

FORUM LETTER

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What the world calls the Christmas spirit



[W]hen God comes in the Person of Jesus Christ, the usual methods of science and philosophy fail utterly. That is why the things of God, the things the Lord Jesus offers, are hid. The relationship between the Eternal God and the Son of Mary can never be discovered by human intellect and reason. If [one] is to know, Jesus Christ must reveal it to him. Therefore the Son of God issues the invitation, "Come unto Me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." If [we] labor to find the truth, if [we] work and sweat at deductions from known facts to discover the ultimate truth that is God; if [we] are heavy laden with the burden of a meaningless existence, the burdens of life and the guilt of sin – we must come to the Lord Jesus and He will give rest. . . . Some may labor with their intellect at the Manger of Bethlehem. They cannot see the connection between the Eternal God and this little Babe. God manifest in the flesh for our redemption means little or nothing. So they labor to create for themselves what the world calls the Christmas spirit. It manifests itself in an artificially stimulated gushing over an Infant born in poverty and romantic circumstances nineteen hundred years ago. With a great deal of effort and much labor they work themselves into the Christmas mood, an emotional spree that leaves them flat the next day.

All these must stop laboring at this sort of thing. They must leave their intellect behind as they go to Bethlehem and come as little babes that the Christchild may reveal the Father to them. They must see God in the Manger. Then Christ will give them rest from the labor of creating a Christmas for themselves. He will give them a real Christmas and they will find rest unto their souls. Surrender is the solution of their problem. – Fred H. Lindemann, *Thy King Cometh* (Ernst Kaufmann, Inc., 1948), 34-37.

To see ourselves as others see us



[Editor's note: A year or so ago I was having lunch with a Missouri Synod colleague, and the talk turned to the question of how each of our church bodies is viewed by people in the other. We've all heard the Robert Burns line, usually rendered "to see ourselves as others see us." The line actually comes from a poem entitled "To a Louse," and it is about observing that insect crawling on a woman's bonnet in church. No doubt all our church bodies have lice, visible to those watching us but not to ourselves. So here for your consideration your editors – first myself, and then Pr. Speckhard – observe what we see in the "other" church body.]

I didn't know much about Lutherans growing up in Northern California. They weren't that plentiful, and I was a Methodist. I certainly didn't know any-

thing about different kinds of Lutherans. The local Missouri Synod congregation was three blocks from my house, so I knew there was such a thing as “Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod,” whatever that meant. Our next-door neighbors were members of that church, and I remember the lady saying that they had chosen it because she was Protestant and her husband was Catholic, and it seemed a good compromise. Perhaps it was, but I don’t remember ever seeing them heading for church on Sunday morning.

Falling in with Lutherans

I became more aware of different kinds of Lutherans in college, when I sort of fell in with the Lutheran Campus Ministry (mostly because they had a student group, while the Methodists had a campus minister who didn’t really do “groups”). The Lutheran campus pastor was LCA, I believe, but there were other sorts of Lutherans involved. This was the 1960s, and the differences didn’t seem all that big.

At Yale Divinity School, I again fell in with the Lutheran students and began to sense a little of the *angst* that was permeating the Lutheran landscape in the early 1970s. Most of those who were Missouri Synod were openly wondering whether they would be able to stay in that body; most of them eventually didn’t.

Over the years I’ve had a number of friends who were pastors in the Missouri Synod. Prior to the 1988 ELCA merger, two of the urban areas where I lived had “pan-Lutheran ministerial associations,” so I got to know on a collegial basis a good number of Missouri Synod pastors; I’ve had cordial and even close relationships with a succession of pastors of the Missouri Synod congregation in the town where I was the ELCA pastor for some 29 years.

Mystified by Missouri

Despite all of those experiences, I often find myself mystified by the Missouri Synod. On the one hand, I am predisposed to view my fellow Lutherans favorably. That does not go without saying. Many, many of my ELCA colleagues simply don’t have that predisposition. Particularly among the younger generation of ELCA pastors, I sense little more than contempt. There is a strong strain of “well, he’s Missouri Synod, and that’s pretty much

all you need to know about him.” Often that contempt is expressed as ridicule.

But as I said, my view is much more one of mystification. There is much that I admire in Missouri. I am convinced that the average Missouri Synod pastor is better educated than the average ELCA pastor, at least in the classical sense. Missouri Synod pastors know their Bible, they know the Confessions, and they know what it means to be Lutheran. ELCA pastors – well, not so much, though they may know a lot of other things. My experience with Missouri Synod laity and congregations is not as extensive, but my sense is that they generally have a greater seriousness about theology than is often the case among ELCA laity.

I admire Concordia Publishing House for much the same reason. They publish books that are serious, not generally captive to the theological fad du jour. I’m always interested in comparing the annual “best seller” list from Concordia to that of Augsburg Fortress; for my money, Concordia almost always comes out way ahead. Not to say they don’t also publish plenty of schlock, but then you have to make money somehow.

I admire Missouri’s liturgical resources. I think the *Lutheran Service Book* is in most respects a product far superior to *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*. I understand that Missouri has its own “worship wars,” and that not every pastor and congregation shapes its liturgical life in the salutary direction provided by *LSB*; still, the trend in Missouri seems to be to encourage responsible liturgical worship, and in my view that’s a very good thing.

On the other hand . . .

Yet in spite of these very positive things, I cannot see myself ever joining the Missouri Synod. The reasons are several, but I suppose they fall into two general categories: ecclesiological differences and temperamental differences.

The ecclesiological differences are complicated, but they boil down to the fact that I just don’t agree with Missouri on some very key points. I believe that Scripture and tradition make it permissible for the church to ordain women. Yet I have to say this is probably not a deal-breaker for me, and if it were the only issue, I’m not sure it would keep me out of Missouri. I do bristle at what appears to be Missouri’s inability even to consider the subject

charitably, but that's getting into the temperamental issues.

A much bigger problem for me is Missouri's view of the Eucharist, and particularly its defense of close(d) communion. I think I understand their teaching on this matter; I simply don't agree with it. On the occasions when I worship in a Missouri congregation, I of course respect their policy. This is an area where my attitude is probably different from many ELCA folks, who see Missouri's practice as "unwelcoming" or "exclusive." I don't really think of it that way; I just think it's incorrect.

There are other ecclesiological issues that would keep me out of Missouri. I do not care for their rampant congregationalism. There's plenty of that in the ELCA, but at least it isn't encouraged, taught and even glorified. Missouri's view of the office of the ministry is also rather different from my own in many respects.

Denunciation, backbiting, and heresy hunting

By far the most puzzling aspect (to me) of the Missouri Synod, however, is the temperamental one. There just seems to be such an astonishingly pronounced tendency in Missouri circles toward angry denunciation, backbiting, and heresy hunting. The examples are too numerous to catalog. The accusations hurled against pastors for participating in ecumenical or interfaith commemorative services following national or local tragedies come first to mind – accusations often made by self-appointed guardians of doctrinal purity who live hundreds of miles away from the pastor they are accusing. Such incidents leave me wondering what kind of fear it is in Missouri that requires such rigidity. It frankly reminds me of the absurd rhetoric from those who want to build a wall along our nation's southern border.

A personal anecdote: My ELCA congregation had for many years an excellent relationship with the local Missouri congregation. In the 1960s and 1970s there had been occasional joint worship services (it was licit back then, as my congregation was ALC) and a joint Vacation Bible School. Some of those things went away as the winds shifted in Missouri, but we still did a number of "external" ministries together. When the LCMS congregation called a new pastor some years ago, they invited me to attend the installation – to vest and be part of the cler-

gy procession, though not to take any other part. I went so far as to call the church office to confirm that they really had intended to ask me to do this, and was told that "of course" they wanted me to participate in this way.

When I showed up for the installation, the ushers directed me to the room where the pastors were vesting. I was met at the door by a retired pastor I did not know; when I introduced myself, he got that deer-in-the-headlights look and said he'd have to check with the pastor being installed (a man I actually had known back in the "pan-Lutheran ministerium" days when he was pastor of another congregation in the metro area). A moment later the new pastor came to the door, welcomed me warmly, and said he was so very pleased that I could be here and of course he wanted me to process with the other clergy.

About two minutes later he came back to me with an ashen face. "Maybe this isn't such a good idea," he stammered. He later explained that one of the other pastors in the circuit had issued an ultimatum: "If that ELCA guy vests and processes, I'm leaving." I, of course, simply said, "Don't worry about it. I'll put my vestments back in the car and sit in the congregation," and I did. After the service the presider at the installation – I believe he was the district vice-president – sought me out and apologized profusely for the incident. "It's just very hard right now," he said.

It always seems very hard

Trouble is, it seems always to be very hard in Missouri. Around every corner there is always someone lying in wait, ready to pounce on the least deviation from his own version of orthodoxy. The scorch and burn policy is applied just as viciously in interactions with, or comments about, other church bodies. Some of those Missourians who participate in our *Forum Online* have nothing but venom for the ELCA and anyone associated with it. There are, of course, others who engage in serious dialogue, just as there are ELCA and NALC and other non-Missourians who regularly spew vitriol toward those with whom they disagree. But my sense in that forum at least is that quite a few Missouri participants have no real interest in understanding other points of view – maybe even no ability to understand other points of view. They are right, damn it,

and everyone else is wrong, and that applies to every conceivable point of doctrine or practice. And if a forum poster who is himself or herself in the Missouri Synod should dare to disagree, then the level of hostility goes up another three notches. It is not a pretty sight. I've visited some LCMS-oriented websites where the nastiness is even worse.

So that pretty well describes "how I see" the Missouri Synod: lots of positive things, admirable things; but on that beautiful bonnet crawls a louse so big it sometimes makes it difficult to focus on anything else.

— by *Richard O. Johnson, editor*

"But some of my best friends are in the ELCA." There. That preemptive defense just might head off any complaints about what is likely to be a fairly negative essay about how I as an LCMS pastor view the ELCA.

It wasn't always that way. There was a time in my adult life when I would have been hard pressed to tell the LCMS and ELCA apart. I was married in an ELCA church, Trinity in downtown Valparaiso, IN, my wife's home church. I grew up at Immanuel, an LCMS church. Immanuel downplayed its connection to the LCMS and Trinity was in a brand new denomination, meaning (to my wife) little more than that the acronym letters had been rearranged for organizational purposes. We both attended the same youth gatherings every year in Chicago, put on by Lutheran Youth Encounter, a pan-Lutheran group, rather than our respective triennial denominational youth gatherings. We used the same LBW in worship every Sunday. Neither of us could tell much difference between the two other than that Trinity has a nice traditional sanctuary and Immanuel has an architecturally modern one. And hey, she was the bride, so the wedding venue was never in question.

Surface reasons

When we moved to Cleveland after our wedding we tried two local congregations, one LCMS and one ELCA. We ended up joining the LCMS one because the ELCA one seemed to consist entirely of senior citizens. That was the surface reason, but at a deeper level I think the choice mattered more to me than it did to my wife. Regardless of

whether there were any major differences (there didn't appear to be any between the congregations in Cleveland, either), LCMS was something I *was*. It defined my family on both sides for generations. ELCA, on the other hand, was not something my wife *was*. It wasn't an identity, it was an acronym to which she wasn't particularly attached. So we were married in her congregation but became members of my denomination, in both cases for reasons of emotional attachment rather than doctrine or practice.

I went to seminary the next year, with vague notions but still no clear sense of how the ELCA and LCMS were all that different or why it mattered. There I learned that my experience at Immanuel in Valpo was not typical and that the LCMS as a whole was far more conservative. And I heard (probably exaggerated) horror stories about all manner of theological goofiness in the ELCA. But I figured I was fairly mainstream. Yes, there were hard-core conservatives in the LCMS and wacked out liberals in the ELCA, but I thought (rightly or wrongly) that most Lutherans were still in an area of comfortable theological overlap.

A crack beneath our feet

Since then it seems like a crack opened in the earth beneath our feet, forcing everyone to be on one side or the other. In retrospect I can see this crack was opening long before I became aware of it, but the important thing about it was not merely that it left everyone on one side or the other but that it ran and still runs perpendicular to the normal divisions and labels in Western Christendom. There are Catholics on both sides of it, Lutherans on both sides of it, Methodists, Anglicans, and so forth. These "sides" came to have different labels. Some called it the traditionalist/revisionist divide, others opted for the simpler (and more misleading) conservative/liberal divide.

But whatever the terms, the fault line between the two sides has widened so drastically in the last twenty years that Christians of all stripes on a given side of that chasm have more in common with each other than they do with Christians of their own stripe on the other side. "Continuing Anglicans" who broke away from The Episcopal Church have more in common with me than they do with their fellow Anglicans in The Episcopal Church. I suspect I have more in common with Orthodox

Presbyterians, for example, than I do with fellow Lutherans in the ELCA, and ELCA Lutherans have more in common with the Presbyterian Church USA than they do with either the LCMS or Orthodox Presbyterians.

The practical controversies center on issues about which one must take one side or the other. For example, one either allows for the ordination of women or one does not. One either does gay weddings or one does not. There is no third way by which to straddle the divide. Often the disagreements mirror political disagreements, causing people to mistake it for a simple “culture war” disagreement or a matter of mere politics rather than a genuine theological difference. But I think they are mistaken about that. I think the fault line is theological to the core. The same divide affects less black and white subjects as well, but the practical issues that require an actual policy decision are simply where the very different worldviews and ways of doing theology manifest themselves most clearly.

One sectarian church

Speaking strictly for myself (though I can say with some confidence many in the LCMS share my views, more or less) I now view the ELCA as simply a part of mainline liberal Protestantism, and I view all the denominations of liberal Protestantism collectively as one sectarian church that is like an ice shelf that has broken off from the continent of historic, orthodox Christianity and continues to drift further away. So I can only offer personal sentiments, more like impressions, though with confidence that many in the LCMS, especially those in their fifties or younger, likely have the same impressions and attitudes.

I don't take the ELCA seriously anymore, or liberal Protestantism generally. I take every other kind of Christian church seriously even where I disagree. I have tremendous respect for many individuals in the ELCA, but I see no ecumenical future and feel no pull to look for one in official organizations of liberal Protestantism.

Non-Christian voices from the social “sciences” (scare quotes intended for maximum implication) in academia sound to me exactly like the ELCA and vice versa. My relative who is an ex-Lutheran, atheist Ph.D. in sociology could probably preach to the ELCA bishops and get a chorus of

“Amens” because it would be all about global warming, transphobia, colonialism, heterosexism, the occupation of Palestine, and the dangers of the “Religious Right.”

The degree to which I take ELCA bishops (and Episcopalian bishops as well) seriously seems inversely proportional to the seriousness with which they take themselves. When I read about them online I'm always taken by the sheer quantity of ceremonial garb in the photos. I've always heard you shouldn't dress for the job you have, you should dress for the job you want, and they dress like they want to be globally and historically significant.

Members of the ELCA tend to speak more sympathetically about Muslims than they do about Evangelicals. When a Muslim does something bad, it is exceptional and we are told not to judge. When a Fundamentalist does something bad, it is typical and must be “prophetically” condemned.

“Stay off my side, Cheswick”

I often enjoy the company of ELCA liberals more than I enjoy the company of conservative LCMS folks. My ELCA friends and acquaintances are the very soul of interesting and pleasant, whereas too often, when I hear certain fellow LCMSers agreeing vociferously with me, what comes to mind is a line in “One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest”: “Cheswick, do me a favor. . . . Stay off my side!” Many ELCA people understand themselves as counter-cultural even when they are 100% in tune with American culture. To hear them tell it, you'd think the U.S. government teaming up with the media, Hollywood, and all of academia played the role of David against the Goliath of some county clerk in Kentucky.

All this being said, there are definite cultural and historical things that all Lutherans share. We all still say, “This is most certainly true,” even if some Lutherans think of all certainty as close-minded arrogance. We all say “We should fear and love God so that . . .” even if we don't agree on what to call God or what specifically the “so that” might refer to. So if you are Lutheran you can almost assuredly say that some of your best friends are members of a different Lutheran church you find ridiculous, and probably feel blessed by the friendship.

— by Peter Speckhard, associate editor

On mending wall

by Samuel Zumwalt



In his famous poem “Mending Wall,” Robert Frost described the annual ritual of New England neighbors restoring the stone wall separating their properties. Twice one neighbor says: “Good fences make good neighbors.” Twice the narrator says, “Something there is that doesn’t love a wall.” With that interchange, Frost captures the human struggle with the idea of boundaries.

As a middle child baby boomer, I watched my older siblings, one born in 1945 and two in 1947, come of age in the mid-1960s. Two of the three were drawn into the *Zeitgeist* which said “Question Authority”; they have an enduring fascination with the preciousness of baby boomer idealism. (Cue John Lennon’s “Imagine.”) The other became what they used to call a “businesswoman,” always conforming to the conservatism of our father who had an excellent regard for boundaries. He understood the need for walls. Two of the three, like our mother who had poor boundaries, didn’t love walls and thought they ought to be torn down, imagining that whatever came after the tearing down of walls would have to be better. Of course it isn’t.

A major Old Testament scholar once described the commandments as a circle within which God’s people live. Who are the Jewish people? Orthodox and Hassidic Jews will answer: “Those who keep the 613 commandments.” Indeed, these most traditional of Jews organize their communities and their lives around the keeping of God’s commandments in the Torah, the five books of Moses. Non-religious Jews who have begun to live as Orthodox Jews often describe the living within that wall as “freeing” – an idea that grates against the sensibilities of most baby boomers. When I was younger, a neighboring Reform rabbi (the most liberal of Jews) said: “We don’t care much about worship. We *do* Jewish” (which for him meant social action).

Growing up ecumenical

I grew up going to the Lutheran church at 8 a.m. with Mom, the highbrow Baptist church at 11 a.m. with Dad, and to dozens of rosaries and funeral masses in Latin for our paternal grandmother’s

many Sicilian relatives. My best friend was a high church Episcopalian, and my first serious girlfriend, with whom I attended Sunday evening services for a year, was Church of Christ (non-instrumental). I grew up ecumenical. I breathed what C. S. Lewis called “mere Christianity,” that which all Christians have in common.

But I came to understand how Christian practice and theology differed from church to church. I like to say that I became a Lutheran as an adult. I chose one way of being Christian, because there isn’t really a generic way. At my ordination to the Holy Ministry, I promised to teach, preach, and practice as a Lutheran Christian – which is to say, I promised to tend and mend the walls that are the boundaries between Lutheran Christians and others.

Lutheran walls

The first “wall” defining a Lutheran Christian is composed of the three ecumenical creeds, with their Trinitarian faith. When I see worship purporting to be Lutheran or worship resources purporting to be Lutheran but which do not refer to Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, I say, “There’s a wall that needs rebuilding.” But of course those who change our Trinitarian language, like all who don’t love boundaries, say: “Lutheran is whatever we say it is.” This leads, it seems to me, to pastors and laity unwittingly mimicking Vice-Principal Ed Rooney in the movie “Ferris Bueller’s Day Off,” screaming: “Grace! Grace!” Sorry, but that’s not grace!

The second “wall” defining a Lutheran Christian is the Lutheran Confessions. In the old days, two Latin words described how pastors subscribed to the Lutheran Confessions. “*Quia*” meant you believed the Confessions accurately interpret Scripture. “*Quatenus*” meant you would only subscribe to the Confessions insofar as you thought they accurately interpret the Bible. Needless to say, many pastors today wouldn’t know “*Quia*” if it bit them on the backside. And, surprise, surprise! The “*Quatenus*” pastors and laity don’t love walls. In fact, most of them think you can have generic Christianity. This I unkindly liken to the old “Our Gang” episodes (showing my age here) when one of the

gang says: "Hey, kids, let's put on a show!" And that's what you end up with: people who, like my rabbinical neighbor, "do" the faith as social action, all dressed up in clerical collars, robes, and matching T-shirts as they perform service projects.

But what about St. Paul?

Those who don't love walls will doubtless point to St. Paul, who writes in Ephesians 2.14 that the Lord Jesus tore down the wall of hostility. Of course Paul meant that Jesus tore down the wall separating Jews and Gentiles, which is, as Genesis 12.1-3 described, the ultimate purpose for God's having chosen Abram and Sarai to be the parents of a whole new people. From the beginning, God intended Abram's and Sarai's offspring to be a blessing to all the people of the earth. God accomplished that intention by sending his Son to be born of the Virgin Mary and to be publicly and legally claimed by her husband Joseph, as Son of David. Through the gift of God's Son Jesus, God fulfilled both the promise in Genesis 12 to bless all nations through Abram and Sarai and the promise to David in 2 Samuel 7 that someone from his family would rule forever over God's people. God kept His promises!

The Good News of Jesus is not that walls are no longer necessary, as if Easter were all about Jesus leading the army of Israel around Jericho shouting "Christ is risen" until the walls came tumbling down. Yes, the death and resurrection of Jesus mean the wall of enmity between Jew and Gentile has been broken down, and there is now only one people of God defined forever by Baptism into Jesus' death and resurrection instead of by ethnicity, language, or country. But good fences still make good neighbors precisely because the unholy trio of sin, death, and Satan are loose in the world until the end of time. We need speed limits and we need troopers to enforce them, so that everyone doesn't turn every bit of pavement into a motor speedway. We need laws to protect the most vulnerable from the most rapacious. We need the preaching of judgment against

rebellion and God calling everyone to account precisely to counter the cheap grace about which Lutheran martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer so eloquently wrote in *The Cost of Discipleship*. Bonhoeffer was prescient about what would take hold in churches far beyond the moribund state church in Germany.

Old Adam doesn't love a wall

I am a Lutheran Christian precisely because the creeds and Lutheran confessions have taught me how to read the Bible using a Law/Gospel hermeneutic. Properly dividing God's "Yes" and God's "No" is all about *not* wasting the death of God's Son Jesus, which is exactly what those who preach and practice cheap grace do. In short, there is no need for God's Son Jesus to die on the cross if people are without sin or if people can make the world a better place through social action or if we can all just get together by "feeling groovy" towards one another. Decades ago H. Richard Niebuhr nailed what cheap grace looks like in his oft-quoted description of liberal theology: "A God without wrath brought men without sin into a Kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a Cross."

The old Adam, that old unregenerate part of each Christian and of all the unbaptized, questions God's authority. "Something there is that doesn't love a wall." But until all that is hostile to God has been destroyed, "Good fences make good neighbors." And the good fence that is God's judgment against sin, death, and Satan is necessary to keep in check the bad neighbor in us and to drive us empty-handed and penitent each week to receive the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation through Christ's true Body and most precious Blood, graciously given to us in the Holy Meal.

Samuel Zumwalt, STS, is pastor of St. Matthew Evangelical Lutheran Church (ELCA), Wilmington, NC. This is his first contribution to Forum Letter.

Omnium gatherum



All are welcome • A reader writes: "My husband and I were having coffee with a number of members of an area ELCA church when one of them told this story:

"There is a man who attends our church and who brings his service dog with him to church. A few Sundays ago the dog accompanied the man to the rail for Holy Communion. The communion assis-

tant gave the dog the wafer' (aka the Body of our Lord Jesus Christ). The person telling the story thought it was 'cute,' and the five or six congregational members agreed that they thought it was 'cute' and 'funny.' My hope is that the pastor would have spoken to the communion assistant, but I can't be so sure. When we have occasionally attended services there, he makes a point of announcing that it is the policy of the church to welcome all people to the altar, thus making everyone feel welcome, I guess. So communing the dog shows just how welcoming that congregation has become."

Australian decision • The Lutheran Church of Australia has voted against a proposal to open the office of ordained ministry to women. The decision was made by secret ballot at the church's General Synod in October. The vote was 269 in favor, 145 opposed – but a two-thirds vote was required to make the change, and proposal fell seven votes short. The LCA is something of an anomaly among Lutheran churches worldwide, being an associate member of both the Lutheran World Federation and the LCMS-leaning International Lutheran Council. Bishop John Henderson wrote a pastoral letter to congregations following the convention, with some wise words: "The outcome of the vote has left people with a variety of responses and emotions, some of them quite strong. This is hard, but it is human and quite normal. The bishops have also experienced a range of emotions, coupled with some exhaustion after working so intensely for so long. We believe, therefore, that it is too soon to understand the full impact of the vote. It is obvious, however, that there is work to be done. Part of that work, de-

cided by Synod, is to prepare a doctrinal statement on the ordination of women and men. Right now, though, there is something more immediate we need to be doing. In the closing sermon on Sunday I asked, 'What happens next?' The first thing we need to do is pause and breathe, just as the delegates did from time to time during the debate, and as Jesus also did after intense times in his ministry. This is not our church, but God's. . . . I especially encourage our pastors to follow in this way of Christ. Blessing and encouraging God's precious people must be at the forefront of our pastoral practice. Gentleness and compassion, often sacrificial, must come first. It is written that despite everything that was done to him Jesus loved his own to the end. He willingly went to the cross for their sake (John 13:1). Pastors, as servants of Jesus Christ, can do no less at a time in the life of the church when so many people need your help and wise counsel." This is the third time in the last couple of decades the matter of ordination of women has been discussed and voted down; with the very close vote this time, you can be sure it won't be the last. It sounds, however, as if the church's leadership is wisely suggesting that the issue be off the agenda, at least for a while.

A venerable tradition • For many decades now, our publisher, the American Lutheran Publicity Bureau, has conducted an annual "Christmas appeal" – sort of like NPR, only less frequent and thus less annoying. Probably less lucrative, too, but you could help that by sending your tax-deductible contribution by year's end to ALPB, P. O. Box 327, Delhi, NY 13753. We don't offer any coffee mugs or book bags, but we do thank you! – *roj*

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