of their own again. Others see it as opening the door to a change on women’s ordination, since the EECMY has a small number of women pastors. Others see it as the LCMS finally stepping up on the international stage.

Few of those considerations, naturally, make it into the official press release announcing the decision to hold formal talks, and of course it is years before the academic papers come out. So *Forum Letter* is where enlightened people go to find out the real deal. So that article would be written soon after the event, edited and proofed, published 1-2 months later. Feedback would come in, hopefully in time for the next issue but more likely for the issue after that. That isn’t how it happens online.

How it starts

In the case of the LCMS/EECMY news, the *Forum Online* discussion started on January 27 when the Rev. Jeremy Loesch posted the press release from the *Witness, Mercy, Life Together* blog (President Harrison’s office) announcing formal talks between the two church bodies. As of this writing less than three weeks later there have been 335 subsequent posts under that topic thread, and it has been

viewed 7,734 times, which is fairly typical. I chose to write about this thread because it is current and because I participated in it, which is not true of all of the 3,523 topic threads (containing over a quarter million separate posts going back several years). This particular thread features comments mostly (but not exclusively) from LCMS contributors because of the nature of the topic. At any rate, here is a quick synopsis.

Within an hour or so of the initial post, several people – Prof. and military chaplain Daniel Gard of the Concordia Theological Seminary, the Rev. David Benke, president of the Atlantic District of the LCMS, Prof. Scott Yakimow of Concordia University, Portland, the Rev. Jim Butler, the Rev. Steven Tibbetts (ELCA), and the Rev. Will Weedon, LCMS Director of Worship – all responded to say they found this to be a very positive development and added some personal insights or nuances from their own experiences. (We can’t always list the posters’ full names, titles and credentials, partly because we don’t always have such information and partly because this isn’t an official press release.)

As the forum twists

The first twist to the discussion came a few hours into it when pseudonymous poster Carlvehse (subsequently revealed by another poster to be Dr. Rick Strickert) pointed out that the EECMY ordains women and used the term “patrix” for female pastor, prompting several complaints from both LCMS and ELCA contributors that it was an obnoxious term. About six pages of free-ranging comments ensued on what constitutes acceptable conversation, the rationale behind women’s ordination, who controls language, the LCMS’s history with 8th commandment issues, how to engage with those with whom we disagree, and how *Forum Online* compares to other theological forums. Participants included clergy and laity, men and women, representing the LCMS, ELCA and others. Amid all this were several posts with more details on other potential issues between the LCMS and EECMY, including participating in the Lutheran World Federation and the EECMY’s fellowship with other bodies with whom the LCMS does not have fellowship.

So right away you get the effect of a raucous atmosphere in which several conversations are happening at once. You have to learn to wade through

the things that don't interest you in order to get to the good stuff. You also quickly learn the personalities of the regular contributors and what their pet topics and areas of expertise are.

But they ordain women!

The next big turn in the conversation came when "Wallenstein" somewhat with tongue in cheek proposed that the EECMY send missionaries to our inner city churches and the LCMS in turn send all pastors who don't currently have calls to Ethiopia.

Marie Meyer then asked what would happen in that case if some of the Ethiopians sent to the U.S. were ordained women. This led to many pages of discussion of how church bodies seeking fellowship yet with conflicting doctrine and practice might interact with respect and without compromise. It also included posts about the nature of urban decline and how it affects churches, whether President Harrison was going soft and would subsequently be attacked by the conservatives who got him elected, and how women's ordination relates to women's suffrage in congregations.

Does God contradict himself?

This discussion lasted several pages until Prof. Matthew Becker of Valparaiso University responded to a claim that either the LCMS or the EECMY must be right about women's ordination by claiming that perhaps the Bible simply contradicts itself on the subject, sort of like Law contradicts Gospel. This led to a long discussion on the difference between paradox and contradiction, the distinction between the Law being fulfilled and being contradicted, the nature of the Scriptures, and whether God could contradict himself.

Dr. Becker doubled down on his assertion by stating, "Human experience and the testimonies of the prophets and apostles do not allow one to avoid the real tensions and contradictions in God's own self-witnessing. This opposition is not as Marcion thought – of one god against another. The contradiction lies in God, as given in the testimony of the prophets and the apostles and as experienced by human sinners." This led to strenuous objection by many people, including yours truly, that God could not be internally self-contradictory, so the discussion ranged over how we could know that about God, Luther's insights in *Bondage of the Will*, and

many posts on the nature (or not) of the Third use of the Law. So the discussion of LCMS-EECMY talks began to include the classics of the Reformation, the ancient heretics, the Church Fathers, and much modern academic discussion.

Back on topic, sort of

Marie Meyer then tried to bring the discussion back to EECMY by pointing out that Dr. Albert Collver III is a key player as LCMS Director of Church Relations and he has written articles against the ordination of women using "orders of creation" reasoning and claiming that by God's design a woman is always under the authority of a man. Could the LCMS really be said to be listening to the EECMY position on women's ordination or to ordained women in the EECMY if we are represented at the talks by people who think about women's issues in these terms? In the ensuing responses it came up that Ethiopia has large problems with the mistreatment of women. It was also pointed out by others that Americans can hardly consider ourselves beacons of Christian morality on sex, gender and family issues, so instead of focusing on the downside of Ethiopian practices related to gender perhaps we could learn something about the downside of our own post-sexual revolution assumptions.

The side-topic about LCMS-EECMY views and practices concerning women went on concurrently with the previous one about God being or not being internally self-contradictory for quite some time, with other issues popping up intermittently, as, for example, in exchanges between the Rev. Lou Hesse (formerly LCMS then ELCA layman, now ordained in an independent Lutheran church) and the Rev. Brian Stoffregen (ELCA) about whether any of this pertained to salvation or whether respecting the other side could only happen if the other side reciprocated the respect. These side issues are sometimes very enlightening. Pr. Hesse was a layman on the ELCA Sexuality Task Force until he resigned in disgust due to the treatment his more conservative views received there, while Pr. Stoffregen tends to be very supportive of the ELCA generally and the decisions of CWA 2009 in particular.

It always boils down to Law and Gospel

As these discussions were winding down, a poster WJV responded to some of the Law/Gospel

discussion by linking to a recording of a speech by Dr. Biermann of Concordia Seminary on the topic of “Two Kinds of Righteousness” and arguing that this template incorporates the proper Law/Gospel distinction on matters of salvation while also encompassing other important aspects of the faith. Significantly, the talk claimed that 20th century theologians like Elert tended to present a truncated “Law/Gospel reductionist” view of the matter. This prompted several responses from many of the people already involved as to how faithful Elert and other 20th century Luther Renaissance theologians were to the doctrinal heritage of the Reformation, with several people bringing considerable expertise to bear but not agreeing with each other.

The thread petered out with well-worn appeals to the constancy vs. changeableness of church teaching through time and several hermeneutical points from Greek experts concerning scriptural passages on homosexuality.

If you’ve got the stomach . . .

So it was a far-flung, wide-ranging discussion involving, by my count, 44 distinct contributors (My apologies to the many not listed here. Or perhaps I should say “You’re welcome” that I didn’t list your name.) Then there are the hundreds more “lurkers” (people who read the discussion but don’t

post anything) who check the forum and take a genuine interest in following the discussion. The really interesting thing about it is that those 44 posters include all kinds of personalities and passions and a huge variety of experience and expertise. Every Lutheran synod, several Lutherans-turned-Catholics (and in some threads Lutherans-turned-Orthodox) and every viewpoint within those synods is represented. It is a genuine clash of ideas and opinions happening in more or less real time.

We continue to publish the print version of *Forum Letter* with articles like the one we could have offered this month but didn’t on the new formal talks between the LCMS and EECMY because we know, and you know, those articles are very valuable. *Forum Letter* fills a void, a niche market of discriminating, interested and informed readers. But we also encourage those with the stomach for it to venture to the *Forum Online* (www.alpb.org/forum). Lurk for a while, or join the conversation. It is a very different experience, and often (but certainly not all the time) it is well worth it. And ALPB’s *Forum Online* is just about the only place in the world of physical paper or in cyberspace where the discussion like the one I’ve briefly outlined here can happen.

—by Peter Speckhard, associate editor

Praying for my killer

By Peter C. Garrison



“But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” [Matthew 5.44]

I am in a dream state, brought on by the masseuse touching the right occipital region of my scalp, touching over old scars which curve above my ear — remnants of a bronze-age attack with a sword and stones. The scars give me a special feeling under my skin, a good feeling. My scalp there is especially sensitive and the sensation is cool and humming. I can thank my killer for that.

In this dream state I lie comfortably on the massage table and pray for my killer, wondering if he’s still alive; wondering if he has a nice life, a family, a dog.

My *would be* killer, as I am yet alive since that

Honduran afternoon in 1969 — the summer of love, of the man on the moon, and the summer of a bronze-age murder attempt as old as Abraham’s tribe. No dream.

Indeed, life was “but a dream” of a 17-year-old’s immortality until that moment I felt the dull blow (it *is* dull, not sharp as you’d think; not a bright sting, but more a shove) and turned to see my killer within the nimbus of the Central American sun.

Shown to be mortal

Do I love my enemy? He brought me to God when once I thought myself a 17-year-old immortal. Quick as a slash, I was shown to be mortal — thuds and blood and rain and mud and a cry to God that I

am going to die, not an immortal's afternoon at play in the mountains under thunderheads.

And a small dog from a small hut off the trail, the dog yapping back at the thunder, yapping at my bloody ankles. I remember that dog so clearly, wishing it to be quiet in my escape. Thinking, "Should I follow it to the hut – or is my killer waiting there?"

Teach us to number our days

Do I love my enemy? He gave me the day most in-focus of my life, a day filled with adrenaline-charged blood pouring all over me, my clothes, the mud, memories of pebbles in mud (these are fantastically clear memories), and of me joking (yes, joking – with panicked good humor), joking with God to "Keep the deal!" and rescue me.

Do I love my enemy? I feel sorry for him. The best revenge is living well, and I can't see him having lived well. Most likely he died from the sword long ago, or from the insanity that caused him to hit me from behind and leave me for dead after I fell over a stone wall into some high grass.

My future wife hugged me, hid me in some bushes, getting soaked in me, and then ran to get help. My enemy helped us bond for life. He can perhaps be loved for that.

In the pickup truck ambulance with a tinny ringing bell I ask again and again of her, "What time is it?" "3:10" "3:12" "3:30" "We're at the hospital!"

Do I love my enemy? He taught me the wisdom to number my days.

The prayers of martyrs

The tiny pickup is bouncing along again over the road. I am too white and too American and have to go to another hospital across the cobblestones of Tegucigalpa. My killer taught me the problems visited by race and ethnicity even on the dominant.

Onto a gurney, into surgery wide awake, no anesthetic; too much blood is gone. As I'm wheeled

around a corner, my future wife sees the other side of my head and screams, and she is pushed roughly into a side room. Adrenaline memories so fantastically clear.

Do I love my enemy? He taught me that mortal wounds don't hurt that much. Now I understand the reality of the beautiful Shakespearian soliloquies of dying thanes, the insightful prayers of martyrs, the famous last words of heroes.

A baby is born in the surgery room next to me. A wounded worker is put up on a white tile wall and taken away leaving blood graffiti. My enemy has taught me the importance of hospital visits and the luxury of walking out of a hospital. But I don't love him much.

There are months of surgeries and therapies and I type now with seven fingers and behind the altar my *orans* position of prayer during the *Sursum Corda* may look like the fingers of a Valasquez figure, the left middle and ring finger together, the others relaxed. It is not an artistic pose, but machete damage to the ulnar nerve. Must I love my enemy for that? I don't love him much.

Some nights

I have visited the mountain since that day, from the magic-carpet safety of Google Earth. There is a suburb on the hillside where I stumbled and prayed. On the hillside kids play with pretend weapons. Dogs yap from poolside patios at thunder. My killer teaches me my smallness in wanting the brutal hillside to remain uncivilized so I can dream of walking it again and feel sorry for myself. I have him to thank for this missed opportunity. I thank him, but not much.

"I believe, help Thou my unbelief" is as good as I can do in believing God's love for my killer, my love for my enemy.

I pray for him some nights. But not much.

Peter Garrison is pastor of Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Burlingame, CA, an ELCA congregation.

Omnium gatherum



About that blank page • Unless you have switched your subscription to *Forum*

Letter from the print version to the pdf version, you undoubtedly wondered what on earth happened to

page 6 of the February issue. Lots of readers reported it, which is good, since it means that they were paying attention. Several of them, perhaps in the spirit of the 8th commandment, proposed whimsical ideas about why the page was mostly blank. One writer wondered if it was because I was spending time in Houston with my new granddaughter. Another believed we had used invisible ink, and wondered if rubbing lemon juice on the page would reveal some new esoteric knowledge. Still another accused the National Security Administration. One reader commented on the apparent lack of snarkiness in the February issue, but supposed that maybe it was all confined to the missing page 6. *Forum Letter* readers are endlessly inventive. But the short answer is that it was a problem in the printer's shop. By now you've probably received the "corrected" version, which the printer kindly provided. Anyone who emailed us, desperate to know what they were missing, received a pdf copy in return. And of course those who regularly get the pdf copy were clueless as to the problem, since it didn't affect them. If you'd like be clueless about future problems, email Donna at the ALPB office and she would be happy to switch you over to the pdf version.

Union churches • Some pastors in the United Church of Canada in Ontario have joined Unifor, Canada's largest private sector union. The Canadian Broadcasting Company quotes one of their leaders: "A large number of colleagues are aware of issues of workplace bullying, isolation and desolation for those serving in their vocation. This has been an ongoing concern for us for many years now. . . . We've looked at various ways to address what could happen in terms of advocacy and professional development for those who are indeed in desperate circumstances." They do assure us that there is no possibility of the pastors going on strike. (CBCNews)

Australian Lutheranism • A few months back, I related some recent events in the Lutheran Church in Australia. One reader said he wasn't much interested in Australia. (The precise comment: "Who cares?") I think that's a rather shortsighted opinion; we actually do have readers in Australia (a very few), but even if we didn't, it behooves us to be conversant with the wider Lutheran world. Anyway, if

you'd like to be more conversant with it, the Epiphany issue of *Logia: A Journal of Lutheran Theology* would be a place to start, for the whole issue is dedicated to Lutheranism in Australia. I found especially interesting the article on how Lutherans of the "LCMS variety" and Lutherans of the "ELCA variety" managed to merge into one church body in 1966. (Yes, I know that's anachronistic, but you know what I mean.) There's also an interesting article on the state of worship in the Australian church. The author, Pastor Linards Jansons, teaches liturgy at Australia Lutheran College in Adelaide. While weekly Eucharist has become very common, he suggests that "frequency does not necessarily equate with depth. One suspects that a curtailed understanding of the sacrament prevails." His assessment is very interesting indeed, and not altogether irrelevant to the American scene. For more information about *Logia*, visit www.logia.org.

Mouths of babes • I couldn't possibly teach kindergarten, but I'm glad my wife does. She brings home great stories which I enjoy, even though I can no longer use them as sermon illustrations. In January she was doing a unit on Martin Luther King, Jr. She was telling the kids how it used to be that people were treated differently because of how they look, and especially because their skin might be different from someone else's. One lad carefully looked around the circle and then piped up, "Our skin here is all the same." This class in our very white county includes two Hispanics, one Filipina, and two clearly bi-racial students – more than a fourth of those in the circle. Out of the mouths of babes. . . .

As Luther turns • Latest news regarding Luther Seminary's efforts to overcome its financial problems is that the seminary will be selling a couple of apartment complexes that have provided housing for Luther students. The administration has found a buyer who, they say, will continue to offer the apartments to students at "an affordable price," and will also make significant improvements to the properties. One can understand that the students living there have some unease about all of this. The campus community has also been told the search committee for the new president is close to making a recommendation.

Scripture, canon, creed • The annual theological conference sponsored jointly by Lutheran CORE and the North American Lutheran Church is scheduled to be held at The Citadel in Charleston, SC, July 22-23. “Rightly Handling the Word of Truth: Scripture, Canon and Creed” is the theme, and speakers include Robert Benne, Mark Granquist, Stephen Hultgren, R. David Nelson, Christopher Seitz, Amy Schirrin, and David Yeago. Doesn’t look like there’s a way to register quite yet, but you might want to put it on your calendar.

Online schooling • I received several comments about my reflections on theological education in the January issue, and especially about online courses. Most of them were appreciative of learning something about how that medium works. A couple of them were unhappy that I didn’t mention the Institute of Lutheran Theology, the Brookings, SD, group that has put together what is essentially an online seminary called Christ School of Theology. Craig Nehring, who is working on an STM degree there, reports that classes “run completely in ‘real time,’” so that “when you are in class, you see and speak to the professor and other students as they are.” As I noted in my reflections, there are several different models of online education, and this one is a bit different from what I described. There’s no question that the ILT has some very good people involved in it, both in administration and teaching. On the other hand, it is not yet accredited (though they’re working on it), and that means, for instance, that the ELCA would not accept an M.Div. degree from ILT-CST as meeting its requirements for ordination. ILT

claims that “our degrees are recognized by LCMC, NALC, CALC, ELCM and the Augsburg Lutheran Churches,” and they clearly want to be considered a primary theological educator for Lutheran bodies who don’t have “their own” seminaries. My own view is that it’s too early to tell how successful they’ll be in meeting that goal, or whether it’s a good idea, but you can check them out at ilt.org.

Different strokes • Stephen Koenig admits he is being something of a curmudgeon in his response to Pr. Mark Birkholz’s article last month about preparing for worship. “Accepted pre-service decorum has been debated as long as I can remember,” he writes. “My like goes much more to the freedom of greeting, moving around and conversation than staid quietness.” To some extent, this is a “different strokes for different folks” kind of question, but as someone who would prefer to pray quietly before the liturgy begins, I would simply note that my praying quietly doesn’t interfere with your greeting, moving around and conversing, but the opposite is not the case. Not at all. In my previous parish, it was the choir members who were the worst offenders. They would come in shortly before the service began and stand in the back, waiting for the processional hymn. I could be in the sacristy, at the absolute opposite end of the nave, and I would know when they came in by the sudden increase in the volume of the chatter—obvious even over the organ. But if you can’t get those leading worship to be respectful of those who prefer to pray quietly, there’s probably not much hope of getting anyone else to do so. There, that’s *my* curmudgeonly bit for this issue. —roj

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