

FORUM LETTER

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He made him the Way



The kingdom of heaven has been promised to sinners: not to those who persist in sin but to those who have been freed from sin and live for righteousness. Yet they can do this only, as we have said, when they are aided by grace and justified by him who is always just. That God should lavish so much care on human beings seemed incredible: . . . That out of the mortality, the squalor, the vileness, the weakness, and the dust and ashes of the human condition we should one day be equal to the angels of God. He was therefore not content to provide us with a written guarantee of his promise to help us believe in him. He even appointed a mediator to establish his good faith: not some nobleman, nor an angel, nor an archangel, but his only Son. Through his Son God could show us the way whereby he meant to lead us to the destiny he had promised us. But he wanted to do more than simply show us the way. It would not have been enough for God only to appoint his Son as a signpost to the way; he made him the Way, that you might walk in him who guides you. . . . The only Son of God therefore decided to come to human beings, to become a man himself by taking on our humanity, to die, to rise again, to ascend into heaven, to take his seat at the Father's right hand, and to fulfill among the Gentiles the promises he had made. . . . It was necessary that all this should be prophesied, announced in advance. We needed to be told so that our minds might be prepared. He did not will to come so suddenly that we would shrink from him in fear; rather are we meant to expect him as the one in whom we have believed. — Augustine of Hippo, "Exposition of Psalm 109" in *Expositions of the Psalms*, translated by Maria Boulding (New City Press, 2003), 262-263.

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The death of the funeral

By Nathan Corl Minnich



Death is an unavoidable reality for all human beings, those with faith and those without. A hallmark of faith for Christians, however, has been that we do not grieve as those without hope. "Hope in what?" the world may ask. For faithful Christians, the response is found in Holy Scripture, particularly in 1 Thessalonians 4, where hope is described as the bodily resurrection and life everlasting, promised for those who believe and have fallen asleep, when Christ descends from heaven.

No human explanation of what happens when the Lord will command our bodies to rise can convince the world of his promise or his return. The nature of how this new life will rise from the grave will remain a mystery, for our Lord offers no explanation. Much like the mystery of his true presence in the Sacrament of the Altar, which, for those who believe, is his true body and true

blood, there are no explanations for the mystery of resurrection. Faith alone is the answer to satisfy the longings of knowledge of things eternal. When human understanding finds its limit, faith must lead the way. Because death marks the end of human understanding, faith points us to Christ. If Jesus Christ is the focus of eternal life, then his experience must be central to the way in which we care for the dead.

Hallowing the tomb

When faced with death, the appropriate action of a follower of Jesus Christ can be found in the places where Jesus himself went. In hallowing the tomb for the sake of all those who rest there in waiting for the day of resurrection, and in rising from the grave as the first-born of the dead, Jesus taught what would be most needed for those who loved him: honor and love for the physical. The human body is not simply a wrapper for the holy part within us, but an integral part of the holy union of body and soul. Holy Scripture records for us how honorably Jesus' body was cared for by Joseph of Arimathea and others. The care of the dead, the participation of those who grieve, and the hope of resurrection reinforce our need to follow what our Lord exemplified in his own death. Jesus was intensely focused on making all things new, fulfilling that which could not be fulfilled, and expanding the Kingdom of Heaven to all those who would believe – and yet along the way he honored what was, loved what is, and modeled what is to come.

The church has preserved and promoted this hope of life everlasting as a witness to those who wander or are lost. It is surely a cornerstone of evangelism across generations and the rock upon which the faithful stand. In many ways, this hope is why the church gathers weekly (or daily) around the very physical presence of Christ in the Eucharist. The great hope of new life sustains us in all times and in all perils, as it has sustained the faithful from ancient times to the present. Yet the one most significant opportunity to teach, preach, and bear witness to this hope – the funeral itself, with the body of the deceased present – has begun to slip into disuse.

Despicable titles

What has eroded the funeral in our modern Christian culture? A most certain and distressing starting place would be found in the naming of what

it is the church does when a faithful person has died. Burial of the dead, funeral, laying to rest, and many other titles have proven to be faithful representation of what we do with those who have fallen asleep. These titles have appropriately described the act of caring for the dead within the pastoral oversight of the church.

But in recent times, other despicable titles have risen from the human avoidance of death, titles which try to deny that death is real or significant. "Celebration of life," "remembrance of life," "memorial service," and others have come to be too easily accepted by the church despite the fact that they redirect the focus squarely upon the deceased and only minimally (if at all!) on Christ. If a *memorial service* can be likened to a *memorial meal*, would not we Lutherans who proclaim the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist defend the benefits of the real presence of the body at the burial of the dead, and especially when the Lord's Supper is also celebrated? When the people who vehemently oppose the language of *memorial meal* begin to use the language of *memorial service*, the world sees confusion where a solid hope of the bodily resurrection should be proclaimed.

Celebrating everything but resurrection life

Yet today many clergy abdicate responsibility as families plan elaborate celebrations of life, completely devoid of the physical body but full of everything else except a faith in the resurrection. Far too many families choose to destroy the body quickly so that no one needs to have interaction with it at all. How can a small vase be easier to comprehend than a human-sized casket? How can it be properly explained to those who have yet to understand death fully (children, for example) that their dear loved one has been quickly destroyed and placed in a tiny box because those making decisions cannot face death themselves? Funeral directors across the globe are lamenting the rising trend of cremation. The *personalization* of funerals has become the vain attempt to add what seems to be missing, when all along what is missing is the confrontation and interaction with the very real and physical nature of death represented by the body.

The liturgy of the Burial of the Dead must be reclaimed within the church because of the value associated with its actions. This task may seem diffi-

cult in the face of a culture that has reduced the body to a mere object of our own desires and preferences. Perhaps there are circumstances where cremation is not avoidable, but there is never a reason to allow cremation to precede the funeral liturgy in the church.

The body matters

A few simple factors can guide the faithful in decisions allowing them to gather at the liturgy with the body and not be driven to choices promoted by culture, cost, or the false notion that the body is simply disposable. Physical presence is key in all things of death, dying and bereavement. The body matters; the container does not. When the body is brought to the church (regardless of whether there was embalming and a viewing, or a closed casket visitation with family), it is draped with the pall. Under that symbol, both physically and theological-ly, no one is different. Whether the body lies in a simple pine box or an elaborate bronze casket, it is the body itself that has been the "human container," one created by God and of immeasurable worth in his eyes. That we are one people in Christ is spoken clearly with the pall.

As the concept of Burial of the Dead slips away, cremation has taken its place in our modern culture. Without any concern at all, it seems, it has even managed to change the authoritative voice of Christian practice which would normally resist the vagaries of culture. And as cremation has become widely popular, it has begun to deprive the faithful of the blessing of the funeral service.

Cremation was not associated with the people of God during the time Jesus walked among us, neither in his own Jewish heritage nor in the faith that recognized him as Christ. The practice can be found in some religions of the world, and there it can have deep spiritual meanings, reflecting their own views of life and death. In the ancient Roman culture, great funeral pyres were erected for the dead, especially leaders and warriors, to demonstrate their status. Along the Ganges River in India the faithful cremate their loved ones with hymns and prayers and their remains are left to the river. Many ancient cultures with afterlife beliefs different from those of Jews and Christians practiced this destruction of the body. It was in fact Christian influence which began to change the beliefs and rituals

associated with death in the ancient world. As Christianity prevailed, so did burial practices which reflected the hope of resurrection.

The problem with cremation

What makes the practice of cremation at odds with the Christian faith and hope? There have been debates about the practice for centuries, with many arguments made. Certainly the familiar words from the *Book of Common Prayer*, "ashes to ashes, dust to dust," have been cited by those who promote cremation. If Christians believe in having been formed from the dust by the creative power of God the Father, then perhaps that same power should be the only authority to cause the return to dust, in his time, and in his plan.

But when people of faith substitute ashes for a body at the rite of the Burial of the Dead, the wrong is not done to the one who has fallen asleep so much as to the body of Christ. To quickly dispose of the body and then take what can be collected from its remains to a "memorial service" says to the world, "We care not for the physical body of the one we loved." It implies that the body has no real value at all.

As distressing as cremation itself, what typically happens after the process is even worse. Often cremated remains are not even respectfully buried in a place of holy and consecrated ground. (Indeed, the government considers the place of disposition to be the crematory, not the place of burial of the ashes; that is generally what is listed on the death certificate.) In fact, there can never be a complete extraction of all cremated remains, even with the most careful cleaning of the crematory; thus small amounts of one person's remains are comingled with those of another. The treatment of the body in such ways is an affront to the resurrection; it is an action that proclaims, "Good luck trying to raise up this scattered and destroyed body!" The increasingly common placing of the cremated remains in such things as jewelry, art, tattoos, and garden statues reduces the body to something akin to a simple memento of something past. The scattering of so-called "remains" teaches the younger generations the worthlessness of our bodies, which are simply dumped in places where they will be blown away, disposed of like rubbish. And perhaps the saddest cases of all are those persons whose ashes are never

claimed, whose remains rest for years on a shelf inside a funeral home closet.

The authenticity of the liturgy

If cremation has no theological justification within Christianity, why has it been a choice of the faithful at all? If at any point in life a person of faith turns to the church, the burial of the dead should certainly be as important as the church's other rites. But it seems that marriage, confirmation, various rites for the setting apart of workers of the church, and numerous other occasions have become more important life events than death. Each of these rites with their prescribed rubrics have been carefully preserved by the church in most cases, as they should be. In these instances, clergy generally hold fast to the church's tradition and insist on careful preparation and planning. Such careful liturgical integrity guards the faith of the people of Christ. Yet when it comes to the church's funeral liturgy, requirements are cut and free rein is given to those eager to avoid what is most needful at death.

The authenticity of the liturgy itself, and everything said therein, must provide care for those who grieve. The preferences of the deceased may, of course, inform the hymns and shape fellowship time after the liturgy, but a question must be asked of the service itself: Does this liturgy celebrate eternal life in Christ, or is it merely a celebration of a mortal life now ended? Does this day speak of a future hope, or of only past remembrance?

It must be acknowledged that sometimes a funeral director plays an outsized role in what is properly the calling of the pastor. Families are sometimes encouraged to choose immediate cremation

for reasons of cost or convenience. But pastors who are sensitive to the power of the traditional funeral, with the body present, can influence decisions about this matter. Good funeral directors understand the significance of the funeral liturgy, and will support pastors in urging these practices; indeed, finding the faithful director to care for the dead is a key responsibility of shepherding those in need. Conscientious pastors will also find ways to encourage thought about these issues before the time when decisions must be made quickly.

The value of the funeral in the church, the physical presence of the dead and all that has been part of the faithful response to the cessation of this life will not be easy to reclaim. It is possible, however, to continue to teach, comfort, guide and direct the faithful in their response to death. The sanctity of the body must be a topic of discussion not just in distressing life situations but in death as well. The church must hold fast to the centrality of Jesus Christ in our worship. Just as the liturgy of Holy Communion should not be shortened, changed, skipped, or watered down for the sake of time, comfort or personal preference, neither should the liturgy of the Burial of the Dead. That liturgy in its full manifestation proclaims the gospel of Christ when hearts are most ready to hear, and it must not be allowed to fall into disuse.

The Reverend Nathan Corl Minnich, STS, is a fifth generation licensed funeral director and embalmer. He is a pastor of the NALC serving Salem Lutheran Church, Elizabethville, PA, where he is still active with the funeral profession. This is his first contribution to Forum Letter.

Bells still are chiming and calling



Recently I broke two personal pastoral policies with one stroke when I had our church staff turn on the long dormant carillon system. Normally I wouldn't make any sort of unilateral change in the first months after arriving at a new church. And in this case I was so new I didn't even know we had a carillon system, and I had it turned on the same day I found out about it. And normally I would sacrifice a lot to be on good

terms with the immediate neighbors of the church, especially on non-essentials like carillons, and it seems the reason the carillon was turned off in the first place was because of complaints from one squeaky wheel who didn't like listening to it. But even so, the sound of chimed hymn melodies warbling and wafting in the distance is once again a feature of life in our neighborhood. We've also started ringing the real church bells for a portion of

the communion liturgy to announce to the whole world (or at least our little corner of it) that the holiest, most sacred thing that God does with us in this world is happening right here right now.

More than melodies

As for the carillon hymns, why bother with them? Granted, they aren't essential, but due to our particular cultural context I think they represent something more important than melodies. Think of all the human noises you put up with no matter where you live — sirens, trains, fireworks, traffic, factories, fog-horns or motorboats near the water, tractors and other farm machinery in rural areas, perhaps helicopters if you live near a hospital, or cheering crowds, bands and p.a. announcers if you live near the high school — some of those noises you enjoy and others you might just have to put up with. So why do those things have the right to make public noise? Obviously, ambulances make noise because accidents happen and our health matters to us. Trains rumble loudly through town because we need them to transport stuff and commerce matters to us. There are fireworks when the home team hits a home run (even if the neighbors near the ballpark are trying to sleep) because entertainment matters to us. Such things might not matter to everyone, but they matter sufficiently to us as a culture that we allow such noises to affect those who like them and those who don't.

Church bells simply stake the claim of religion on the public square. If trains can honk out the demands of the economy coming through, then carillons can peel the love of God for a fallen world. If crowd noise from the football field can announce to everyone in a three block radius that the home team scored a touchdown, then church bells can announce something even more momentous. If sirens can blare that someone is dying and needs help, then our bells can toll that someone has died and yet lives forever. We can't say that everything secular has a right to make noise but everything religious has to be quiet.

But what about common sense community standards? No problem. We aren't suggesting we should play hymns through the neighborhood at three o'clock in the morning. We're simply saying that our noise shouldn't be discriminated against in public merely because it is religious noise. Where

and when community standards allow commerce and entertainment to make noise whether people like it or not, churches should be allowed to make noise as well. If you can live with the ice cream truck's music, you can live with ours. And assuming noise in general isn't forbidden, I actually think churches should make more noise than we do.

The world needs to know

But what about complaints? Well, what about them? We aren't trying to irritate anyone, of course, and we hope everyone enjoys the simple beauty of the bells even if they aren't Christians. But we are insisting that religion is as much a part of public life as commerce, health, and entertainment. If we don't ring church bells for fear some people won't like them, but we do allow crowd noise, fireworks, sirens, train whistles, etc., then we're saying that everything has a place and a right to make public noise except the most important thing.

Okay, but what about fairness? Would I say the same thing if Moslems wanted to broadcast their calls to prayer from the minarets of their mosque? Yes. Yes I would. More power to them. I think it would make almost any town a better place in a way. Why? Because the call to prayer, even to a false god, still serves to announce to the world that the claims of religion are not merely a private matter, and even some other religion's noise can remind Christians that the promises of our God in Christ matter most of all. When I heard Muslim calls to prayer broadcast over loudspeakers in Israel, I was not persuaded to become a Muslim but I was reminded of the urgency of Christian evangelism and I was reminded that faith is not a personal, private thing to be kept silent and out of public hearing. In fact, I took time out to pray.

So remember, as you're sitting in church during the communion liturgy, that you're hearing the bells because heaven and earth are coming together right here, right now, and there is nothing more important than that, not even a fire truck. And enjoy the carillon if you have one in your neighborhood. Let the melodies be more than pretty noises that blend with the uglier and more industrial noises all around. It is this world, with its factories, construction crews, police cars and high school bands, that is redeemed in Christ and needs to know it.

— by Peter Speckhard, associate editor

Omnium gatherum



The banality of sin • Quora.com is a web site where people can pose questions, and other people (who presumably know the answers) can respond. Someone asked, “What’s it like to be a priest hearing confession?” Fr. Larry Rice responded: “In my experience, it can be both very humbling, and an amazing movement of God’s grace. That said, it’s not usually as interesting as people think it must be. Sin is banal. It’s commonplace and boring. Everyone tends to think that their sin is special, unique to them, and (sometimes) particularly awful. But we’ve heard it all before. It has been many years since someone surprised me in confession.” Sounds about right to me, and I’d just add that anyone who has made use of what Lutherans call “individual confession and absolution” has likely recognized, after a while, that one’s own sins are unsurprising, and one seems to need to confess the same old banal sins again and again.

A time to rend • The movement to reclaim Christian marriage is growing legs. Over at the *First Things* website, R. R. Reno argues that “it’s time to make a clear distinction between the government-enforced legal regime of marriage and the biblical covenant of marriage.” He reports that Ephraim Radner and Christopher Seitz are now urging pastors to sign a pledge to renounce their role as agents of the state in solemnizing governmentally defined marriage. The pledge runs to several paragraphs, but the concluding words are as follows: “Therefore, in our roles as Christian ministers, we, the undersigned, commit ourselves to disengaging civil and Christian marriage in the performance of our pastoral duties. We will no longer serve as agents of the state in marriage. We will no longer sign government-provided marriage certificates. We will ask couples to seek civil marriage separately from their church-related vows and blessings. We will preside only at those weddings that seek to establish a Christian marriage in accord with the principles articulated and lived out from the beginning of the Church’s life.” It’s a gutsy pledge, but a bold way to take some positive action on the marriage crisis rather than just going along with the *Zeitgeist*. If you’d like to sign the pledge, you can do so by visiting

www.firstthings.com/marriage-pledge.

Religion and science • Concordia Seminary in St. Louis and Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg are among ten seminaries which have received a major grant from the John Templeton Foundation for the purpose of including science in their curricula in various ways. The overall group of ten schools represents a wide spectrum of theological perspectives (you might have guessed that just by the Lutheran recipients), ranging from the Regent University School of Divinity to Andover Newton. A comparative study of how these institutions use the money will be a fascinating read indeed.

Another centennial • Turns out the American Lutheran Publicity Bureau wasn’t the only institution celebrating a centennial in 2014. We share that distinction with *The New Republic*, the magazine with usually (but not always) leftist commentary on politics and the arts, which was founded by a group of early 20th century luminaries including Walter Lippmann. With their distinguished history (and a circulation about 25 times that of *Lutheran Forum/Forum Letter*), they managed to bag Bill Clinton for their centennial banquet speaker in November. His speech was classic Clinton. I’m not a huge fan of the former president, but I thought one part of his speech was spot on (and this is obviously a transcription, not a formal manuscript): “We only have one remaining bigotry: We don’t want to be around anybody who disagrees with us. And if you look, actually residential patterns in America are changing. I mean, not just by Congressional Districts. I mean fixed-line borders, like counties, the internal, social and political complexion of them are changing, and we also are siloing our information sources. I read the other day that 47 percent of self-identified conservatives will only watch Fox News on television. That’s good for Fox News. I mean, it’s a good business model. My mother-in-law, who died a couple years ago at 91 . . . was the most liberal member of our family. She watched Fox News every day. I asked her if she was trying to give herself a heart attack. She said, ‘No, I’m just trying to keep my blood pumping.’ But then . . . she said . . . ‘Bill, I

need to know what they're saying so I have an answer and I need to know what they're saying in case they're right. . . . Nobody's wrong all the time.' So it was really interesting to see for me, as I had time to study this in the last few years, how much we are disaggregating ourselves from people who disagree with us." And when he's right, he's right.

On the other hand • I hear that there has been a big shake-up at *The New Republic*, and most of their senior staff members and editors have resigned. So in spite of *TNR's* bagging Bill Clinton for the centennial, it appears the ALPB is more likely to make its sesquicentennial celebration.

William Muehl • I seem to have missed the news earlier this year of the death at the age of 95 of William Muehl, who was my preaching prof at Yale these many years ago. An Episcopalian layman and an attorney, Muehl was not the guy you'd normally peg as a homiletics professor. But he was effective, entertaining and wise. This would be a good place to quote from one of his own sermons or other writings, but what I had of his seems to be among the books I let go when I retired. It's amazing how often that happens.

Christians on campus • The 23-campus California State University system recently denied official recognition to Intervarsity Christian Fellowship, the latest in a series of campus decisions around the country that discriminate against Christian organizations on the grounds that they discriminate by requiring their leaders to be Christians. These non-discrimination policies don't usually seem to prevent recognition of, oh, fraternities and sororities (obviously gender discrimination there) or athletic clubs (discrimination against non-jocks). Strange world we live in.

Gospel lesson resource • The faculty at Concordia Theological Seminary in Ft. Wayne is offering a weekly podcast which discusses the week's gospel lesson from the three-year lectionary. You can access it each Tuesday on the seminary Facebook page at www.facebook.com/ctsfw.

Another printing glitch • It appears that some subscribers received a November issue with a cou-

ple of blank pages. If that happened to you, please let us know and we'll replace the issue with either a paper or a pdf copy. You can contact Donna at dkralpb@aol.com.

A Lenten resource • Next up in the ALPB's publication schedule is a marvelous reflection on the "Seven Last Words of Christ" by Valparaiso University's Professor Emeritus Gilbert Meilaender. Good stuff, and it will be available in time for Lent 2015. We'll let you know when you can order it.

Withit worship • A recent pastoral letter, or press release, or something like that, from my bishop began with a quotation, allegedly from 2 Cor. 1.1-5, from something called *The Inclusive Bible*. It ran like this: "Grace and peace to you from God our Creator and our Savior Jesus Christ. Blessed be Abba God, the God of our Savior Jesus Christ, the source of all mercies and the God of all consoling, who comforts us in all our troubles so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the same comforting God has given us. For while the sufferings of Christ are abundantly ours, our comforting is just as abundant through Christ." There just seems to be no end to attempts to completely de-gender the Scriptures and all other language in the church. A retired pastor friend of liberal leanings emailed me in late November, gnashing his teeth at how, at the church he had attended on Christ the King Sunday, the liturgy and hymns carefully avoided any reference to Christ as King. It's a two-fer no-no, you see — both masculine language (even though the specific reference is to the historically male Jesus) and politically oppressive language. And there's no end to the striving of ELCA officials to show how progressive they are. Back when I was a seminary student, we used to satirize the worship of the god "Withit." Withit worship is alive and well.

Casual worship • A certain congregation of my acquaintance has stopped advertising its two services as "contemporary" and "traditional." The "contemporary" one has now become "casual worship." After thinking about that for a few minutes, it seems to me that's even worse than the unhelpful descriptor "contemporary." I looked up "casual" in several dictionaries and found words like "unconcerned," "indifferent," "apathetic," "superficial,"

“done without much thought, effort, or concern.” Those may be accurate descriptors of worship services (even many “traditional” ones, in my experience), but they don’t reflect what worship ought to be. Since “contemporary worship” seems to be here to stay, maybe we need a contest to come up with a decent adjective to describe it. Send me your entries. Snarky responses not sought, but accepted.

Creedal confusion • A recent comment by a student led me to the web site of the United Methodist Church, one of the ELCA’s full communion partners. The question I was pursuing was the attitude of various Protestant churches toward the ecumenical creeds. I found two articles on the UMC site addressing the issue, and both of them contained some combination of the incorrect, the misleading, or the just plain silly. One of them, for instance, claims that “The *United Methodist Hymnal* contains nine creeds or affirmations. Only two of these (Nicene and Apostles’) are strictly considered to be creeds because they are products of ecumenical councils.” Which ecumenical council was it again that approved the Apostles’ Creed? The other one, written by a bishop, asserted, “There are two creeds acknowledged as authoritative statements of belief by the universal church. They are the Nicene Creed and the Apostles’ Creed.” Close, but no cigar; most Eastern Orthodox Christians would beg to differ on the status of the latter, if they had even heard of it. The good bishop is actually arguing that Methodists ought to “be careful not to neglect the creeds,” a salutary purpose indeed, and he went on to say something I think quite helpful: “There is also a spiritual

benefit to reciting a creed regularly. It gets into the deep crevices of our brain. It becomes an essential part of who we are. Regular recitation of the creed helps to shape our souls in faith in the one God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit.” Indeed it does. But then he had to add, “Besides, reciting the creeds can be fun. Children love to join adults in reciting memorized pieces. The use of the creeds in worship is another way to enable children to know that they are a part of the people of God.” OK, maybe pragmatically true, maybe even pedagogically perceptive, but a little off point, seems to me. I love reciting the creed, but I don’t know that “fun” quite captures it. But on closer examination, both these articles were written more than a decade ago. Maybe the UMC’s association with the ELCA has cleared up some of their creedal confusion. Or not.

Not so well-funded • Marvin Huggins, Associate Director for Archives & Library at Concordia Historical Institute, appreciated my positive remarks about his institution in the November issue – but took issue with my description of CHI as “well-funded.” It really isn’t, he says, and he hopes my comment doesn’t hamper the development endeavors of the new CHI director, Pr. Daniel Harmelink. Perhaps I should say a better description would have been “well-administered”; CHI, like so many libraries, museums and archives, has to do the very best it can with what is never adequate funding. Anyway, CHI is really good at it. A tax-deductible donation to them would be a fine investment (after, of course, your annual gift to ALPB – which you remembered to make, right?).

– roj

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