

FORUM LETTER

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The moral stakes of everyday life



Today, the word “sin” has lost its power and awesome intensity. It’s used most frequently in the context of fattening desserts. Most people in daily conversation don’t talk much about individual sin. If they talk about human evil at all, that evil is most often located in the structures of society – in inequality, oppression, racism, and so on – not in the human breast. . . .

But in truth, “sin,” like “vocation” and “soul,” is one of those words that it is impossible to do without. . . .

Sin is a necessary piece of our mental furniture because it reminds us that life is a moral affair. No matter how hard we try to reduce everything to deterministic brain chemistry, no matter how hard we try to reduce behavior to the sort of herd instinct that is captured in big data, no matter how hard we strive to replace sin with nonmoral words, like “mistake” or “error” or “weakness,” the most essential parts of life are matters of individual responsibility and moral choice: whether to be brave or cowardly, honest or deceitful, compassionate or callous, faithful or disloyal. When modern culture tries to replace sin with ideas like error or insensitivity, or tries to banish words like “virtue,” “character,” “evil,” and “vice” altogether, that doesn’t make life any less moral; it just means we have obscured the inescapable moral core of life with shallow language. It just means we think and talk about these choices less clearly, and thus become increasingly blind to the moral stakes of everyday life. . . . The concept of sin is necessary because it is radically true. —David Brooks, *The Road to Character* (Random House, 2015), 53-54.

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A trip to Milwaukee



Everybody hates politics these days. Quite apart from this year’s national election (labeled “too depressing to think about” over on *Forum Online*), we have generally lamented the inevitable politics associated with church life together. Behind the scenes machinations, unseemly attack pamphlets and slick parliamentary maneuvers have been considered ugly necessities that put everything wrong with us on full display. This earthly, worldly, all too human side of church life has been with Christians since the earliest councils, and if half the stories my elders tell me are true, it is an arena in which the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod in convention has traditionally excelled.

In an effort to reduce the level of crass politicking at conventions, the LCMS has eliminated the main political event, the election of the synodical president, from the convention schedule. The last time the presidential election took place at the convention was 2010, when current president Matthew Harrison

surprisingly defeated former president Gerald Kieschnick on the first ballot. Kieschnick was the soul of churchmanship in defeat at the podium, but the convention hall was a bit stunned – some depondent, some elated, but everyone wondering what to do next. Something big had happened at the convention.

Reducing the politicking

Never again. Beginning with the last convention in 2013, the delegates now vote for president online about a month before the convention. That means this year's showdown between Harrison and Concordia Seminary president Dale Meyer will take place June 11-14, the time window for the delegates to vote online. Everyone will know who won the presidential election before arriving at the convention.

This policy has already had the effect of vastly reducing the politicking. When I attended the convention in Houston in 2007, there were various flyers, tables, election guides, and the general signs of politicking going on. In St. Louis in 2013 there was virtually none of that. I would expect this year's convention in Milwaukee to follow suit. Even the delegates have been wondering online why they haven't been bombarded with the heaps of advice, suggestions, propaganda and political mailings that plagued delegates to conventions past. Not that they're complaining, mind you. Just wondering what is going on.

But like bustling crowds at Christmastime or booming fireworks in the neighborhood July 4th, sometimes the thing everyone complains about is perversely part of the charm. Perhaps the one thing worse than politicking at a convention is a convention with no politicking. What is the point? Without slogans and sides, campaigns and camps, competing visions and restaurant rendezvous to discuss them, a church convention is little more than a trip to Milwaukee.

Fixing a problem

The biggest topic on the slate for this convention is a proposal to "fix" the problem of lay ministers serving in Word and Sacrament capacity, a policy originally approved at the 1989 convention in Wichita, KS. Richard John Neuhaus and many others often termed this problem the "Wichita Recension of the Augsburg Confession," referring to Arti-

cle XIV, which traditionally has been taken to reserve such ministry to the called and ordained clergy. John Hannah discusses this proposal at length elsewhere in this issue, so there is no need to rehash it here.

Centralized power

The next biggest item, or rather series of items, on the agenda deal with what is perceived as a push for centralization of power in the office of the synodical president. It is a bit risky to critique these proposals now because only the initial overtures are available in the convention workbook, and the floor committees will meet on Memorial Day weekend to vet, arrange, combine, and otherwise come up with the actual proposals the delegates will consider. But the basic gist of them will probably stay more or less the same and receive a fair amount of pro and con argumentation at the convention.

One such overture seeks to give the synod, and specifically the synodical president, more control over the selection of board members of the Concordia colleges and universities. The assumption is that the elected synodical president would work to ensure the schools stay true to their roots and stay focused, while the various university presidents and boards have a natural financial interest in broadening the appeal of their schools to stay afloat institutionally.

The latter will argue that in the current competitive climate in higher education and in light of the lack of funding the synod gives to the Concordias, this is the worst time to rein in the colleges and prevent them from exploring every avenue of attracting the widest possible variety of applicants and potential donors. The other side will argue that there is little point in having a Lutheran university that is disconnected from or embarrassed by its Lutheran identity. And Lutheran identity needs to mean more than heritage; it must embody ongoing purpose, too. It is an age-old dilemma that has faced religious educational institutions from the beginning.

President as pope?

Another potentially centralizing overture would give the synodical president, not the various district presidents, the last say in resolving disputes. Basically this would mean anyone could appeal any decision of the district to the synodical level. Of course anyone who loses a decision at the district

level would have every reason to do just that. So for all practical purposes (some argue), this would make the synodical president something of a pope. Another proposal would give the synodical president the right to censure district presidents who fail to discipline rostered workers in their districts who openly oppose the synod's doctrine and practice.

Again, it is tricky and a bit dangerous to speculate on any of the specifics of these overtures, which are likely to undergo several revisions before being voted on, so I'm only giving what can be called broad brush descriptions, even stereotypes, of the proposals here. But the clear unifying and underlying theme is a push for (and corresponding resistance to) "enforcement" power. We can't just say things as a synod, so the argument goes, and then do nothing when our pastors and teachers ignore those things and do contrary things while bearing the name of the synod.

The irony of it all

The problem is that our polity as it stands does not really allow for such power. The synod is advisory. And whichever side is out of power tends to become even more staunchly congregational in polity. President Harrison has come out in favor of having such enforcement power, shocking some by posting on Facebook that a synod that is unable to remove clergy who teach against synodical positions (the context at the time was Matthew Becker at Valparaiso University) is unworthy of the name "synod" and nothing Harrison wants to lead or even be a part of.

Ironically, President Harrison opposed many other changes that gave more power to the president in the very year he was unexpectedly elected president. The same thing could happen this year; the people seeking to invest the president with more power might sing a different tune with a different president taking office in the unlikely scenario that Dale Meyer unseats Harrison. But unlike 2010, this year they'll know who the president will be long before the convention and thus long before having to come out publicly in favor of or against any specific measures.

And so forth

Other proposals cover a multitude of issues, each of which could merit a separate article of its

own should it pass a convention vote more or less intact. One such proposal that is certain to go down in flames if it even reaches the convention floor is to censure Prof. Matthew Becker for his teachings. Not that Becker is viewed as a hero by large numbers of delegates, but he was removed from the clergy roster many months ago. That means this overture will be perceived as needlessly rehashing a moot issue.

Another would allow any member of a synodical congregation to press charges of false doctrine on any congregation or pastor in the synod, regardless of whether it was their own or even in their own circuit or district. Apparently the frustration giving rise to this proposal is a perception that congregations can practice open communion and pastors can teach against synodical positions or use non-Lutheran worship resources borrowed from Evangelicalism and there is nothing anyone can do about it. It requires someone with standing to make such a complaint to get the ball rolling, so a lot of such balls have never gotten rolling.

The anti-draft movement

Another overture would express synodical disapproval of forcing women to register for selective service or be drafted into the military. This proposal would be largely symbolic but is worth watching, both because of the controversial "orders of creation" reasoning behind it and because it includes a general condemnation of women in combat.

The main thrust seems to be to give cover to women who may conscientiously object to registering for the draft and want to demonstrate that their objection is a sincerely held religious belief (i.e., actual teaching of their church body) and not just a personal quirk. If this should pass, we will certainly provide full analysis in *Forum Letter* after the convention.

But despite this woefully inadequate effort to make the convention sound interesting and pregnant with momentous theological decisions, the smart money is on this convention being not much more than an uneventful trip to Milwaukee. That's what I predict, anyway. I can't decide whether or not I hope I'm wrong. Then again, I can't decide anything about the upcoming national elections, either, so all bets are off. It just seems like that kind of year.

— by Peter Speckhard, associate editor

Confronting the Wichita problem

by John Hannah



The triennial convention of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod rolls around again this July, with all the excitement that generally entails. One issue that promises to be contentious at Milwaukee concerns “Licensed Lay Deacons.”

There is a long back story. In 1989, the LCMS convention at Wichita authorized district presidents to “license” lay deacons to preach and administer the sacraments. It was said at the time that such a measure was needed for tiny congregations scattered far and wide who could never establish a traditional ministry with a fully compensated pastor. Alaska, part of the Northwestern District, figured prominently in the run up to the Wichita decision.

The Wichita amendment

“Wichita,” as the decision has been dubbed, was never fully accepted. Many attempts have been made to reverse the authorization even as more individuals are “licensed” and the practice expands into more districts. Not every district does this; the Atlantic District, for example, has never invoked “Wichita” even though it has a large cadre of trained lay deacons. These deacons assist pastors and congregations in many areas, but they do not preside at the Eucharist; that service is restricted to the ordained.

Richard John Neuhaus, who may have influenced his “home” Atlantic District, often quipped about “the Wichita amendment to the Augsburg Confession.” He was referring, *inter alia*, to Article XIV which says that “no one should publicly teach, preach, or administer the sacraments without a proper [public] call.” [*Book of Concord*, Kolb/Wengert ed., p. 46]

Piepkorn’s view

The strict confessional position was best explicated within Missouri by Arthur Carl Piepkorn. He responded to the ordination of a Japanese layman to the diaconate with responsibility to “proclaim the Word of God” and “administer the Holy Sacraments” and “to care for the congrega-

tion.” (This was done in preparation for an American missionary’s upcoming furlough.) In a careful and detailed examination of the Biblical and confessional evidence, Piepkorn concluded that this man had been properly ordained as a pastor and he wished him and the congregation well. To call him a “deacon,” Piepkorn judged, was semantic confusion.

Significantly, the Japanese pastor had no seminary training nor was it intended that he would serve full time as the soon-to-depart American pastor had. Neither academic training nor specific employment conditions are required for ordination to the pastoral ministry, Piepkorn argued. [“Theological Observer,” *Concordia Theological Monthly*, 38 (January 1967), 54-59]

If the actual procedures in those districts which have “licensed” LCMS “lay deacons” were similar to the those in Japan in 1966, Piepkorn would contend that they are already in fact ordained as pastors, making “lay deacon” a double misnomer. If their ordinations have not been publically recognized, then they should be. If, in fact, they are preaching and administering the sacraments and if their district presidents and their congregations have found them worthy, then the *de facto* reality of their call to the public ministry should be recognized and they should be publically and immediately ordained.

The task force’s proposal

The task force appointed to tackle the “Wichita” problem, while it seems to recognize that these deacons are serving as pastors, could not bring itself to accept Piepkorn’s thoroughly Biblical and confessional resolution, which was to publically ordain them now. Instead, the task force proposes to the convention that no more “licenses” be granted after January 1, 2018. A “lay deacon” currently serving has some options:

- (1) He may go to one of the seminaries for a Master of Divinity degree.
- (2) He may enroll in the Specific Ministry Pastor (SMP) program—a mostly distance-learning

alternative. This is already acceptable to some but is too great a hardship for others.

(3) He may apply for a colloquy for admission to the SMP roster. Here the Piepkorn solution may be thought to apply only retroactively providing the colloquy procedure is not extraordinarily rigorous.

If a licensed lay deacon does none of these, his license will “lapse” by July 1, 2018.

In short, the recommendation of the task force is, *contra* Piepkorn, to tie ordination to education rather than the distinctive responsibilities and gifts of the pastoral office.

No one is betting what this convention will do. All previous attempts to remove “Wichita” have failed. This time around there is a strong push from President Matthew Harrison to change the current practice, so that may make a difference. At this point the debate holds little promise of being edifying or of clarifying a confessional understanding of ordination to ministry like Piepkorn’s. Those defending the *status quo* predictably will appeal to the “priesthood of all believers” (more correctly the “priesthood of all the baptized”) as adversarial to the ordained ministry.

Playing into their hands

Unfortunately, many opponents of the licensed lay deacon program will play into the hands of its supporters by casting ordination as the attainment of rank, privilege, and status rather than the assumption of duty and service. Lutheran discussion of ordination too often reveals confusion with aspects of pastoral life that are *adiaphora* and not inher-

ent to ordination itself. Ordination is sometimes confused with academic degrees and qualifications, which affects the size of seminary enrollment and institutional financial wellbeing. Or ordination is confused with the granting of status by corporate headquarters in St. Louis, which affects who gets to vote at synodical conventions. Others cast ordination as acceptance into the guild, which allows mobility, permits some tax exemptions and some other privileges.

Underlying the conditions which have brought licensed lay deacons to many churches is the simple fact that the congregation cannot any longer compensate a full time pastor. So clerical anxiety about job security and upward mobility also enters the debate drama.

Meanwhile, we pray that those tiny congregations in Alaska and elsewhere may somehow keep the faith. They know how. “So that we may obtain this faith, the ministry of teaching the gospel and administering the sacraments was instituted.” [AC V, *Book of Concord*, Kolb/Wengert ed., p. 41]

[For more discussion of this issue, see <https://www.facebook.com/nowdistrictlcms/videos/1161106383910291/> ; http://lsm.global/uploads/files/LMM_1-16_Kunkel; and <http://thedaystarjournal.com/not-resolution-4-06-task-force-report/>.]

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An uncertain bugle



One of the saddest episodes in my ministry was watching my former bishop lose his faith. I wrote about this four years ago in *Forum Letter* (“To whom can we go?” Sept. 2012); to recap it briefly, Robert Mattheis, bishop of the Sierra Pacific Synod from 1994 to 2002, stopped believing in God. By the time he died in 2011, he was very frank about his conviction that death was the end of things, that there was no God who heard prayers. He was not shy about sharing his unbelief with any who cared to listen.

One doesn’t wake up one morning disbelieving, I suppose, and Mattheis’s journey out of faith had taken some time. Some years before his death he wrote a guest column in the local newspaper where he lived (and had served as a pastor for many years prior to his election as bishop) in which he indicated he no longer believed in the resurrection. Another column had him admitting he could only recite the First Article of the Apostles’ Creed with his fingers crossed.

I concluded that 2012 article by wondering

how the church should deal with ordained leaders who have lost their faith. "Pastors who lose their faith," I wrote. "Bishops who lose their faith. Not a new story, of course, but one we don't want to talk about. And yet we probably should. It is not just a sad tale of individuals going off track. It raises questions of how we evaluate candidates for ordination, how we teach and train pastors of the church. When a pastor abandons the faith but continues to try to serve, what do we do? Do we let him or her continue to preach and serve? What impact does that have on the church and its members?"

The importance of being honest

This all came rushing back when someone sent me a column in the Northwest Washington Synod's newsletter, written by Bishop Kirby Unti. "One of the questions that I assume many pastors are asked is, 'Do you believe in life after death?'" he wrote. "It has always been important for me as both person and pastor to be honest about what I believe and not to give out 'pat' pastoral responses. The truth is I don't know if there is life after death and I won't know until I die. All I can go on are some clues that I have observed while living on this side of death."

The bishop then goes on to talk about his experiences at the side of people who are dying, his conversations with people who have had near-death experiences, his awe at the way life develops. "My reasoning goes like this," he explains. "'Whatever force is behind the creation of a baby surely has the capacity to create new life when death comes . . .' The force for me is the God I have come to know as the Life Giver in so many facets of my life." Then there is this great proclamation of faith: "Death and life are baked into all of the creation giving me great cause to believe that, when death comes, be prepared for the likelihood that life will follow."

Well. It doesn't sound like he can recite the creed either, does it, without his fingers crossed, what with its words about "the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting"?

Hemming and hawing

I suppose there is something to be said for "both person and pastor to be honest." But honestly, if a pastor—a bishop!—can't affirm the most basic teachings of Christianity without a lot of hemming and hawing, then he really has no business in the office of the holy ministry. If the best he can say is

that there is "great cause to believe" in the "likelihood" of life after death, one wonders why he even wants to be a pastor. What good is he at a funeral?

The bishop concluded his column with an even odder statement: "I do know this about the death of my own parents—If I never see them again I will not mourn because they gave to me in this life time enough blessing to last the all [*sic*] of my life." I could not help but think of St. Paul: "If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied." I suppose, if I summon up some generosity, I could pity the poor bishop.

But pity seems too weak a response for a bishop who must cross his fingers when he says the creed.

Wrestling with obedience

Let's try it from another angle. Yes, most thinking Christians probably wrestle with the mystery of life and death. Yes, there is wisdom in not claiming to know more than you know. Yes, honesty is a good thing (although perhaps not always in a synod newsletter article).

There is a deeper honesty, though, that wrestles with doubt and mystery in the context of obedience. Presumably this bishop, like all Lutheran pastors, made a vow to preach and teach in accordance with the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions. To me that means that there are certain limitations on what I should or may say in the context of exercising my pastoral office. Luther said something about his conscience being captive to the Word of God; that didn't mean—contrary to what many seem to think—that he claimed the right to believe whatever the heck he wanted. The Christian faith means more than saying "The Force be with you."

By what authority?

And what about authority? Can the bishop really mean that his thinking about life and death is shaped primarily by his experiences with the dying and his conversations with people who have had near-death experiences? Is that the source and norm of our teaching and our proclamation? I had a student recently (not a Lutheran, I hasten to add) who opined that the job of the pastor is to present Christian doctrine so that the laity can decide whether they believe it or not. That's not really how Lutherans have traditionally seen the office of the ministry, but this bishop flunks even that minimalistic view if he can't manage to present Christian doctrine at all.

The sad thing is that nobody will really be much disturbed by all of this. He's the bishop, he's just expressing his opinion, how wonderful that he can be so honest, and after all, it was just a synod newsletter article.

But bishops are supposed to be teachers of

the Christian faith; if they honestly "don't know" whether they believe it or not, we have a problem. To quote St. Paul yet again, "If the bugle gives an indistinct sound, who will get ready for battle?"

— by Richard O. Johnson, editor

Omnium gatherum



Disrobed pastor • In the April issue, I told you about an article in the Ocala *Star-Banner* about Pr. Dave Connell, who, the paper reported, "had been disrobed by the ELCA." My point was to poke fun at the religion writer who couldn't distinguish between "defrock" and "disrobe," and I didn't really intend to say more about Pr. Connell than was necessary to set the context. That may have left an unintended impression, so let me clear up a couple of things. I reported he had been removed from the ELCA roster because of sexual misconduct, but in fact this apparently was about statements made by his now ex-wife (they were in the process of divorce) that the two of them had while in college engaged in conduct prior to their marriage which, while not unusual these days, was a violation of the ELCA's *Vision and Expectations* (especially the expectations part). He was, it is said, forthcoming with his congregation about this during the disciplinary process, and they fully and enthusiastically supported him and desired that he continue as their pastor. The Florida-Bahamas Synod did not agree, for reasons more complicated than the alleged premarital indiscretion. I did use the term "sexual harassment" in the item, but it was a reference to "disrobing" a pastor being a violation of the ELCA's sexual harassment policies; I did not say, nor did I mean to imply, that the charge against Pr. Connell was that he was guilty of sexual harassment, but apparently some took it that way. It appears that my attempt to avoid going into the details of his situation ended up causing some embarrassment, and for that I apologize. It appears there are widely differing views of what actually happened in this particular case, but suffice it to say that a majority of his congregation ended up in the "splinter group" that became Christ Lutheran Church in Summerfield, FL, a congregation now affiliated with the Evangelical Lutheran Conference & Ministerium of North America (ELCM). The group's president,

Pr. Roy Steward, tells me that both Pr. Connell and Christ Lutheran Church are exemplary and well-respected members of the ELCM. With regard to the ELCM, I snarkily said it was a group that "seems to have nearly as many words in its title as it has congregations." Pr. Steward believes that's neither accurate nor fair. There are eight words in the title, and they now have seventeen congregations and missions in the U.S., plus a few dozen more in such places as Kenya, India and Myanmar (despite the fact that those countries are currently not in North America). They model themselves after the historic Pennsylvania Ministerium and the General Council, and they aren't too concerned about being small. If you'd like to learn more about them, go to elcm.org.

A sinner • In response to "He was a sinner" in the May issue, James Gale reminded me of the "Knocking Ceremony" (*Anklopfzeremonie*) used to conclude the funeral services of Habsburg emperors and high-ranking princes at the Capuchin cloister church in Vienna where the imperial crypt is housed, most recently (and apparently for the final time) Otto von Habsburg, the last crown prince of the Austro-Hungarian empire, who died in 2011. The Grand Chamberlain knocks on the door three times. Each time, the senior Capuchin asks, "Who seeks entry?" The Grand Chamberlain first lists the prince's many royal and aristocratic titles. The Capuchin responds, "We do not know him." He does not open the church door. The second time, the Grand Chamberlain lists the deceased's many impressive achievements and offices. Again, the friar says, "We do not know him." The church door remains closed. The third time, the Grand Chamberlain answers the question "Who seeks entry?" by saying "Otto, a mortal, sinful man." With that, the Capuchin friar responds, "Let him come in," and the funeral entourage enters into the church. I like it. Maybe I'll incorporate that into my funeral plans.

So that's the way it is • The *Living Lutheran* reports (May 2016) on the "Moral Mondays" movement which has gone on "a 15-state 'moral revolution' tour to counter the nation's conservative voices. 'Way too much of our national discourse has been poisoned by hateful language and policies,' said William J. Barber II, a minister and the movement's leader." OK, now let's ask first, does the story really mean to imply that it is "the nation's conservative voices" that engage in "hateful language and policies"? That's a correlation that seems a bit heavy-handed, even for an ELCA publication. And let's ask, second, what was their thinking in making this the lead news story in the issue? There doesn't seem to be any obvious Lutheran connection; if Minister Barber is a Lutheran, it doesn't tell us that. It seems to be a story from the Associated Press, but it's odd that the *Living Lutheran* would run it at all, let alone as the lead story. But if they were going to run it, don't you think they could have edited it slightly to avoid the correlation between "conservative voices" and "hateful language and policies"? I mean, at least the *appearance* of fairness would be a nice touch.

FL wins awards • The annual awards from the Associated Church Press have been handed out, and once again *Forum Letter* brought some home. This year we were given the "Award of Merit" (that's sort of like "second place") in the "Best of Class" competition for newsletters. If I'm counting correctly, we've gotten either that one or the (even better) "Award of Excellence" for seven out of the last eight years. I'm always intrigued, sometimes amused, by the judges' comments. For instance, the judges here said that our "topics include a good diversity of the-

ology, scripture, morality, etc. and how they apply to the readers' lives. In most cases, there is no ambiguity on the author's beliefs or stance on the issues he/she is writing about." Only "in most cases"? I wish they'd specified the places where we were ambiguous about our beliefs, so we could strive for more forthrightness. We also got an "Honorable Mention" for "If only I had known" in the April 2015 issue, which the judges called a "lively and humorous piece that uses a casual, friendly tone that makes readers feel like insiders." I hope you felt that way, too. We didn't actually get an award for *Omnium gatherum*, but the judges said it "scored very well," and here's what else they said: "There is a wonderfully engaging writing style here, one with a lot of personality and a sharp wit grounded in thoughtful observation of the church. The breadth of topics and issues touched on is impressive. The editorializing (and I don't mean to use the term pejoratively) that comes forth from this approach can border on the snarky, but the substance underneath makes you think, and to that end, any reader who has a different view and comes away perhaps turned off by the style ought still to respect the conclusions and opinions here (if they're being honest and fair-minded)." That's our aim, and if they're not being honest and fair-minded, I guess they let their subscription lapse.

Conventions ahead • Lest you be concerned, yes, we will be covering this summer's LCMS convention and ELCA churchwide assembly. You'll be able to keep up with what's happening at alpb.org/ Forum and join in the conversation. —roj

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