

# FORUM LETTER

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## What great patience God has!



Patience begins at the source of its dignity and glory. The origin and grandeur of patience are found in God, its author. We should love what is dear to God and what the majesty of God recommends. If God is our Lord and Father, we must imitate the patience of the Master as well as of the Father; for it is the task of servants to be docile and children not to be unworthy.

But in truth what great patience God has! He makes the day dawn and the light of the sun rise both over the good and over the wicked; he waters the earth with his rain, and no one is excluded from its benefits, since water is given to the just and unjust alike. We see him act with equal patience toward the guilty and the innocent, the faithful and the wicked, the thankful and the ungrateful. For all of them, the seasons obey God's commands, the elements place themselves at their service, the winds blow, the waters flow, crops grow in abundance, grapes ripen, trees swell with fruit, forests take on greenery, and meadows blossom with flowers.

Although God is exacerbated by frequent and ever continual offenses, he tempers his indignation and waits patiently for the day fixed for retribution. And although he has the power of vengeance, he prefers to have patience for a long time. He waits and graciously [defers] so that if it were possible the malice might become less with time and we who are mired in the infection of our errors and crimes might finally turn to God. —Cyprian of Carthage, *On the Value of Patience*. In J. Robert Wright, *Readings for the Daily Office from the Early Church* (Church Pension Fund, 1991), 239.

## The Impuritans



The times, they are a'changin' so rapidly that the news of the day often seems downright alien. But a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away (specifically nine years ago in a simpler and saner world) I wrote an article in this very newsletter about the intentionally Christian dorm at Valparaiso University being designated as a "safe house" for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender students. What innocent times were those. Imagine a world with only four gender designations. Ah, me.

In that article I asked the question, "Safe from what?" I somehow doubted even back in that barbaric age when Senators Obama and Clinton spoke out publicly against gay marriage that gay students at Valpo were in any real danger on campus. My conclusion was that they needed "safety" from disagreement, from people like me who espouse the traditional, Christian view of marriage. I further asked, "But as a Christian, and as a pastor of the LCMS . . . was I

now an invader here? Did I represent an alien and hostile presence [by being a Christian opponent of gay marriage]?" I responded to my own question with a simple, "I wonder."

No need to wonder anymore, at least according to some in the Valparaiso community. In May I received a Facebook invitation as a Valpo alum to petition the university administration to bar a proposed Chick-Fil-A restaurant from campus. As of this writing, 422 people have signed, and though I haven't read all the comments by signatories, three of the first four come from teaching faculty. So what is their anti-chicken beef? I'll let the petition speak for itself, which is not without risk because, as my editorial colleague Richard Johnson noted in our online forum, neither the petition itself nor the many comments say much for the general literacy level of the people involved. The petition reads as follows:

### **This is important!**

*This is important, because it will negatively impact the entire university, greater Valparaiso community, and its reputation. The image presented by Chick-fil-a does not coincide with the inclusive and diverse mission of Valparaiso University. The funding of organizations with a recent negative history and reputation with LGBTQ+ community by Chick-fil-a is completely unacceptable. Students will be able to use meal plan money at this establishment and will be therefore, indirectly funding these same organizations. We pay over \$40,000 to attend a completely inclusive and diverse institution, do we really want a portion of that money to go to a company like this? Having this restaurant on campus is an action which not only completely disregards the voice and safety of the LGBTQ+ community, but will create a safety issue among the entire community. While we do not anticipate any physical violence as a result, the building of this Chick-fil-a will cultivate an unwelcoming atmosphere. If the voices of one minority can be so completely disregarded, who is to say other minorities will not be silenced?*

[A brief aside for those of you modern day Rip Van Winkles who fell asleep back in the day when there were only four genders and need to get up to speed, the letters stand for Lesbian (it is important that this one go first because the antiquated phrase "gay and lesbian" put the men first, which was sexist), Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual, Queer, Questioning, Intersex, Asexual, and Ally. The + sign

signifies an openness to more letters and a pre-apology to anyone whose personal gender was left unacknowledged. Since everyone is entitled to invent their own gender, some groups use fewer letters and allow the plus to speak for the rest. I'm sure neither the author of the petition nor Change.org meant any disrespect to Questioning, Intersex or Asexual individuals by leaving them off their list in the text of the petition, though the micro-aggression is noted for the record.]

### **Better salmonella than social taint**

Now, you might still be asking, how in the world can the presence of a chicken joint represent a safety threat to the community? Has Chick-Fil-A ever discriminated against LGBTQQIAA+ folks in service, hiring or promotions? No. Do they not refrigerate their chicken properly? No, nothing like that. The horror is that the CEO of Chick-Fil-A is a Christian who agrees with the LCMS on the matter of gay marriage and has given money to organizations that promote traditional marriage. That idea is so offensive that even chicken cooked by people who work for someone who once espoused it has no place in a university environment, not even on a campus with strong historical and financial ties to a church body that espouses that same idea. In terms of campus health and safety, better salmonella than socially tainted chicken.

Nobody would have to eat there, of course, but how can anyone feel safe living near people who might not object to other people purchasing such chicken? And what if someone's tuition dollars inadvertently subsidized someone else's participation in the food plan and that person spent some of it at Chick-Fil-A? In the name of Inclusiveness and Diversity Almighty, it can't be tolerated!

The story was picked up by the *Chicago Tribune* on May 8, which quoted the author of the petition (a freshman student who worked through the national group Change.org) as saying they weren't opposing Christianity or the CEO's personal beliefs, a claim that is tough to square with the fact that the only reason this is an issue at all is because several years ago the CEO publicly opposed gay marriage and gave money to like-minded organizations. In addition, all the way back in 2012 Chick-Fil-A announced it would no longer donate to any organization that "could be perceived" as anti-gay.

But that isn't good enough for these crusaders. There is still a taint. Said the petition's author, "We do recognize and respect that Chick-Fil-A may be attempting to correct the situation, but without a longstanding track record of good practices, it is too soon." Got that? It is just too soon. We can't pretend nothing happened and right away start allowing people to purchase chicken from a company run by a CEO who only stopped publicly opposing gay marriage about the same time as President Obama. In the aftermath of the atrocity we need time to recover from the trauma. Someday, perhaps.

### The Impuritans

The old Puritans couldn't abide even a hint of sexual immorality. The new puritans can't abide even a hint of objection to sexual immorality. They are actually Impuritans. With untiring zeal they hunt for and root out anyone who thinks of sexual morality as involving more than consent. The Impuritans' creed is that "Consent is All," and any moral consideration in addition to consent is of the devil. Using anything from informal bullying campaigns to high tribunals, they banish anyone who is not on board with the LGBTQQIAA+ agenda—or even anyone who might be associated at several removes from someone who is perceived as being insufficiently contrite for once having been opposed to that agenda.

The Impuritans insist every campus and eventually all of society be vacuum sealed against even trace elements of traditional Christian morality. We traditional marriage advocates are considered not as sheep to be slaughtered but as yeast before Passover, and the whole house of Western Civilization must be swept clean of our ideas and beliefs in order that the covenant of the sexual revolution might eventually usher in the kingdom of the Impuritans' vision.

Wait. Scratch that. "Kingdom" is a patriar-

chal term, so anybody who has used it in the last four years represents a public safety threat.

### Will they succeed?

As of this writing I have no idea whether the Facebook campaign or any other expression of impuritanical outrage succeeded in making Valparaiso reconsider its adulterous flirtation with a company run by a conservative Christian. After all, anyone can start a Facebook petition and the administration is free to ignore it. I hope there will be a Chick-Fil-A on campus soon, but my prediction back in May was that Valpo would somehow end up not having a Chick-Fil-A on campus but claim the decision had nothing to do with anyone's impuritanical crusading, which would allow them to make the whole brouhaha go away with a face-saving wink to the Impuritans at Change.org in lieu of a formal, public bow to their unquestioned authority. But could the administration just go ahead and defy the Impuritans and get away with it for long? I wonder.

Maybe it is not too late to turn things around. Or maybe nine years from now we'll all look back at what a quaint and naïve era this was, when the Impuritans actually had to circulate online petitions to get their way and people still thought Christian universities could survive unpunished some remote and convoluted contact with traditional morals.

Full disclosure: I worked part time at a Chick-Fil-A years ago. A lot of seminarians did because we had church duties, and like some other chains run by socially unacceptable, puritanical homophobes, Chick-Fil-A was closed on Sundays. Not that I favor Sunday blue laws, mind you, but such policies are pretty handy for Christian employees. And I guarantee you the chicken *is* delicious. Meet me at the proposed Valpo Chick-Fil-A someday and I'll prove it to you.

—by Peter Speckhard, associate editor

## That Neuhaus biography



[Editor's note: Our reviews of Randy Boyagoda's biography of Richard John Neuhaus in the May issue elicited some interesting mail, and we wanted to share a couple of these insightful comments with you.]

### First of all a pastor

Though I found the reviews of Boyagoda's biography of Richard John Neuhaus (hereafter RJN) by Peter Speckhard and Richard Johnson insightful, I thought they missed a couple of important factors

in his trajectory as a Lutheran, then Roman Catholic, public intellectual.

First, I believe RJN indeed made a huge change in his intellectual posture during the late 60s and 70s. It wasn't just his environment that changed. He underwent the same revolution in thinking that other neo-conservatives experienced in that period. He — like other Christians such as Michael Novak and myself — were much influenced by Irving Kristol and Norman Podhoretz in their reassessment of their earlier left-wing views of capitalism, democracy, and America's role in the world. Like them, RJN was "mugged by reality" and "broke ranks" with former friends and allies.

Unlike them, however, RJN came to powerful pro-life convictions that led to an even more decisive break with the Left than differences in either political or economic views. When he could not convince his brethren on the Left that nascent life was to be as well protected as that of the poor and oppressed, he broke ranks with them and pressed that important cause along with others in the pro-life movement. He was a major national leader in that cause.

Though I believe his theological vision was decisively shaped by classical Lutheranism and did not change all that much throughout his life, his way of relating theology to politics did change markedly. As a young man he tended to fuse his theology with left-wing politics. I was amazed at Burkee's account [in his *Power Politics and the Missouri Synod*] of RJN's highly ideological role in several Missouri Synod conventions in the 60s and 70s. Later he tended to fuse them with neo-conservative politics. But in his last years he was careful to distin-

guish core theological convictions from political commitments. His last public speech, given at Roanoke College on the eve of the 2008 national election, was decidedly non-political in any direct sense. Rather, he talked about deeper theological themes that ought to appeal to all Christians.

RJN was first of all a pastor, priest, and churchman, but he also had a powerful drive to project his voice into a national conversation, to be a Christian public intellectual. And he had the talent and chutzpah to bring it off. Because of RJN the interaction of religion and public life in America will never be quite the same.

—Dr. Robert Benne, Salem, VA

### It changed everything

I appreciated both reviews on the Neuhaus biography by Boyagoda. . . . I think *Roe v. Wade* changed everything for Neuhaus, as well as for millions of other people, and for the millions of aborted unborn children. On this supreme life issue, Richard John Neuhaus did not change. Sadly and tragically, many folks (especially on the left) did change, and [they] embraced the ruling as enlightened and necessary. Thankfully, the Roman Catholic Church teaches what it teaches.

You wished that Boyagoda "might have found some enlightenment in attending more closely to the Lutheran Neuhaus." Perhaps; but the Roman Catholic Neuhaus is so much more interesting, don't you think? I wished after reading the book that Boyagoda had attended more closely to Neuhaus's regular pastoral ministry — a portion of a chapter would have been helpful.

—Pr. Michael Lockerby, Red Wing, MN

## Welcoming guests

by Glen Segond



Editor Richard Johnson's recent article "If only I had known" [*FL* April 2015] mentions the challenges of making visitors feel welcome. "I feel an eagerness to welcome visitors," he wrote, "but I find myself holding back for all the same reasons that used to drive me crazy as a pastor." Welcoming visitors (guests) at church in a way that will make them want to return a sec-

ond or third time is crucial to church growth, and a skill well worth developing.

According to the late Lyle E. Schaller, the three primary reasons visitors return to a church are: friendliness of the congregation (40%), the overall worship experience (36%), and the quality of the sermon (34%). In mainline congregations, some 10% of visitors will return and eventually become mem-

bers while in the non-liturgical church down the street 30% of visitors are likely to join. A typical congregation will lose 7-10% of its members each year through death, people moving away or just dropping out. Assume a congregation has as many visitors in a year as it has members (a generous assumption in most places). If only 10% of those visitors are captured, church membership is a wash, growth is at a standstill. Congregations that don't grow, whose membership remains stagnant, often start on a downward spiral that is difficult to turn around.

Currently some 30% of ELCA congregations have an average attendance of 50 or fewer worshipers on a Sunday. These are hardly numbers that support sustainability. If growth is to occur, a congregation's perceived friendliness is essential.

### How is it done?

So how does one grow a friendly congregation or at least make a congregation appear more friendly? It seems like an impossible task given the number of hurdles that hold us back: our own hesitancy, fear of rejection, not wanting to be intrusive or appear too forward. If a trained professional like a retired pastor experiences these hurdles, then how much more difficult it must be for the average lay person who has come to worship. Some church analysts suggest that only 25-30% percent of a congregation's members are fully engaged in the life of the congregation. If a church member doesn't feel a sense of ownership in the congregation and is not fully engaged, he or she is unlikely to welcome newcomers/visitors.

For the past 25 years being a pastor has been my avocation; my vocation is working in health care as a consultant in the areas of improving hospital work groups, customer service performance and employee engagement. I think I have learned some things that might be applicable to congregations.

In the business world, "friendliness" is a must for anyone who interacts with the public. Whether one is a Disney theme park employee or a unit clerk who answers the phone in the medical/surgical unit of your local hospital, friendliness is a key skill. Making customers or visitors feel welcome does not happen by accident; it is a carefully coached, scripted, planned activity. In a highly competitive environment, organizations cannot just hope their employees will smile and say the right

thing at the right time, be friendly enough so people will return, and speak well of the organization. An organization would not survive, let alone thrive, if these crucial interactions are left to chance. I would argue the same applies to our congregations.

### Parking lot Veep

Did you know that Disney (which has a very high rate of return customers, some 70%) has a Vice-President of Parking Lots? Each day Disney will park 20,000 cars and the parking lot is the first and last impression that people have of their Disney experience. Disney wants to manage that first and last impression—how your car is parked, what the person says to you as he/she is helping to park your car, the welcome you receive from the tram operator as you are taken to the park entrance.

At your local hospital, what your nurse says to you when she enters or leaves the room is a carefully scripted and managed interaction to foster a positive patient experience. This even extends to people in housekeeping, billing and admissions. Attention to detail, over-managing the things that make a significant difference and being intentional are lessons we can transfer to making our congregations more welcoming to visitors.

### Track the data

I would suggest the following: First, track the data. Know how many visitors/guests you have each year and what percentage actually become members. *If you don't measure, you cannot manage.* We usually track attendance and offerings but when you see negative change in these numbers, significant damage is already underway. If your visitor retention is near 30%, you don't need to read further; you're already successful.

Second, find two or three individuals or couples who are friendly, smile readily, have good interpersonal skills and attend church regularly. They are now the face of your friendly, welcoming congregation. But you can't just ask these people to be extra friendly to visitors; they need to be trained, scripted, participate in role play and have regular times of debriefing. Even a congregation full of introverts should have at least two people up to the task.

When your designated welcomers recognize someone as a visitor or a long lost member, they can

casually introduce themselves, be friendly, invite them to coffee or fellowship, let them know it's great having them here, thank them "for choosing to worship" here today. They should ask them to sign the guest register. These "friendly faces" should be people who are knowledgeable about the congregation. They should seek to introduce the visitor to another member who has similar interests or concerns.

It may be that in your congregation pastors and people already do these things on their own, but you cannot leave such a crucial interaction to chance. It has to be hard-wired into what happens. The appointed hosts should report back to the pastor with the information gathered, and then there should be follow up in the form of a letter, card or phone call from the pastor. Numbers should be tracked and these procedures should be regularly

re-evaluated and fine-tuned.

### Some key questions

Here are a few questions the pastor can discuss with key members or committees: Who do our visitors compare us to? What does that suggest about how we might change? What details get in the way of our being more friendly and accessible to visitors? What details could be improved to keep visitors coming back? If congregations can learn to be more intentional about how they welcome and follow up on visitors, it cannot help but be an effective stimulator of church growth.

*The Rev. Glen Segond is an ELCA pastor and Licensed Clinical Social Worker, currently serving as interim pastor of St. Mark's Lutheran Church in East Stroudsburg, PA. This is his first contribution to Forum Letter.*

## Where's the book?

by Jeff Zell



"Where's the book?" Someone always asked this question right after the waitress took our orders when we gathered on Tuesday mornings for the Men's Breakfast. The book in question was the devotional book from which we took turns reading. The devotional reading was followed by a brief time of intercessory prayer.

Sadly, "Where's the book?" is a question that can be asked when many of us walk into our local libraries. Public libraries are in the process of transforming themselves into community centers with cafés and Wi-Fi Internet and lots of tables and chairs. The physical books and the required shelving are disappearing so that computer terminals can be installed *en masse*. Public libraries are promoting the use of electronic books and magazines and iPads. The electronic medium and its promises of both efficiency and paper and space saving is making its way into academic libraries as well.

So I was pleasantly surprised to walk into the library of St. Augustine's House in Oxford, MI, and be met with metal shelving lined with 10,588 books that are carefully and uniformly identified with Dewey Decimal System numbers. The legend on the side of the shelves indicates the types of ma-

terials that may be found within. The collection includes fiction, history, and all things theological (commentaries, spirituality, history, etc.).

### Out of the basement

This is a very different library from what I encountered back in 2001 when I first visited the monastery for a retreat. The new chapel was recently erected but not completed. The library was then in the basement of the retreat house and was really a somewhat disorganized collection of books that were lovingly placed on wooden shelves. If one were to ask back then whether they had this or that title, the answer would have been a genuine, "I don't know" or "Yes, but I don't know where it is." That is now no longer the case.

In September of 2011, Tim Rich learned of the need for someone with library skills through a friend of his wife who had just been to St. Augustine's House. Tim is a graduate of Midwestern College and Seminary and served as a pastor for 20 years in the Upper Peninsula. Two college librarians taught him the library craft while he was a student and then he assumed one of the librarian's responsibilities when she died. When he left Midwestern to serve a congregation, he did not return to library

work until the opportunity presented itself at St. Augustine's House.

In September 2011, Fr. Richard led Tim downstairs in the new building where the shelving stood amongst boxes and boxes of books that were in desperate need of professional care and organization. What was supposed to be a four-month contract job turned into a permanent library position. In 2013 Tim began archiving St. Augustine's history and integrating it into the library. The library's 10,588 volume collection is expanding as books continue to be donated. Tim continues to receive and organize the incoming materials.

### Books convey permanence

What does it mean that St. Augustine's House has a library with a permanent librarian? After all, haven't monasteries always had libraries? Well, in this day and age, it is a big deal indeed. And in fact, not all monasteries have working, organized libraries that are available for both monks and visitors.

Books convey permanence. Electronic books and periodicals are software and need constant updating (as does the hardware that runs them). A

book that is well taken care of will last several human lifetimes.

A permanent librarian means organization and service. St. Augustine's House is the only Lutheran monastery in North America. St. Augustine's House now has four monks. The monastery is laying the groundwork to add another building and to remodel the retreat house according to modern standards. The monastery is growing so that it can be a place of spiritual respite for the weary in the years to come.

When we enter the hospitality of St. Augustine's House, we leave behind the "efficiency" and hectic pace of the world. We enter into the rhythms of prayer, silence, and conversation. For those of us who dare to leave mobile devices behind or off, we discover that we suddenly have time on our hands and that we wish to fill our minds with something substantial. What do we do? We go to the library!

*The Rev. Jeff Zell is pastor of Gloria Dei Lutheran Church, South Bend and First English Lutheran Church, Mishawaka, Indiana. He was at St. Augustine's House during the week of Easter 2015.*

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## Omnium gatherum



**A useful word** • David Garner, a former Lutheran (now Orthodox) who posts occasionally on Forum Online, has coined a new word that you may find useful. He refers to churches that have "jumped off the deep end of worshiptainment." My opinion, even the shallow end is problematic. On the other hand, even the deep end is shallow.

**Underwear** • Making the rounds on the internet is a photo taken at the Metro NY Synod Assembly, which shows a "liturgical dancer" dressed only in what appear to be tighty-whities (well, with a white T-shirt on top). It has provoked a good bit of discussion in a lot of places, as you can imagine. Some argue that one shouldn't make any judgments without knowing the full context—i.e., you had to be there to understand. I personally have trouble thinking of a context where it would have been an appropriate addition to worship. But then I generally feel that way about liturgical dance, and I generally feel that

way about liturgy in a hotel ballroom, and I generally feel that way about worship at synod assemblies. So I guess that's three very curmudgeonly strikes.

**On the other coast** • I had the—what shall I say? Opportunity? Privilege? Invitation? Obligation? Assignment? I just don't know—to go to my own synod assembly this year for the first time in several years (all for very good reasons, you understand). I don't think I will need to go back again, ever. There was no liturgical dance, at least while I was there (I confess to having left early). We were treated to music by the Sacramento Gay Men's Chorus, which didn't either surprise or upset me, though I still haven't quite figured out how "Somewhere Over the Rainbow" is an appropriate liturgical piece. (I guess maybe it's an improvement over what we heard some years back: "There must be a God somewhere.") Things were relatively quiet on the resolutions front, but then in the ELCA it's harder and harder for resolution writers to find things to be out-

raged about. Too bad Valparaiso isn't an ELCA university. There was one resolution, though, that you'll probably be hearing more about. The ELCA, you may recall, requires that the lay representation at assemblies and on councils be 60%, and that of the lay representatives, half be male and half female. The Sierra Pacific Synod has officially gone on record to say that the language here needs to be changed to take account of gender diversity. People who aren't either male or female don't feel welcome in the ELCA because of this constitutional provision. The resolution passed without debate. Expect this issue to float up to the next churchwide assembly.

**Hazy** • Pr. Michael Lockerby, whose letter about our Neuhaus biography reviews appears elsewhere in this issue, also kindly pointed out that I was in error when I mentioned my "indelible memory of being in the library at Yale Divinity School one January day in 1972" when *Roe v. Wade* was handed down. The year was 1973. I should blame this error on my proofreaders, but I'd best take full responsibility since, now that I think about it, I didn't start at Yale until September 1972. I should have known that. Pr. Lockerby generously notes that "memory can fail, even in a Yale library." That, and then also it was the early 70s, and a lot of things that happened then are a little, shall I say, "hazy" for many of us.

**Where's the book, indeed!** • I enjoyed Pr. Zell's little reflection on books elsewhere in this issue. It reminded me of two things, one amusing and one not so amusing. The amusing one took place one summer when I was apartment sitting for a semi-

nary classmate. The first thing I noticed when I walked into his apartment is that his books, hundreds of them, all had call numbers. I asked about it. "Yeah," he said, "one summer I really didn't have much to do, and I thought it would be a good idea to catalogue all my books. Turns out it really wasn't that good an idea; I still can't find anything, and everybody who comes in here thinks I've stolen them all from libraries." The unamusing one took place last month when we worshiped for the first time at my previous congregation – at their invitation, since they were celebrating their 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary and I'd been the pastor for roughly 60% of that span. Of course the bishop was there and was asked to preach – meet and right, to be sure, though perhaps not so salutary. When it came time for the sermon, he read the Gospel lesson from his iPhone. He seemed to think it was clever. Now I wouldn't object if he were using his device for his sermon, though I might be secretly praying that the thing would crash mid-sermon. But to read the Gospel? Really? In a church, in a festive liturgy, when there's both a pulpit Bible and a lectionary book in easy reach? I suppose it did facilitate his strolling around while he read, though he sort of looked like all the people one sees strolling through shopping malls looking at their devices. I was taught that the various objects we use in worship have meaning, rich meaning, that there's a reason we have candles rather than lava lamps (or whatever is currently the "with it" thing) on the altar. Physical objects communicate. If you're going to lead worship at a campfire on a backpacking trip, OK, allowances can be made. But I was left wondering, "where's the Book?" – *roj*

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