

FORUM LETTER

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Malice toward none

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The Almighty has His own purposes. 'Woe unto the world because of offenses; for it must needs be that offenses come, but woe to that man by whom the offense cometh.' If we shall suppose that American slavery is one of those offenses which, in the providence of God, must needs come, but which, having continued through His appointed time, He now wills to remove, and that He gives to both North and South this terrible war as the woe due to those by whom the offense came, shall we discern therein any departure from those divine attributes which the believers in a living God always ascribe to Him? Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray, that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled by the bondsman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said 'the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.'

With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations. — Abraham Lincoln (Second Inaugural Address, 1865)

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Summer of discontent



I watched President Obama's speech at the memorial service in Dallas for the assassinated police officers. It was a sobering oration, a reminder of the rhetorical gifts that contributed to his twice being elected to the highest office in the land. I tried to imagine what kind of speech might be made in this situation by either of the two candidates vying to succeed him; it was not a happy thought. (In the interest of fairness, I will note that the speech by former president George W. Bush was also moving — appropriately briefer and more focused on the local situation since Bush and his wife now live in Dallas.)

The president wondered how it could be that we are still struggling with racial divisions in America some fifty years after the passage of the Civil Rights Act. I thought of Lincoln's second inaugural address, and his hope "that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away." The literal scourge of war did so fairly quickly, but the aftermath continues — the aftermath, not merely of the war itself, but of "the bondsman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited

toil." His fear that it must continue until "every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword" sounds eerily prescient in this summer of discontent.

An unending journey

Indeed we have come a long way in race relations, but the required journey has only begun. Or perhaps it is an unending journey. The feeling of despair and hopelessness among African Americans is deeper than most white Americans can possibly fathom. It is increasingly reflected in the fears of Hispanics and Muslims, many of them loyal American citizens, who are being demonized in the current political climate.

Thomas Jefferson, in the early days of the Republic, made a sober comment: "I tremble for my country when I remember that God is just and that his justice cannot sleep forever! A revolution is among possible events. The Almighty has no attribute which would side with us in such a struggle!" This was echoed by Lincoln decades later in his acknowledgement that "the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether." It's remarkable that such sentiments could be expressed by men who were rather far from what we would call "orthodox Christians." We do not hear such honesty these days; today it's all about "make America great again."

President Obama also quoted Scripture a few times, and particularly Paul's affirmation in Romans 5 that "suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope." It was just the right note to strike in a community undergoing great suffering, badly in need of hope.

Misunderstanding is a two-way street

If you need evidence of the divisions we still experience, the misunderstandings we still nurse, watch the president's speech again. Keep an eye on the visual. To his right, a couple of rows back, watch the African American woman who gently nodded throughout the speech. Her face displayed a stoic sadness, but she was clearly if silently articulating her conviction that the president had it right.

Then, immediately behind the president, watch the young white police officer to his left. When the president praised the police and spoke of their heroism in the face of a dangerous calling (which he did often), the officer applauded (albeit

somewhat dutifully). When he spoke of the despair and fear of minority communities, the officer sat stone-faced.

I do not mean to cast aspersions on anyone. Misunderstanding and suspicion and anger is a two-way street. But there are too many of us who still do not wish to listen to one another, who cannot or will not find it in our hearts to empathize with those with whom we disagree, or whom we do not understand, or whom we count as our enemy.

Good Samaritan

The Sunday after the Dallas shooting the common lectionary served up the parable of the Good Samaritan—a powerful text for that day, one which I'm sure many pastors utilized to reflect on the brokenness of humanity so starkly revealed that week. The preacher at my church (not the rector, but a vacation substitute) did a good job of confessing her own fears and weaknesses, her failure to regard everyone as neighbor. I thought of the man up the street whom we had encountered that morning on our walk, out in his truck looking for a run-away dog, and how quickly my pity for my neighbor's plight dissipated when I saw the bumper sticker on the back of his vehicle. "Neighbor" is a concept most of us don't do all that well.

To my Lutheran ears, the preacher went off track with her conclusion that we should all just try harder to be like the Good Samaritan. We've been trying, more or less, for a long time now without much success. Ultimately the only hope for a solution is to recognize the desperate bondage in which we all are mired, and the profound need of the Savior. It is to read the parable as most of the early church fathers did, seeing Christ as the Good Samaritan and ourselves, all of us, all of us fallible human beings, as the ones who have been beaten, robbed and left for dead.

Yet there is the penultimate hope as well, the hope that we can still find paths of understanding; the hope that we can work together to find ways that will at least mitigate injustice; the hope that we as a nation can renounce demagoguery and prejudice and allow ourselves to be touched, to borrow another Lincoln phrase, by the "better angels of our nature." I must confess, however, in this summer of discontent, that this hope seems ever distant.

—by Richard O. Johnson, editor

Reflections on a protest march

by Paul Sauer



[Editor's note: While the LCMS convention was meeting in Milwaukee, there was a Black Lives Matter protest not far from the convention center. Pr. Paul Sauer attended the event and shares some reflections.]

By the time I arrived at 6 p.m. after our convention sessions ended, the protest group had already marched from the park to the courthouse where families who had lost children to police shootings were speaking. Aside from one other pastor I knew, there didn't seem to be any other LCMS folks there. A group from the LCMS convention was scheduled to go meet at 8 pm after another event, but the Black Lives Matter Facebook page indicated that the march would be over by then. My colleague and I had left the starting point by 8 p.m. and were already at the park which concluded the protest march, so I am not sure whether the LCMS group ever made it.

Contrary to some outside characterizations of these rallies, I found the speakers to be restrained in their rhetoric. Given that these were parents who lost a child to a police shooting, they were probably far more restrained than I would have been were I in their situation. They called for unity, empowerment, and dignity.

Little invective

Politically the bulk of their rhetoric was directed against the district attorney, who apparently has not brought charges against police officers in a number of shooting cases. So much of what this particular group seemed to be about was expressing frustration at having their calls for justice being ignored. They feel they were given no outlet for seeking justice for their lost children and thus the system that failed them is ultimately seen as the problem.

The police were not singled out as a whole; rather there was a call to hold accountable bad police. The only "over the line" invective I saw directed at police was by a white protestor who sought to antagonize the police by getting in their face and shouting obscenities. To their credit, throughout the protest the police were unobtrusive

and conducted themselves professionally.

Images

Some images that stick with me:

- Hearing family members speak of their helplessness in a system that they believe failed them and doing so with a calmness and articulation beyond what reasonably could have been expected from them.
- Talking during the march with a father who lost his 12-year-old son to a police shooting. The conversation was private and will remain so. But I am in awe of his faith and his dignity as a child of God.
- A counter protestor with a "Jesus Saves" sign shouting at the marchers. I was struck by how presumptuous it was on his part to think that the marchers had no faith, and how tone deaf he was to their actual concerns. He clearly had not listened to them or spoken with any of them.
- Marching under the pedestrian bridge between the prison and the courthouse where I walked once long ago as a pro-life protestor and having all of those memories flood back to me within a context of people who feel they are denied justice, dignity, and personhood.
- The genuine hurt and abandonment, sometimes manifested in frustration and anger, of so many of the protesters.
- The mall where I had eaten lunch on Sunday having their security guards lock the doors as the protest marchers walked by, and denying non-protestors entry until the protest march had passed by. What a horrible optic, one which reinforced the non-personhood and anti-dignity feelings of so many of the marchers.
- The remarkable vocational service of the police officers who were unobtrusive and professional in providing protection to both protestors and those around them.

The body of Christ

Ultimately, I was there because I believe that the church is the body of Christ and needs to be present wherever people are hurting. We need to be at

Black Lives Matter protest marches just as we need to be at Blue Lives Matter rallies – not because we have a position to take or even anything to say, but because Christ must be present where there is hurt and fear and anger, and the church above all must bear the peace of Christ to a broken and conflicted world.

In addition to being executive director of ALPB, Paul Sauer is pastor and executive minister of Our Savior Lutheran Church and School in the Bronx (LCMS), and assistant professor of religion at Concordia College, Bronxville. His report on the recent LCMS convention will appear next time.

RIC at Luther: an insider's perspective

by John W. Hoyum



As was noted briefly in the May issue of the *Forum Letter*, Luther Seminary is presently in the beginning phases of becoming a Reconciling in Christ seminary. For those who don't know, this designation (RIC for short) is issued to institutions (usually congregations, but also other church-related organizations) by Reconciling Works, a nonprofit which, according to its website, advocates for the “full welcome, inclusion, and equity of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) Lutherans.” The process by which an organization such as Luther Seminary receives such a designation is admittedly a murky one, but a movement is afoot at Luther to make this happen nonetheless. As a current student at Luther Seminary – and one who quietly but unequivocally disses from any such attempts to normalize sexual behavior outside monogamous heterosexual marriage – I'd like to offer the perspective of one from inside the controversy itself.

A genealogy

The impetus for the current campaign to make Luther Seminary an RIC institution goes back to the grassroots efforts of what was then known as Lutherans Concerned, prior to the 2009 Church-wide Assembly of the ELCA. Back then, the organized effort to promote the acceptance of homosexuality actually had a specific goal: to change *Vision and Expectations* in order that gay and lesbian pastors might openly live in sexually active relationships with individuals of the same sex. They achieved their ends in August 2009 in Minneapolis when the ELCA caved, abandoning 3,000 years of Jewish and Christian consensus about marriage and sexuality. One might think this would have been enough for Lutherans Concerned, and that they could have packed it all up and gone home.

Instead, Lutherans Concerned rebranded itself, becoming Reconciling Works. While the acronym “LGBT” had been in use prior to 2009, the issue in that case primarily had to do with opening the door to sexually active gay and lesbian pastors. Since 2009, however, they have taken as their mission the normalization of a whole host of previously taboo and subaltern sexualities, practices, and identities – ostensibly on the presumption that this is what God has called them to do. So the organization proceeds, providing trainings, workshops, and other educational resources for those who would like to partner with them in building an ever more inclusive community as they understand it.

So at some point in August of 2015 – according to *The Concord*, Luther's non-ironically named campus newspaper – a cadre of students began approaching various offices and organizations on campus to inquire about the cultural situation at Luther. It was, you might say, a barometric reading of the seminary's level of welcome (or unwelcome) extended to LGBTQIA+ folks. The general atmosphere perceived seemed to be quite open regarding these historically unacceptable sexualities and gender identities. So the decision was made – by whom I do not know – to proceed with some kind of exploratory initiative to pursue the matter further, headed up by a slate of prominent gay and lesbian students and their straight allies.

The current situation

I've attended a handful of the public forums designed to foster community conversation about the initiative, and I've spoken to various persons promoting RIC at Luther. From what I can discern, the general trajectory desired by the students involved is the crafting of a “welcome statement” to

be engineered by way of community effort that will eventually be posted on the seminary's website.

Apparently this is all that is required to become RIC—assuming that the seminary board officially approves the proposal. In order to advance the process, the student leaders involved have held community forums to raise and discuss issues, to begin the preliminary conversations about writing the welcome statement, and to raise awareness about the effort within the community. The argument I've heard so far from the pro-RIC faction is that Luther already embodies a culture of welcome, and that taking up the mantle of RIC simply claims the reality that already exists.

They have also distributed a survey to all faculty, staff, and students, asking about whether one feels "welcome" or "safe" at Luther, and if one's "identity" is "welcome" at Luther. It concluded with a straw poll asking—yes or no—about one's support for becoming RIC. The purpose of the data gathering is apparently to determine the general feelings of support around the seminary, and potentially to utilize the data in approaching the board with a proposal to become an RIC seminary.

The irony of welcome

As I filled out the survey sent to me, I could hardly help but chuckle at the irony in questions about safety, welcome, identity, and campus culture. As one of the more conservative students at Luther, I'm forced to work hard to ignore much of what passes for theology, preaching, and liturgical praxis in order to get to that which is actually worthwhile (a handful of orthodox, confessional, courageous faculty members and a world class theological library).

There is also a sizable silent minority of students who quietly dissent from the politicized theological and social agenda being openly promoted on campus. This community is small, but it nonetheless fights for the privilege of a good theological and pastoral education, one which is still theoretically possible at Luther Seminary if one is sufficiently aware and adequately prepared.

The current circumstance is an odd one. From what I can detect, Luther's administrative staff is largely committed to promoting a progressive theological and social perspective—hence the ease with which RIC affiliation has been actively pursued. As

Pr. Johnson noted in the May *Forum Letter*, the issue of Luther's financial support—as well as the governing role of the seminary board—remain open questions in this case. My hunch is that RIC's agenda will be pursued as long as possible until someone with actual authority can say "no," and thus add a measure of sanity to the situation. Of course this assumes that they grasp the financial and institutional ramifications involved.

A loop of self-deception

The problem is that the campus culture at Luther is not inclusive and welcoming at all—at least not welcoming of those with identifiably conservative or traditional perspectives. Instead, it is a hopeless feedback loop of self-deception in which vocal, self-empowered, well-connected individuals collude with one another in a sustained fashion, thus establishing an exclusive discursive hegemony for their progressive platform.

Most of the conservatives on campus, including myself, have learned not to interrupt this culture since its adherents frequently utilize demonization, personal attacks, and character assassination as the chosen protocol for responding to objections, rather than thoughtful, intelligent engagement. Sit down, shut up, do the work—because that's how to get by relatively unscathed if you harbor any sympathy for western civilization or catholic Christianity.

The sad fact of the matter is that the echo chamber created by this kind of behavior actually perpetuates the feelings of disenfranchisement, exclusion, and discrimination experienced by women, ethnic minorities, and homosexuals. It narrates into reality a structural notion of oppression that doesn't actually exist. Historical instances of ill will directed against such people, problematic as they once were, are clearly unproblematic today—at least as patterns of behavior manifest on a large scale. Indeed, middle class women and gays prosperous enough to be pursuing graduate theological education and ordination in a mainline denomination like the ELCA are exceedingly privileged by historical standards. Nonetheless, the internally contradictory narrative proceeds, resonating at each community forum: Luther already extends a culture of welcome toward LGBTQIA+ people, so why not claim it? The patriarchy persists, haunting like a specter the ideas and institutions we must continue to utilize! Therefore, a

state of “permanent revolution” (Leon Trotsky) must be established in order to achieve justice and equity.

One-sided discussions

This kind of situation isn't unique, of course. Those with traditional or conservative views are frequently marginalized, silenced, and discriminated against in higher education as an industry. So resistance to neo-Marxism, postcolonial theory, and theological liberalism must proceed in other ways at Luther. I've had the pleasure of knowing many intelligent and confessionally committed students at Luther Seminary who have courageously taken up the task of acquiring a decent theological and pastoral education in spite of the great challenges that present themselves at Luther. Especially as one who has contrived no share in this game of identity politics, my identity is found in Jesus Christ, who has declared to those who come after him that we will be hated and cursed because of his name.

It also remains to be seen what will actually happen at Luther going forward. It is difficult to know what the board will decide, and how they may evaluate the potential financial implications of their decision; nor have the proponents of Luther's becoming RIC said much, at least publicly, about that issue. In fact, as of this past spring, the timeline for presenting a proposal to the board has actually been pushed back. This has probably been for a couple of reasons.

First, as the community forums went on in April of this year, it became apparent that something about the formatting of the conversations was off, since at none of them did anyone with a dissenting view actually speak up when time to do so was allotted. So it became clear that the discussion needed to change, which was actually noted in an op-ed piece published in the May edition of the campus newspaper. I have my own theories as to why these discussions are so lacking in viewpoint diversity, but it is clear to me that Luther's campus culture is profoundly effective at chilling the perceived viability of expressing honest dissenting perspectives.

The international voices

Second, a growing awareness regarding the program for international students at Luther has become palpable in a way it was not previously. Many

of Luther's international students come from countries and churches in the Global South, many of whom do not share the ELCA's fondness for scripturally proscribed sexual behaviors (just as their sponsor churches do not). Their noticeable exclusion from the conversation has finally been recognized, and hopefully measures will be taken to address that.

In my view, this represents a particularly humorous wrinkle in the progressive narrative about the dynamics of power, since so many of the students from the Global South — parts of the world commonly mischaracterized as oppressed and exploited by the economic and political influence of the West — actually agree with the traditional Christian perspective on sexuality, and therefore must be somehow complicit with the broader economy that also oppresses and marginalizes them. You can't make this stuff up.

What will happen?

Who knows what will happen with RIC at Luther? Perhaps the board, a faction of the donors, or one of the ELCA's international LWF partners — or some combination of them — will step in to avert disaster and stave off the effort. Perhaps they will find some way to lower the partisan rhetoric, and defuse the issue. I hope this will happen, though I fear it will not.

If Luther is not able to survive, or if it eliminates any space, however small, in which to dissent and acquire a decent theological education, then traditionally inclined pastoral candidates (and at Luther, this includes students from the North American Lutheran Church and Lutheran Congregations in Mission for Christ, as well as from the ELCA) and others in need of an academically rigorous and respectable theological education with confessional conviction, will need to look elsewhere to find what they need. Whatever happens, I'm sure there are many at Luther Seminary who will enjoy smugly and self-righteously proclaiming how inclusive and welcoming a community they have.

John Hoyum is a master of divinity student at Luther Seminary, St. Paul, MN, and a candidate for ordination. He is also considering further graduate work after seminary.

Ex libra forum



We're approaching the dog days of summer, and in case you haven't finished your beach reading, here are some possibilities for you.

Being Nixon: A Man Divided, by Evan Thomas (Random House, 2016). ISBN 978-0812985412. I always make it a point, during presidential election years, to read something about an earlier campaign or presidency. Nixon is infinitely fascinating, and this is a thoughtful analysis of the "inner Nixon" and how this painfully shy and insecure man became a successful politician (and, of course, how those traits then led to it all coming unraveled). A particularly interesting note: there's a moment in the book when Nixon is discussing the racial situation with his advisors, and he remarks that racial tensions in America won't be resolved for another hundred years at least (though he goes on to say that economic and educational policies and programs must be put in place now as a step toward the ultimate goal). An insightful, if depressing, observation.

Reading the Early Church Fathers: From the Didache to Nicaea, by James L. Papandrea (Paulist Press, 2012). ISBN 978-0809147519. The author bills this as "the book I wish I had when I was first studying the early Church and the development of doctrine." I'll go along with that; it's a very accessible introduction to primary sources for early Christianity, with generous references pointing the reader to the sources themselves for further study.

Warrior Monk, by Ray Keating (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2010). ISBN 978-1453801031. I confess that it took me a while to get around to reading this, the first in a series of novels by Keating (a former ALPB board member). I like mysteries; they're my choice for reading while on the treadmill at the gym. But a mystery novel whose main character is a former CIA agent turned LCMS pastor? I found myself charmed, however, and I think you will, too. Keating really gets what pastoral ministry is like, and there's a lot here to entertain, amuse, and enjoy. I think there are five novels in the series now; I'm looking forward to reading the rest of them.

Wheat that Springeth Green, by J. F. Powers (New York Review of Books Classics, 2000). ISBN 978-0940322240. Continuing along the "novels with protagonists who are clergy" line, this is a new edition of Powers' 1975 classic about Joe Hackett, a young Catholic boy who wants to be a saint and thinks the priesthood is the way to attain it. It doesn't quite work out for him, and the novel is a sobering portrait of disillusionment and discouragement—though in the end, Hackett gets some of his idealism back.

Lutherans in America: A New History, by Mark Granquist (Fortress Press, 2015). ISBN 978-1451472288. It will be a long time before there is a replacement for E. Clifford Nelson's *The Lutherans in North America*, at least in terms of comprehensiveness. But that text is now badly outdated (it was published in 1975), and this new book by Luther Seminary church historian Mark Granquist is a fine addition to any pastor's or congregation's library. The very complex story of American Lutheranism is told in fairly broad strokes, but each chapter offers an "Excursus" where Granquist goes into more detail about something that is more of a side story— "Lutherans and the Lodge," for instance, or "Hispanic Lutheranism." Granquist tells both the big story and the side stories with facility, and the book gives even the well-informed reader new insights into the identity of Lutheranism in America.

The Nazi Pastor: Carl Krepper and the War in America, by J. Francis Watson (Praeger, 2014). ISBN 978-1440828072. Krepper was a ULCA pastor who was just what the title suggests—an agent of the Hitler regime. It is a remarkable story. The author tells us about Krepper's background (sometimes in more detail than one really wants to know), and tries to help us understand how he came to be the contact person for the Nazi saboteurs who were part of "Operation Pastorius," a plot to land agents on U.S. soil to attack key economic targets. The story starts slow, but picks up as the FBI starts to suspect, follow, and then close in on Krepper (a tale enlivened by Watson's use of voluminous FBI files on the incident).

Omnium gatherum

More rebranding • Will all this rebranding never end? First it was *The Lutheran* becoming *Living Lutheran*. Then the announcement came that Augsburg Fortress shall henceforth be known as “1517 Media.” Well, actually, they’ll be “doing business as 1517 Media.” Why? Well, they say that the new name “expresses both our rootedness in the Lutheran tradition and the gifts of the Reformation as well as our focus on developing resources for the church, classroom, and home that embrace our world’s ever-evolving means of communication.” Yes, those are the first things I personally thought of. ELCA News Service reported that Bishop Gerald Mansholt, the Conference of Bishops liaison to Augsburg Fortress’s, er, 1517 Media’s, board of trustees had the following reaction: “When I first heard the new name for the ELCA’s publishing ministry, I smiled at the old and the new, the past, present and future all rolled into one.” My own reaction? I didn’t smile, I laughed. But not in a good way. Then I got the notice that the infelicitously named General Board of Pensions and Health Benefits for the United Methodist Church (I have a small Methodist pension from my previous life) was becoming “Wespath.” I think it has something to do with “Wesley” and a path to the future, so I guess you could say that it “expresses rootedness in the Methodist tradition.” “Wespath” has the advantage of being a lot shorter; the new publishing house name is twice as long as the old, at least in syllables.

Blame the bishops • Last month I discussed the

proposals coming to the ELCA churchwide assembly in August regarding the unification of the “lay rosters” into an office of “Word and Service,” with those serving in the office to be known as “deacons.” I noted that the decision as to what to call the rite by which future deacons will enter this ministry has been put off for future decision, thus avoiding a potential brouhaha about ordination. A pastor friend (recently ordained after working several years as an associate in ministry) has called my attention to the fact that the postponement came at the request of the Conference of Bishops, who urged “conversations across the church about this rite.”

No thanks • We’ll have a full report on the LCMS convention from our correspondent Paul Sauer next time, but in following Paul’s reports, one has to marvel at how even a resolution to thank the guy who’s been the LCMS youth ministry head for 37 years gets 38 negative votes. Maybe people thought he should have retired sooner. Or shouldn’t have retired so soon. Or maybe they were against youth ministry. Or maybe they just thought such resolutions were a waste of their time. Or maybe they couldn’t master the voting machines. There could be darker reasons, of course, but I’m not going there.

Churchwide Assembly • I’ll be offering real time blow-by-blow reporting on the ELCA 2016 Churchwide Assembly, which begins August 8. Join me at alpb.org/forum, and look for a written report in the October issue.

– roj

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