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Editor: Pr. Richard O. Johnson
<roj@nccn.net>

Associate Editor: Pr. Peter Speckhard
<pspeckhard@hotmail.com>

Member: Associated Church Press.

EDITORIAL OFFICE: P. O. Box 235, Grass Valley, CA 95945. <roj@nccn.net>

SUBSCRIPTION OFFICE: American Lutheran Publicity Bureau, P. O. Box 327, Delhi, NY 13753-0327 <dkralpb@aol.com> Telephone 607-746-7511. Postage paid at Delhi, NY and additional mailing offices.

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A drought in our own souls



Art will not make men religious. It is not meant to do so. It should not be used or expected to do so. It can only express, educate, refine, and exalt in certain directions what religion we have. . . . Religion, which handles the most commanding realities, and affects the whole soul, must kindle also in due time its imaginative side. It will open hidden glories, and, what is of most moment for the best artistic purposes, teach men habitually to believe in them. It will create not only Art, but the soil and climate in which Art grows. The immediate sequel of the Reformation was such that the sympathies of men had to turn away from the gentler agencies of imagination, and flow towards the more militant tasks which the social condition of Europe prescribed. Religious thought had to be reconstructed, and that led to absorption in theology. . . . But now . . . we are beginning to feel how wretched, and blind, and naked our religious soul is. . . . We feel a schism and a drought in our own souls. . . . We are made to realise, not only the sufferings of Art by its detachment from the spirit of religion, but – what most of us should, and many of us do feel much more – the sufferings of religion by its severance from the imagination. Our religion is too often a starveling, pinched, inhuman, and unholy thing. And it is so because it has lost in inspiration far more than it has gained in currency and correctness. It has lost in that aspect and function of it which is kindred to the imagination. It has become harsh, strident, and unlovely, something to be stoutly asserted, blindly defended, and tenaciously held, rather than absolutely trusted, winsomely worshipped, nobly evidenced, and beautifully beloved. Our God has become in many quarters but our Palladium, and our Christ but a crutch or a badge. –P. T. Forsyth, *Religion in Recent Art* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1905), 4-5.

Towards an artistic vision of the church

by Steven K. Gjerde



In my seminary days, my friend Victor and I decided to spend one afternoon cruising Minneapolis – St. Paul in search of beautiful churches. As it turns out, traffic doesn't allow you to see all that many city churches in one afternoon, and most of them are locked and vigilantly guarded by secretaries. But after about three hours, we had seen enough for Victor to turn to me and ask, "Do you suppose there's something in the Lutheran faith that opposes beauty in worship?"

Clearly, Victor wasn't too impressed by what he had seen. As someone who once considered art school myself, I tended to agree, but I didn't blame Lutheran doctrine.

The finite can hold the infinite

The Lutheran church has always differed from its Protestant cousins on the value of the material world. Where many reformers taught that “the finite cannot hold the infinite” – that is, the limited creation cannot contain the unlimited God, and therefore, ought not be used to portray Him – the Lutheran reformers insisted just the reverse: the limited, material creation can indeed hold the infinite God. Isn’t Christ’s flesh God’s flesh? Has he not said that the bread is His body? By uniting Himself with material elements, God has signaled His own desire to fill and abide with His creation.

You might think of it in terms of a metal lawnmower set outside in the sun. The heat of the sun is (as far as our small human life is concerned) infinite – it exceeds our limits, anyway. But that lawnmower soon soaks up that heat and “contains” it: touch the lawnmower, and you touch the sun’s heat. The sun is greater than all things on earth; yet the earth contains its heat. So can God’s creation contain God.

Thus we can use His creation to teach and proclaim His glory, leading Luther to declare that images are so “praiseworthy and honorable” that he’d like to see the whole Bible painted on our houses, inside and out [*Against the Heavenly Prophets*, LW 40, 91-99]! At least that’s what our *doctrine* says. As Victor observed, our practice seems to indicate something else.

Viewing church with a business mindset

Church life and the artistic life were once virtually synonymous in Christian cultures. Today, artists have a harder go of it: altar pieces are rare; stained glass and mosaics, if used, tend to be more geometric and patterned than illustrative, and virtually no one is commissioning sculpture. Why? What I suggested to Victor 17 years ago, I still believe: in view of the bland church architecture appearing across denominations (save for the Orthodox, where art is canonically required), the problem may lie in giving patterns and an industrial pragmatism.

Rather than looking at churches as a place where the Holy Spirit gathers life’s entire creative endeavor to confess the beauty and glory of the Lord, we do tend to look at them with a practical, business mindset. Pastors are CEO’s, or perhaps spokesmen; teachers and musicians are “professional church work-

ers.” Even our language suggests that the goal is to grow and survive economically, and not to reveal and disclose lavishly. Yes: those two words, “reveal” and “disclose” – they are perhaps crucially helpful for recovering an artistic vision of the church. Jesus and the apostles use that very language to describe both the ministry and the goal for which the Church lives, the great Day of the Lord, in which all things “will be disclosed” [Luke 8:17, 1 Corinthians 3:13, 2 Peter 3:10]. Isn’t that what artists do for us? Don’t they disclose to us new ways of seeing?

The call to create

My family and I recently hosted a church artist at the parsonage. An ordained Lutheran pastor, he now works as an artist full-time, using his ability to paint representations of the faith to proclaim that same faith in a variety of settings. Happily, his denomination views this work as a “call,” and so views him as a “pastor under call” as he engages in this work – yet getting the denomination to see it this way was not easy. It took some amount of time and a turnover in leadership. Considering that this same denomination considers pastors working in administrative offices or for social justice as “under call,” the fact that they were not sure a pastor painting the faith before audiences was “under call” is fascinating, and speaks volumes about our uneasy relationship with the arts.

Recovering an artistic vision of the Church would require a great many things, not the least of which would be patronage: the more that generous donors lead the way in matching their faith with color and form, avoiding sentimentality in favor of proclamation, the more the Church will follow in appreciating that mode of “preaching.” It will also require:

- (1) recovering the Lutheran affirmation of creation and material redemption in Christ;
- (2) losing the proletarian prejudice that views good art as high brow and elitist (not too long ago, our immigrant ancestors left their farms and factories to crowd opera halls, hear poetry, and visit art galleries!); and
- (3) remembering that creativity is part of being created in the image of the Creator.

Broadening our devotion

Yet perhaps it will also require a broadening

of devotion. The relational intimacy of devotion, as frequently practiced, leans heavily on literacy and the conversation of prayer. Is there room for gazing on images in meditation? Or appreciating how the *movement* (some call it the dance) of our prayer – the crossing, folding, kneeling – shapes our experience? Devotion is not the crossword we do as we await departure from Planet Earth; it is our way of con-

fessing that the whole earth will contain the glory of God. Let us then use the whole earth to do it!

Steven K. Gjerde is Senior Pastor of Zion Lutheran Church (ELCA), Wausau, WI. He also is editor of the newsletter Coram Deo, in which this essay first appeared.

A work of art?

by Ted Gulhaugen



A painting is more than just slapping a bunch of paint on a canvas so that it will look like something. The artist must choose the subject, prepare sketches, and select the appropriate colors and canvas. He or she must decide how to best frame the subject upon the canvas, and the time of day that would suit the subject best. From what perspective will he paint the subject? What medium will she use: oil, acrylic, pastels, or watercolor? Only when an artist explores these questions can he finally apply the first brushstrokes. When the painting is finished, and the critics' eyes pour over it, only then, perhaps, will it be considered a piece of art.

Discipleship as performance art

Is the Path a work of art? Obviously it is not a painting, but you certainly could think of it as performance art, the process of which reflects the one outlined above. First, the Path has a strong subject, devotion to the Triune God, who has called us to Himself in Holy Baptism. The "canvas" is the course of our day, drawing its structure from creation itself which was ordered according to days, evening and morning, and for our "color palette" we have the words of Scripture and the heritage of the Church, painting our devotion in a bright and varied array.

You could also say that our Path, like good artwork, has perspective. Usually the artist has at least one if not two or three points in his work to which she wants to draw the eye of the beholder. These points also serve as focal points for the rest of the painting or the performance. For the Path, while the Holy Trinity provides an overarching presence, the main focal points are the cross and the empty tomb. Each part of the day (bedtime, rising, and midday)

is drawn to these points through remembrance of our baptismal union with Christ crucified and risen.

As the cross and the empty tomb provide the perspective for our piece of art, there are features that give added value and texture to this work: mealtime and family, the liturgical rhythms of the Church, going to bed and rising, events that bring variation to our experience just as lighting and shading bring variation to a work of art. They give a sense that we are, indeed, *on a path*, a journey with an end to reach.

Realism or impressionism?

Now here's a question: is our work realistic, that is, does it look and feel as much like the real thing as possible? Or is it impressionistic, letting you see the shape of reality, but not its details? I think it is some of both. For example, the creation and the cross are very real, but we only have impressions of the actual resurrection and the new heaven and new earth it inaugurated.

Again, the canvas for this art is the course of your daily life. It is at one time ever old, always there. On the other hand, it is recreated afresh each day. Certain parts of it will always seem to be the same, others will seem different from day to day. The structure and the perspective will be the same, but you will see all the contexts and textures in new ways every day.

The rhythm of every day

So what does this work of art that is called the Path actually look like? It begins in the darkness of the evening. This is the darkness that preceded the creation and Christ's resurrection and foreshadows the bright light of the new heaven and the new

earth. This is the darkness with which you bury the day's sins and, making the sign of the cross, remember that you have died with Christ in your baptism. This is the death in which you commend your whole life to Christ our Lord.

When the morning comes, you greet a new day, a resurrection day, a new life day, a day that the Lord has made. This is the morning of the first day of creation, the first day of the new creation, a new day of forgiveness and life. As you make the sign of the cross, it is the morning for remembering that you have risen with Christ in your baptism. It is the morning that anticipates the arrival of the new heaven and the new earth. The grave of sleep is empty. This is a resurrection in which you commend your whole life to Christ our Lord.

The cross at the center

In the center of this day stands the cross. You rest ever so briefly to mark the time of the crucifixion. Whether the day has been filled with joy or tears, brilliance or mediocrity, success or failure,

with passion or boredom, at noon there stands the cross. Here all the mornings and evenings come together, all the sins and all the faithfulness, all the darkness and light of our lives come together at the foot of the cross. There hung the One who took all of it into His body so that you might be who God intended you to be. Here stands the cross which the empty grave will declare a sign of glory and victory. That is what marks the center of your day.

Then the evening comes again. The painting is finished. The performance is ended. A new piece is being readied for the soul's eye to conceive and the hands of faith to render. Yet because God, not you, is the ultimate artist, each day will be a thing of beauty; it will be good, very good. It will be filled with grace and love, and you can rejoice and be glad in it.

Ted Gulhaugen is Associate Pastor of Zion Lutheran Church in Wausau, WI (ELCA). He is also associate editor of the newsletter Coram Deo, where this essay first appeared.

On the Supreme Court ruling



Editor's note: The recent ruling by the Supreme Court of the United States has, of course, elicited much commentary, and will continue to do so. Much of the social media reaction, even among pastors, has been a bit vitriolic (and that's true of both supporters and opponents of the decision). We thought it might be useful to compile here the immediate reactions of the leaders of several Lutheran church bodies. In the American Lutheran official world, here's what they're saying:

NALC: "Idolatry"

"Contrary to Jesus' authority and teaching about marriage that affirms the Father's intention in creation, the decision by a majority of the justices of the United States Supreme Court today to legalize same-sex marriage in all 50 states is tragic, but not surprising. Many Americans live with the arrogance and delusion that contemporary wisdom makes our understanding superior to the revealed truth of God's Word. In this context the high court's ruling redefines relationships and marriage as a right preserved as a matter of human 'dignity.' Such dignity

is based on an individual determination of fulfillment and morality without regard to external truth or teachings that preserve the greater good of all society. The Supreme Court has foolishly endorsed this idolatry.

"The Supreme Court may have the power to dictate what state governments must claim to be marriage, but it most certainly does not have the power to change what God has revealed to be true marriage, an integral part of His plan for human life which is inherent in the order of the world He has created.

"God alone knows the long-term consequences of the decision for our nation. Now Christians who uphold the orthodox Christian faith and confess that God alone defines marriage must be bold to confess the truth of God's Word without regard to the consequences. The North American Lutheran Church will not shrink from the challenge and the opportunity this decision provides. Both our message and our life become even more distinguishable from the confused and misguided state of our cultural context. To that end we will be providing

resources to equip all our congregations and pastors to confront an idolatrous culture and government. Our first response must be one of prayer and careful deliberation. There is no need to panic about each congregation's right to continue to practice Christian marriage. NALC congregations and pastors can legally continue to teach, preach and practice our confession: *We believe and confess that the marriage of male and female is an institution created and blessed by God. From marriage, God forms families to serve as the building blocks of all human civilization and community. We teach and practice that sexual activity belongs exclusively within the biblical boundaries of a faithful marriage between one man and one woman. (Common Confession 6, Marriage and Family)*

"... Let us pray all the more fervently that our Lord will shield and protect families, and especially children, from the destructive impact of redefining marriage to be whatever sinful human beings desire. Let us not forget that we are bound to follow the One who possesses even greater authority, the authority of our Lord Jesus Christ. One day every knee will bend and every tongue confess that He alone is Lord. For us, there is no other option except an obedient response to His Word and His authority."

— Bishop John Bradosky and General Secretary Mark Chavez, North American Lutheran Church

WELS: "Continuing commitment"

"We are saddened that today the United States Supreme Court issued a ruling requiring all 50 states to allow same sex marriage. In its ruling the Court took the position that the right of same sex couples to be legally married is a right guaranteed by the Constitution.

"Of course, even though the highest court in the land has changed the legal definition of marriage, it has not succeeded in changing the essence of the institution that was created by God and given by him as gift and blessing.

"At this time, we do not know what all of the ramifications of this ruling will be for our congregations and schools. We will need to be looking at these issues carefully in the coming weeks, identifying the potential threats to our freedom to teach and practice our faith in keeping with God's Word, and providing advice and guidance to congregations as those threats become reality.

"In the meantime, we pray: *Lord God, we are grieved that an institution of our government has taken an action which undermines the precious institution of marriage in our country. More important, it is an action which takes a wonderful gift that you created and distorts it into something you, the Giver, never intended. We pray today for our country, asking that you would have mercy on a nation that has once again ignored your Word and will. We pray for our churches and schools, asking that you would give them courage, wisdom, and strength to continue to hold true to your teachings. And we ask that you would bless all the members of our synod with a continuing commitment to hold fast to the truth that you have taught us, no matter what kinds of pressure or temptations this sinful world places on us. Above all, help us to continue to use Law and Gospel, not to change society or laws, but to change hearts. Use our faithful witness to bring others to true repentance and to find perfect healing and forgiveness at the foot of our Savior's cross. As we live in these last days, Lord, we pray with believers of all time, 'Come quickly, Lord Jesus!' Amen"*

— President Mark Schroeder, Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod

ELS: "No human authority"

"God has established His own criteria for what determines marriage – the intimate and lifelong union of a man and woman into one flesh, entered into by mutual consent and promise. His institution of marriage is for the great benefit of our families and of our nation. No human authority – even the highest court of our land – can overthrow what the Supreme Judge of all mankind has defined as marriage.

"Will this unfortunate 5-4 ruling of validating 'same-sex marriage' for the entire country have a direct effect on our pastors and congregations? Will litigation be brought against any pastor who for conscience sake refuses to officiate at a homosexual wedding? More study is needed in the days and months ahead to realize the full range of what the ruling entails. But – no matter – our obedience is to the Lord, and we know He will be with us as we seek to do His will. He also provides the necessary strength to remain steadfast when the torrents of secularism rush against the church.

"It is a day that calls for national repentance. The Supreme Court's decision presents an occasion for each of us fellow Christians to speak another word – a better word – pointing people not only to

what Scripture states on marriage but also to what is at the heart and center of that Word. We desire to use every occasion to focus on the Lord Jesus Christ and his forgiving love.

“May God help us all, for the sake of His beloved Son!”

—President John A. Moldstad, Evangelical Lutheran Synod

LCMS: “Seismic ramifications”

[Pastor Harrison’s statement begins by quoting Psalm 46.1-7]

“A one-person majority of the U.S. Supreme Court got it wrong – again. Some 40 years ago, a similarly activist court legalized the killing of children in the womb. That decision has to date left a wake of some 55 million Americans dead. Today, the Court has imposed same-sex marriage upon the whole nation in a similar fashion. Five justices cannot determine natural or divine law. Now shall come the time of testing for Christians faithful to the Scriptures and the divine institution of marriage (Matthew 19:3–6), and indeed, a time of testing much more intense than what followed *Roe v. Wade*.

“Like *Roe v. Wade*, this decision will be followed by a rash of lawsuits. Through coercive litigation, governments and popular culture continue to make the central post-modern value of sexual freedom override the ‘free exercise of religion’ enshrined in the Bill of Rights.

“The ramifications of this decision are seismic. Proponents will seek to drive Christians and Christian institutions out of education at all levels; they will press laws to force faithful Christian institutions and individuals to violate consciences in work practices and myriad other ways. We will have much more to say about this.

“During some of the darkest days of Germany, a faithful Lutheran presciently described how governments lose their claim to legitimate authority according to Romans 13:

“The Caesar cult in its manifold forms, the deification of the state, is one great form of the defection from the [true] idea of the state. There are also other possibilities of such defection. The government can forget and neglect its tasks. When it no longer distinguishes between right and wrong, when its courts are no longer governed by the strict desire for justice, but by special interests, when government no longer has the courage to exercise

its law, fails to exercise its duties, undermines its own legal order, when it weakens through its family law parental authority and the estate of marriage, then it ceases to be governing authority.

“Raising such a question can lead to heavy conflicts of conscience. But it is fundamentally conceivable, and it has time and again become reality in history, that a governing authority has ceased to be governing authority. In such a case there may indeed exist a submission to a superior power. But the duty of obedience against this power no longer exists. [Hermann Sasse, ‘What Is the State?’ (1932)]

As faithful Christians, we shall continue to be obedient to just laws. We affirm the human rights of all individuals and the inherent and equal value of all people. We respect the divinely given dignity of all people, no matter their sexual preference. We recognize that, under the exacting and demanding laws of God, we are indeed sinners in thought, word and deed, just as are all (Romans 3:9ff.). We confess that the ‘blood of Jesus Christ, God’s Son, cleanses us from all our sins’ (1 John 1:7). We confess that God’s divine law of marriage and the entire Ten Commandments apply to all, and that so also the life-giving sacrifice of Christ on the cross is for all. It is a ‘righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe’ (Romans 3:22).

“However, even as we struggle as a church to come to a unified response to this blatant rejection of the entire history of humankind and its practice of marriage, ‘We shall obey God rather than man’ (Acts 5:29). Christians will now begin to learn what it means to be in a state of solemn conscientious objection against the state. We will resist its imposition of falsehood upon us, even as we continue to reach out to those who continue to be harmed by the ethic of radical sexual freedom, detached from God’s blessing of marriage. And we will stand shoulder to shoulder with Christians, churches and people of good will who are resolute on this issue. God help us. Amen.”

—President Matthew C. Harrison,
Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod

ELCA: “We are not of one mind”

“Last week the U.S. Supreme Court rendered its decision announcing the right of same-gender couples to have equal access to marriage. For many members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in

America, this decision is a welcome sign of hope and a time for celebration. Other members of this church do not agree with the court's decision and remain deeply concerned because of their understanding of Scripture.

"This decision affects each of us, some profoundly, and we are not of one mind. Let us continue to accompany one another with prayer, love and mutual respect as we reflect on this new reality and remember Paul's words in 1 Corinthians about the enduring power of God's love. The ELCA social statement "Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust" (2009) neither endorses nor forbids same-gender marriages and recognizes that we have differing understandings and convictions on this matter. In its decision, the court stated that 'the First Amendment ensures that religious organizations and persons are given proper protection as they seek to teach the principles that are so fulfilling and so central to their lives and faiths.'

"According to this church's social statement on human sexuality, all decisions about recognizing, supporting and holding publicly accountable same-gender relationships are entrusted to congregations. Recognizing that the church is not of one mind on this subject, our 2009 actions provide that congregations and clergy should discern together whether to recognize such relationships and to what degree.

"Pastors are to engage in conversation, discernment and partnership with the congregations

who have called them prior to solemnizing or presiding over a same-gender marriage. On the other hand, no pastor is obligated to solemnize the marriage of any couple, same-gender or different-gender, whom the pastor cannot in good conscience marry.

"As Lutheran Christians, we continue to be a church that engages in conversation and discernment in all aspects of our faith and life. Creating space for respectful conversation and dialogue continues to be an important part of our life together. A helpful resource for engaging in difficult conversations is *Talking Together as Christians about Tough Social Issues*. In addition, the ELCA Ministry to and with Same-Gender Couples and their Families Working Group remains in the process of completing its work. A report of the group's findings and possible recommendations will be presented to the ELCA Church Council at its November meeting.

"We seek to see our differences as a gift to be celebrated as we live out that which unites us: the mercy and grace of Jesus Christ who leads us into mission and ministry in the world. In the midst of this change, we are first and foremost church—a church that proclaims the good news of Jesus Christ. May God bless, guide and strengthen you each day as you go in peace and serve the Lord."

—Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton,
Evangelical Lutheran Church in
America

Omnium gatherum



Bp. Eaton's statement • I had just finished the draft of this issue of *Forum Letter* when the email from Bp. Eaton arrived with her response to the Supreme Court decision about same-sex marriage—nearly a week after the fact. The original version had noted that she had as yet made no comment, so I went back to the drawing board to make room to include her. No doubt one reason for the delay is that she was attending the funeral in Charleston of the folks murdered in Charleston's Emanuel AME church (Pr. Clementa Pinckney, one of the victims, was a graduate of the ELCA's Southern Seminary; the alleged shooter is apparently a member of an ELCA congregation). Another reason is no doubt that it takes

some time to write a thoughtful response to such a significant decision. But we in the ELCA are unaccustomed to thoughtful responses from our Presiding Bishop. Bp. Eaton's predecessor would have had his statement already drafted, ready for release within seconds of the decision's announcement. It most likely would have been along the lines of the statement issued by Presiding Bishop Kathryn Jefferts Schori of the Episcopal Church, in which she "rejoice[d] that the Supreme Court has opened the way for the love of two people to be recognized by all the states of this Union. . . . May love endure and flourish wherever it is to be found." Whatever one's view, Bp. Eaton's statement, given the reality of the church she serves, is a model of pastoral restraint. It

is a relief to know she remembers that those who opposed same-sex marriage are fully in accord with the ELCA's official position (if you can call it that), and gratifying that she raises the banner of religious freedom.

I can only imagine • The Episcopal congregation I attend follows the version of the lectionary that has continuous Old Testament readings during the non-festival part of the church year (in their parlance, it is "Track 1"). The Sunday after the Supreme Court decision the Old Testament lesson was the story of the death of Saul and Jonathan – you know, where David says of Jonathan "your love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women." I shudder to think of the direction some preachers in Episcopal churches took that text on that particular Sunday.

A resource • The letter on the Supreme Court decision from the NALC leaders included a link to a "teaching statement" prepared by some legal minds in that church body about what the decision might mean for congregations and pastors. Even if you're not in the NALC, there are some suggestions here worth pondering. You can read the statement, entitled "Marriage Law and the Protection of Congregations' Religious Liberty," at <http://thenalc.org/wp-content/uploads/Documents/Teaching%20Statements/Marriage-Law-2015-JUN-26.pdf>.

Coram Deo • Our first two pieces this month are reprinted from *Coram Deo*, a thoughtful and pastoral guide to prayer, utilizing ALPB's *For All the Saints* as a primary resource. A subscription will cost you five

bucks, but it's likely they would send you a sample issue if you sent a self-addressed stamped envelope to Coram Deo, c/o Zion Lutheran Church, 709 Sixth St., Wausau WI 54403. One stamp would do it.

Is this the trajectory? • The June 22 issue of the *New Yorker* contained a sobering article by Rachel Aviv entitled "The Death Treatment." She writes about euthanasia in Belgium, a country that prides itself on being the most advanced nation in legalizing a "right to die." Belgians can request that they be euthanized by their physician for a wide variety of medical reasons, loosely defined. They need not be suffering from a terminal illness; even the pain of, say, depression or a broken relationship seems to qualify one for being put to death by a doctor. It makes for very sobering reading, as more and more states seem eager to follow Vermont, Oregon and Washington in permitting "physician aid in dying."

CCET director • The Center for Catholic and Evangelical Theology has a new Executive Director; he is Pr. Gregory Fryer, pastor of Immanuel Lutheran Church in New York City. He succeeds Michael Root in that position. Congratulations to both Pr. Fryer and the Center.

Cremation • If you're still burned up about the article in January on cremation, check out *Cremation, Embalment, or Neither? A Biblical/Christian Evaluation* by Alvin J. Schmidt (Westbow Press, 2015). This book is so new it actually cites the aforementioned article. It's a thoughtful discussion of more things you may not have thought about. – roj

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