

FORUM LETTER

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Come unto me



When I was of the age to receive confirmation and full membership of the Church, I was told to choose a passage from the Bible as the expression of my personal approach to the Biblical message and to the Christian Church. Every confirmand was obliged to do so, and to recite the passage before the congregation. When I chose the words, ‘Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden,’ I was asked with a kind of astonishment and even irony why I had chosen that particular passage. For I was living under happy conditions and, being only fifteen years old, was without any apparent labour and burden. I could not answer at that time; I felt a little embarrassed, but basically right. And I was right, indeed; every child is right in responding immediately to those words; every adult is right in responding to them in all periods of his life, and under all the conditions of his internal and external history. These words of Jesus are universal, and fit every human being and every human situation. They are simple; they grasp the heart of the primitive as well as that of the profound, disturbing the mind of the wise. Practically every word of Jesus had this character, sharing the difference between Him as the originator and the dependent interpreters, disciples and theologians, saints and preachers. Returning for the first time in my life to the passage of my early choice, I feel just as grasped by it as at that time, but infinitely more embarrassed by its majesty, profundity, and inexhaustible meaning. — Paul Tillich, *The Shaking of the Foundations* (Scribner’s, 1948), 93ff.

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Promises, promises



“Happy families are all alike,” wrote Tolstoy; “every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.” No doubt the “Anna Karenina principle” applies to church families as well, both on the congregational and denominational level. I’m not quite sure there are that many happy church bodies these days; some of the newer ones claim to be, but they may be victims of the even more famous “honeymoon principle.” Some of the smaller ones claim to be as well, but that may just be a product of size. Larger church bodies, those that are more than a handful of congregations, seem to be pretty unhappy these days — each in its own way.

And it is difficult for outsiders to understand, though perhaps outsiders can shed light on unhappiness in a new way. Goodness knows attempts by Missouri Synod insiders to interpret and clarify the whole Seminex controversy have largely failed, even though nearly half a century has passed. I don’t think there will be a convincing account of that episode for several more decades, and

then only if a non-Missourian decides to write it.

The latest Missouri brouhaha

All of that is a lead-in to this non-Missourian giving an account of the latest brouhaha in Missouri (provided, of course, another one doesn't erupt between now and publication of this issue, which isn't necessarily a safe bet). This one hasn't hit the secular press, so perhaps our non-Missouri readers haven't heard about it yet.

One of the big events in the life of the Missouri Synod is what is dubbed "Call Day." At each of the two seminaries (on consecutive days), a service is held in which candidates for the pastoral ministry receive their first calls. Second year students and deaconess students also receive their vicarage/internship assignments, but that's a separate service held in the afternoon. The real deal is the evening service where the about-to-be-ordained learn where they're going.

As far as I can tell, this process is unique among church bodies. The closest thing to it I know is when the Methodists used to "read the appointments" at the close of their Annual Conference. Appointments by the bishop were always for one year, and pastors went to this session not knowing where they'd be going (usually within a week) until they heard it read by the bishop. But most Methodists abandoned that process long ago, and while the appointments may still be read, they aren't a surprise.

A day fraught with emotion

Not so in Missouri, however. Many of the graduating seminarians (and their wives and families) are in the dark until Call Day, so you can imagine this is a service that is fraught with emotion and anticipation, heightened by the presence of the district presidents. It's such a big deal that both seminaries livestream the service. Some congregations (especially, I suppose, those anticipating a new pastor from the graduating class) actually have local events where members can watch the service live.

This is all very interesting, and apparently a longstanding tradition. But at the service at Concordia in St. Louis this year, there was an unexpected wrinkle. After the calls were announced, the seminarians rose as a body and participated responsively in something called "Covenant of Candidates for Ministry." On the CSL website, this covenant is ex-

plained like this: "Students live together for years at Concordia Seminary in the spirit of Christian love and unity. During the Assignment of Calls, students receiving calls will declare their commitment to continue standing together as stated in this covenant, written by Seminarian Matthew Warmbier." The text of the covenant was printed as an insert in the service folder, though it was referenced in the service folder itself.

With the help of God

The covenant consisted of five questions, and let's just spell them out in full: "Do you promise to treat each other and every brother pastor with respect, patience, and loving care and concern? Do you promise to be willing to seek unity, brotherly love, forgiveness, and harmony between brother pastors for the sake of the Gospel? Do you promise to seek understanding in conflict, pray for the unity of faith, and explain everything in the kindest possible way? Do you promise to live in humility, being willing to be held accountable to this promise by your brothers standing here with you? Do you promise to faithfully encourage your brothers standing here to be accountable to this promise?" To each of these questions the seminarians responded, "I promise" — adding, to the last one, "with the help of God."

At this the congregation stood and applauded — led by the members of the Council of Presidents, who almost leapt to their feet. At least some of them had apparently been given a heads up about this prior to the service, but didn't know the content until they got there. Then the service continued with song and prayer.

Now if I, an outsider, had been present at this service, I would have found it all very moving. The music was fine, the liturgy had integrity, the sermon was engaging and gospel-oriented; what was taking place was clearly important. As an ELCA pastor, I would have found a few things jarring and peculiar — the frequent references to "men" and "brothers," for instance. But on the whole, I would have enjoyed the service. (I did watch it, by the way, so I'm not just making wild assumptions here.)

Extracting promises?

It seems, however, that some of our LCMS brothers found something peculiar that went right

past me. It was the “Covenant of Candidates for Ministry.” Pr. Todd Wilken posted on his Facebook page a seemingly simple question: “Why are we extracting promises from newly called men in addition to their ordination vows?” And then all hell broke loose.

Now we should be clear that Todd Wilken is not an uncontroversial person. He is the host of “Issues, Etc.,” a talk-radio program broadcast at the LCMS-owned station KFUE (also available as a podcast). He also has a blog, “The Bare Bulb” (at <http://thebarebulb.com/author/issuesetsite/>), where he comments on a wide variety of topics from, I think it would be fair to say, a self-consciously confessional Lutheran point of view. In other words, he is a prominent spokesman for the more conservative end of the LCMS spectrum. You should also know that, in the mind of some at the other end of the spectrum, Wilken is a pawn or tool of LCMS President Matthew Harrison, who is viewed with suspicion or worse by the “Missouri moderates.”

We should also be clear that the phrase “extracting promises” is somewhat problematic. It was stated in the service that the graduates had unanimously agreed to participate in this covenant, and that the initiative for it came from the students themselves, not from the seminary. (We’ll have to leave aside the question of whether all the students really, really, agreed with it; we all know about the power of peer pressure.)

Benign concern?

One of the problems with the internet, of course, is that words devoid of vocal inflection and facial expression can be heard in different ways. Some read Pr. Wilken’s words as a simple question – well, maybe not so simple, but at least essentially benign. His concern, as I understand it, was twofold: First, is it appropriate, given the historical weight this call service carries, for a group of seminarians to add, as it were, supererogatory promises to the established liturgy? Particularly in a church that prides itself on having two seminaries but a unified and rather tight ministerium, what does it say that the students at one seminary make promises not made by students at the other?

And second, is it appropriate for seminarians, about-to-be ordinands, to be making promises

that are above and beyond their ordination vows – and really, promises that are in a sense nothing more than what should be assumed of pastors anyway. Some skeptics – not Wilken, as far as I know – compared this to the “promise-keepers movement” where Christian men made emotional promises to keep the already-made promises of their wedding vows.

These seem to me to be fair questions, without presupposing what the answer might be. God knows, in the ELCA we’ve had some unfortunate results when people start vamping on the liturgy, adding their own creative impositions. I can see the point in asking whether this might be sort of a distraction from the “real” promises one makes at ordination. (Truth be told, to me this whole call service thing seems something of a distraction from the more important liturgical act, that of ordination; but then again, I’m an outsider.)

Reading the subtext

There is always a subtext. Even an outsider can see that one dynamic of the seminarians’ covenant is the acknowledgement that there is, within the Missouri Synod and especially within its ministerium, a history of pretty nasty disagreements. Accusations have been known to fly with alacrity when one faction or another thinks that one pastor or another has been guilty of unionism or other sins. The young seminarian who drafted the covenant indicated, when he presented it in the call service, that he and his classmates had had many differences of opinion, even many arguments, but had found a way to remain collegial and to support one another in their ministries.

It would not be unreasonable to read that as something like, “The pastors in our Synod are too contentious. We are committed to finding a better way.” That would seem to be a good thing, at least to an outsider; one might have qualms about the way this was expressed liturgically but still think that the seminarians’ hearts were in the right place, and that they were in some sense naming the elephant in the room. However, those in the “confessional” wing of Missouri might also hear this as something of a criticism of them, since it seems more common for contentious accusations to come from that direction.

Let the games begin

More common, but not always. Very shortly after the service and Wilken's posted question, thirty-two pastors signed a letter to President Harrison and other LCMS officials in which they expressed concern that Wilken had "impugned the character of these men and undermined the churchmanship they sought to nurture." These young men, the writers averred, were trying "to undo the divisive conversation that is increasingly commonplace in our synod." But Pr. Wilken, they say, "discredits the very intention of these seminarians to honor Christ who is the singular head of the body. Beyond putting the worst construction on their words, Rev. Wilken violates the very heart of Christ who prays in the hour of His death for the singularity of heart among those for whom He dies."

Strong words, to which they added a "fraternal request that the matter with Rev. Wilken be reviewed and appropriate actions be taken." Apparently, though, they neglected not only to speak to Wilken before launching this attack, but even to do him the courtesy of sending him a copy of the letter. Yeah, that's fraternal, all right.

More fraternal requests

But fear not. There are always others in Missouri ready to ride to the rescue. In this case it was another letter to President Harrison et. al., signed by — get this — thirty-three pastors, defending Wilken and expanding on the questions about the covenant. "What these seminarians need is greater clarification

to [*sic*] what the Ministerium of the Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod is, and how our unity is found in sharing the very same ordination vows with nothing added and nothing taken away." So they want the LCMS leadership to "take up the matter with" the signers of the other letter, "for ironically, they have done the very thing [of] which they have accused Pastor Wilken: broken the 8th commandment by false accusation."

Oh, and they also "fraternally request" of the LCMS leaders "that the matter of this 'covenant' and 'promises' made by the St. Louis seminarians be reviewed and appropriate actions be taken by you with the administration and faculty of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis and such action reported to the Synod."

The Missouri way

Sigh. As one participant in *Forum Online* put it: "If you want to know why Lutheran denominations are in decline, here is part of your answer." This might have been an occasion for some interesting conversation about a lot of things: the meaning of collegiality in ministry, the purpose and meaning of liturgical forms, the intersection of youthful idealism and the reality of the church, and who knows what else. Instead, it becomes yet one more occasion for acrimony, accusation, and majorly ruffled feathers all around. It is, I suppose, the quintessential Missouri Synod way of being unhappy.

— by Richard O. Johnson, editor

Pastoral call, the Confessions, and the call committee

by Ken Sundet Jones



Service on a call committee is one of the most crucial arenas of lay ministry in a congregation — and one of the most difficult. What can compound the difficulty is the lack of clarity about what a pastor's calling really is. The culture around us demands allowance for a wide variety of views about religious matters, and it is no surprise that this would be reflected even on a committee that represents those the congregation regards as both faithful and savvy. The committee will hear many voices expressing diverse visions for pastoral ministry. The Lutheran theological tradi-

tion, grounded in the work of Martin Luther and other evangelical reformers, is a trustworthy compass for them on their call process path.

Because each Lutheran congregation includes a statement of fealty to the Lutheran Confessions in its constitution and because all Lutheran pastors vow to uphold the Confessions at their ordinations, it is important that we understand what the Confessions say about that calling. Such knowledge can serve both the call committee *and* the pastoral candidate by defining the parameters of the call, even as it educates the wider congregation in under-

standing what its own call to ministry is.

Ministry in the Lutheran Confessions

The Lutheran Confessions are a set of 16th century documents drawn up by the evangelical reformers. The 1530 Augsburg Confession is the primary guiding document for Lutherans, and its core articles for understanding the pastoral calling are the first eight. They use theological language to tell the same story of salvation we find in the Bible: why we need to be saved and how God accomplishes it.

The Augsburg Confession (AC) begins by speaking about who God is (Article I) and what's gone wrong with our relationship with God (Article II): Sin has such a hold on human beings that we are captive to ourselves and "by nature" can neither fear nor trust God. In order to free us from this captivity, God takes on flesh in the person of Jesus. The AC recounts what our creeds say about what Jesus does for us: He died, rose, ascended to God and sends the Spirit to yank us into a life of freedom (Article III).

From that point on, everything in the AC centers on Jesus. He is the beginning and end of every conversation, the focus of every topic, and the one who drives all our activity in the church. To trust Christ to accomplish *all* the work of salvation without even the simplest contribution of our own is what brings salvation (Article IV) and identifies both the church and individual Christians (Articles VII and VIII). The AC calls that "justification by faith" and argues that, while our own sin-tainted works can't do the trick (even our best "powers, merits, or works"), such trust in Christ's work is the thing that saves and releases us.

Where can we get that saving faith?

Then comes a crucial article in understanding what is and is not the pastor's calling. If Article IV is about justification by *faith*, Article V asks, "Where in the world can we ever get that saving faith?" It comes in the Office of Preaching, that is, in the proclamation of God's promise in Word and Sacrament *wherever* it happens and whoever does it. The Holy Spirit makes faith happen when both our own inability to trust God and Christ's gracious gift to us are proclaimed.

The implication for a call committee is that this Office of Ministry belongs to God and *not* to a congregation or pastor. It is *God* doing the work of

salvation through *God's* ministry. Congregations and pastors are simply the means by which God can deliver the goods. In other words, because God wants to be sure we hear the saving Word of Christ, churches and pastors are given as divine "set-asides" (that's what being "holy" means). Their sole purpose is to be a guaranteed location where people who are captive to sin can be sure to hear a freeing Word that will create and sustain faith.

When God's Word brings faith, people who trust God's promise in Christ begin to see the world and their neighbors in a different light. The AC calls this the "New Obedience" (Article VI). Faithful people want to seek after others' welfare and see to the good care of the creation. The Augsburg Confession doesn't make a distinction about serving in the church or in the world, which means the gospel doesn't necessarily call us to greater religious activity in the church but instead to service where our neighbors are in need.

Implications for a call committee

If a call committee surveyed a random sample of a congregation to find out what people think is crucial in their pastor's calling, they will hear a list of places in the congregation's life where members have connected to the gospel: in community, music, ordered and creative worship, small groups, youth and family ministry, or adult education. Because the pastor is likely to have a hand in many or even all of those things, people who value them will see the pastor's calling through that lens.

At one congregation I know, for instance, the top five ministry tasks the call committee compiled reflected a congregation with some truly healthy and faithful priorities, and they were a sign of the congregation's history of vital ministry. And the list of tasks revealed both a community of people committed to what the gospel does and congregational leaders who are diligent facilitators. Even so, what lies behind all these tasks and churchly activities is the gospel itself — the thing that our Lutheran Confessions say happens when our sin is understood and Christ's benefits are proclaimed.

All the ministry tasks we list are the *means* by which God's ministry in the gospel takes place: Music makes the gospel heard. Young people in confirmation learn about the promise given to them in baptism. People in a crisis have Stephen Ministers

who visit. The altar guild sets up the Lord's Supper and the bell choirs rehearse in order to deliver good news to sinners. The church council makes sure our staff members are insured so they can concentrate on gospel work. It all happens in order to reach the same outcome: saving faith, first, and then freedom for faithful service in the world.

Putting other things before Christ

It is easy to confuse the means by which the gospel is delivered with the actual salvation God gives through them. The culture around us is mighty good at putting lots of good things *other than* Christ in front of us as essentials. This is why the first and most faithful agenda item for both a call committee *and* the pastor being called is to know what the gospel is and is not. Even the best things we strive after (like being better parents, gaining a stronger knowledge of the Bible's content, or becoming better financial stewards) are not the gospel. The proclamation of Jesus Christ alone as the one who saves sinners like us *is* the gospel.

The above-mentioned congregation's call committee had already done a splendid job discerning the congregational context for that gospel work—the essence of the pastoral call. The committee had assessed the congregation's various activities, sorted through priorities and opportunities, and drafted an orderly description of the congregation's identity, history and hoped-for future. None of those things are the gospel, though. A call committee must be clear about the central proclamation of the gospel and understand the need for its proclamation in our midst. The committee seeks to find a pastor whose clarity about Christ's work shines brightly and who has other *secondary* gifts—gifts which will be means

for the gospel's proclamation in the congregation.

The task of discernment

After that point, a call committee moves into the ultimate task of discernment: interviewing potential pastors. Before any other discussions of a pastor's gifts and talents, the primary task of a call committee in an interview is to explore whether any candidate for a pastoral call to its congregation is able to do three things: First, can this pastor speak with clarity, passion and confidence about Christ's work in his or her own life? Second, can this pastor articulate how God's demands and promises function to bring us faith in any passage of scripture? Finally, can this pastor discern the places in our community and in our lives that are ripe for hearing the gospel, so that faith might grow in us and move us to serve?

During the Reformation, Martin Luther gave a name to asking these kinds of questions. He called it "judging doctrine," and it is one of the most important tasks for lay people in any congregation. When it is done, a congregation's leaders become faithful stewards of the rich gospel treasure entrusted to them and they ensure that God's work continues among them beyond the tenure of any single pastor. What's more, in taking on this responsibility they too become part of the ultimate life-out-of-death story of God creating us and making us new, of Christ captivating us with his nail-scarred embrace, of the Spirit spurring us to faith and service.

Ken Sundet Jones is a pastor of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, currently serving as Chair of the Department of Philosophy and Religion at Grand View University, Des Moines, IA. This is his first contribution to Forum Letter.

Omnium gatherum



NALC seminary • The North American Lutheran Church and Trinity School for Ministry (Ambridge, PA) have announced that Dr. David Yeago has been appointed to Trinity's faculty, in partnership with the NALC Seminary, as professor of systematic theology and ethics. Yeago, a distinguished orthodox Lutheran

theologian, mysteriously lost his long-time position at Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary when that school merged with Lenoir-Rhyne University. (The other LTSS professor whose position was eliminated, Dr. Mary Havens, is now director of the NALC seminary house of studies at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary in Charlotte, NC.)

Yeago's appointment is good news all around, and shows that the NALC is serious about putting together a first-rate seminary program. They are unfortunately lagging just a bit in the fundraising for the program; they had hoped to raise a million dollars in the first year, but are only at about 60% of that goal. Still, that's an impressive start, and we wish them well. If you are interested in making a gift to the NALC Theological Education Fund, you can do so online at www.thenalc.org.

Hey, Dude • Andrea Palpant Dilley reports that she returned to church in her 20s, going to "the kind of church where the young, hip pastor hoisted an infant into his arms and said with sincerity, 'Dude, I baptize you in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.'" But a few years later, when she and her family moved to a new community, they "skipped the nondenominational and went straight to the traditionals," settling into an orthodox Anglican parish whose liturgy is straight *Book of Common Prayer* ("in which not once in 1,001 pages does the word 'dude' ever appear"). She offers an encouragement for churches to "take the long view." "Keep your historic identity and your ecclesial soul," she advises. "Fight the urge for perpetual reinvention, and don't watch the roll book for young adults. We're sometimes fickle. When we come, if we come, meet us where we are. Be present to our doubts and fears and frustrations. Walk with us in the perplexing challenge of postmodern faith. Even so, your church (and your denomination) might die. My generation and those following might take it apart, brick by brick, absence by absence. But the next generation might rebuild it. They might unearth the altar, the chalice and the vestments and find them not medieval but enduring. They might uncover the *Book of Common Prayer* and find it anything but common." (*Faith and Leadership* blog, <http://tinyurl.com/lgdwr78>)

On being "interreligious" • The Board of Trustees at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley unanimously approved a resolution affirming the interreligious nature of the GTU. This resolution, they say, "opens the way for other religious traditions to join the Protestant, Catholic, Unitarian, Jewish, Buddhist, and Muslim communities already represented" in the GTU. One would think that the

way is already pretty open, wouldn't one? [*Currents*, Spring 2014]

Segregated cemetery • ABC news reports that a historic Lutheran cemetery in Berlin has opened an area to be reserved for Lesbians only. A spokesperson for the Lesbian and Gay Association of Berlin approvingly noted that the provision "increases the diversity of opportunities and is a nice opportunity for those lesbian women who want to be buried among other lesbians." Yes, I suppose it does that.

ACP awards • In the Associated Church Press's "Best of the Christian Press" awards for 2013, *Forum Letter* again took a couple of prizes. In the "Personal Experience" category, your editor's "Retirement Reflections" received the "Award of Excellence" (translation: first place), while for "Department" the *Omnium gatherum* feature was given "Honorable Mention" (translation: third place). Congratulations to our friends at *Lutheran Forum*, who got the "Award of Merit" (translation: second place) for a journal in the coveted "Best in Class" competition. Other Lutheran media were also recognized in various categories. Joining *Lutheran Forum* as "Best in Class" recipients were *Concordia Journal* (Honorable Mention for a journal) and *Metro Lutheran* (Honorable Mention for regional newspaper). In addition to their "Best in Class" awards, *Concordia Journal* got an award in the theological or scholarly article category, and an award for printed non-fiction book, while *Metro Lutheran* was honored in the newspaper column category. *The Lutheran* scored well, with awards in seven different categories (feature article, illustration, single photo, in-depth coverage, Biblical interpretation, devotional, and interview). Other recipients in various categories included *Lutheran Witness* (digital edition), *LCMS Communications* (public relations), and *Lutherans Engage the World* (feature article and design, spread or story). Lutheran media rock!

What they said • Or didn't say. I'm happy to report, I guess, that not a single judge this year thought we were too snarky, and only one made a rather wistful comment about how it'd be nice if we had some pictures. But for what it's worth, the news-letters that won the awards in the "Best in Class" competition this year (for the first time in several

years, that didn't include *Forum Letter*) all had color and pictures, and none of them were snarky. We don't offer color and pictures, but something much better. As the ACP judge said about this very *Omni-um gatherum* department, it is "a very well-written section, presented in an engaging style with straightforward opinions and interpretations the author is not shy about." Yep, that's our goal.

Response to chaos • I should have known that my reflections on "Liturgical Chaos" [*FL*, April 2014] would have gotten some folks riled up, proving yet again that the worship wars are still raging in Lutheran circles. Actually the responses to the article were overwhelmingly positive (a ratio of about 3 to 1). A number of readers shared their own horror stories about the sad state of Lutheran liturgy. One retired pastor who is doing supply work reported finding white paper towels on the altar rather than purificators and half-empty individual plastic cups tossed in the trash. Others waxed philosophical — one suggesting that the liturgical mantra of our day comes from *The Big Lebowski*: "Yeah, well, you know, that's just, like, your opinion, man." But there were some dissenting voices. One pastor wrote a more or less satirical response about how he must have been doing it wrong for 36 years since he's been doing some form, I guess, of "contemporary worship" and the congregation has been growing. (He did allow as how if I printed his piece it would fill the "snarky quota" for a whole issue. That's why I couldn't print it.) But the most testy response came from David Luecke, author back in 1988 of *Evangelical Style and Lutheran Substance*, which was sort of the Magna

Carta of Lutherans who wanted to abandon the liturgy. "It is chaos," he wrote, "only if you assume that to be Lutheran is to do liturgy like it is laid out in the recent hymnals. Surely you know that Lutherans did not worship that way 70, or 100, or 300 years ago. It is a novelty that emerged among most Lutherans in America after the second world war. . . . Just wanted to point that out on behalf of those of us intent on reclaiming our Lutheran heritage of not getting hung up on ceremonies, the proper Formula of Concord term for what many now call liturgy. Incidentally, the term liturgy does not show up in the Confessions except as a footnote in its original Greek meaning." He goes on to say he's been enjoying *FL* "especially with better coverage of LCMS issues. This [April] issue was a return to the old newsletter with a very biased narrow focus that I saw little purpose in reading. I am wondering if you will be retiring soon from the editorship because you are no longer serving in a parish. It is in the congregations that the future of Lutheranism is being worked out." Did it sound to you like that wasn't so much "wondering" as "hoping"? Yeah, me too.

Save the date • The American Lutheran Publicity Bureau is celebrating its centennial year, and there's going to be a banquet. The date is October 12, the time 5 to 9 p.m. The place is Fogarty's in Bronxville, NY, and the keynote speakers will be Prof. Robert Benne and, uh, me. The cost for dinner and program will be \$40. More information about reservations will be forthcoming, but if you are, or can be, in the New York area that weekend, put it on your calendar. It promises to be a good time. — roj

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