

FORUM LETTER

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God has come into the depths

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During the night we console ourselves with thoughts of the dawn, and during winter we wait for the spring which will awaken new life.

The eternal rhythm of nature is our comfort. Here, however, we have a darkness over the earth and the nations from which there is no escape. Here is the night in which no man can work. Here the imagination of wickedness gives itself to increasingly terrible excesses until the day of judgment. Here is war and tumult which can never end in the happiness of eternal peace but even at best can only be interrupted by brief and illusory armistices.

Nor are we told that in the engulfing night we are to wait for the day. For this will never come, in spite of fools who expect a social and political paradise. What we are told with reference to the Christmas light is: 'Bright its radiance in the night.'

Even now, as we sit in chaos, the peace of God is proclaimed to us. Even now the angels sing. Even now God intimates to us the presence of His love and His miracles.

And have we not all tasted something of it? Which have been our most happy hours? Have they not been the hours in the depths, in the night from which there is no escape, rather than the moments of joy in which we have rejoiced for a short time in some light or other like butterflies? . . . Here . . . the mystery of the kingdom of God is manifest, namely, that God has come into the depths to seek us and that the light shines in the darkness. It is because this has happened, and not because of the operation of a dialectic of nature, that sorrow has its promise. On Christmas night something decisive happened in those depths, so that they are now full of blessing and promises and the echo of the angelic choirs is heard.

We thus have to recast all our own ideas about light. Or rather, we can now do so because we experience miracle after miracle. —Helmut Thielicke, *The Silence of God*, trans. G. W. Bromiley (Eerdmans, 1962), 65-66.

Ecumenical ponderings



Lutherans don't often make headlines (unless, of course, we are changing our view on human sexuality). We're a quiet people, after all — not very numerous, and actually not all that interesting. But when the Pope gets into the act, even the secular press pays attention.

And so it was that Lutherans hit the newspapers on October 31 this year, when Pope Francis joined leaders of the Lutheran World Federation for a prayer service in the cathedral in Lund, Sweden, commemorating (not "celebrating," please note) the Reformation which began with Luther's "95 Theses" in 1517.

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The service was widely covered; there were homilies by both the Pontiff and LWF president Bishop Munib Younan. Uppsala's Archbishop Antje Jackelen, the first woman to serve as primate of Sweden, read the Gospel.

Carefully guarded words

Of course Lutherans and Catholics praying together is not that new (at least Lutherans of the LWF family), but the participation of the Pope and the occasion of the Reformation commemoration made it a good story. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of it came with the joint statement of Pope Francis and Bishop Younan in which the two admitted that "many members of our communities yearn to receive the Eucharist at one table as the concrete expression of full unity."

It was a responsible and carefully guarded statement, of course — one that did not address the theological, disciplinary and historical reasons for Catholics and Lutherans being "out of communion." Nor did it admit that Eucharistic fellowship is more a problem for the Catholics than for the Lutherans (again, at least LWF Lutherans). It did highlight the significance of the issue, however, by acknowledging that the freedom to share the Eucharist at one table "is the goal of our ecumenical endeavors, which we wish to advance, also by renewing our commitment to theological dialogue."

The tone of the statement is reminiscent of the *Declaration on the Way* document approved by the ELCA last August. That joint statement summarized the fruits of decades of Lutheran/Roman Catholic dialogue, and quite consciously was named to signal the hope that the two churches are "on the way" toward full communion. When it was approved by the churchwide assembly, the Roman Catholic representative present, Bishop Denis Madden, was given the gift of a chalice by ELCA Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton — symbolic of hope for the day when Eucharistic sharing is possible, a day which Madden said "will not be long in coming I'm sure."

Other views

Of course there are other Lutherans who find all of this talk about Eucharistic sharing puzzling. The Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod leadership has been fairly silent about both *Declaration on the*

Way and the recent event in Lund. Albert Collver, the LCMS Director of Church Relations, was interviewed recently on the radio show "Issues, Etc." (For non-LCMS readers, that's a fairly conservative LCMS-oriented program hosted by Todd Wilken.) He was generous in explaining that the Roman Catholic Church is "genuine in wanting to engage in dialogue" with Lutherans, citing "informal conversations" that happen between Rome and the International Lutheran Council, the conservative alternative to the Lutheran World Federation. But he also made it clear that the LWF's approach to such dialogue is one of willingness to compromise many points of doctrine — but unwillingness to consider compromising on matters such as the ordination of women.

He also expressed puzzlement with what he called a "transformation hermeneutic," where Rome is not willing to repudiate, say, certain statements of the Council of Trent, but will instead reinterpret those statements as "they should be read like this." From the LCMS perspective, that's simply not possible. Lutherans cannot "reinterpret" our confessional documents, and neither should Roman Catholics. It's sort of like the originalist interpretation of the U. S. Constitution: words mean what they say, and they can't just be "reinterpreted" in a new context.

It's hard to see how that kind of approach allows for any genuine ecumenical progress at all. How can unity can be achieved when the demand on both sides is, "You must repudiate what you've previously said and acknowledge that we're right and you're wrong"?

A jaundiced eye

The LCMS is not the only Lutheran group to view occasions like the Lund service or the approval of *Declaration on the Way* with a jaundiced eye. An official of the North American Lutheran Church recently described the latter document as "a joke," noting that whatever a committee of American bishops might do, the Vatican is never going to approve Eucharistic sharing with "liberal Lutherans" who repudiate basic Christian moral doctrines on, for instance, abortion and sexuality.

There may be something of a "sour grapes" element here; sources tell me that the NALC had expressed interest in joining in the discussions that led to *Declaration on the Way*, but the U. S. Conference of Catholic Bishops opposed the request on the

grounds that it was imprudent and unhelpful to bring a new partner into a dialogue already well along in its process. ELCA representatives agreed, and the NALC was not invited to join. Be that as it may, badmouthing ecumenical dialogues of which one is not a part seems a particularly unfortunate offense against the eighth commandment.

Signs of spring

I am not sanguine about the possibility of even limited Eucharistic sharing between Roman Catholics and Lutherans of any stripe any time soon, despite Bishop Madden's optimism. It is significant, however, that some Lutherans and the Roman Catholics are at least saying out loud that this is a goal of ecumenical dialogue. The conviction of the ecumenical movement among Protestants has long been that

perfect agreement is not required for Eucharistic fellowship. That, of course, is a premise not at all accepted by some Lutheran groups, and that is their right.

But for others – certainly in the ELCA, and probably good numbers in other bodies as well – the pain of division at the Lord's table is palpable, and even baby steps toward finding unity should be taken whenever it is possible. They are like early signs of spring – a sprouting leaf here, a birdsong there. There may be a lot of winter left, to be sure; but that doesn't mean we can't or shouldn't look ahead, dreaming of and praying for the day when we can come together around the sacrament of unity, drawn together by our one Lord.

– by *Richard O. Johnson, editor*

Is the Reformation over?

by Charles Austin



On October 31, global observances marked the start of a year observing the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, a revolution that began in the church and its theology but soon impacted politics and economics and released concepts that would shape every part of the world for the ensuing 500 years.

The Reformation began Oct. 31, 1517, when Martin Luther, a monk and professor of Bible at Wittenberg University in Germany, posted 95 “theses,” propositions for debate, on the door of the Castle Church. It was a common way to start an academic discussion, but Luther's challenge to the practice of selling “indulgences” that would keep a individuals or their deceased relatives from suffering the consequences of their sins, along with Luther's criticism of the church hierarchy, started much more than a discussion.

Others concerned about church corruption in thought and practice supported Luther's views. German princes saw a chance to keep money home rather than have large sums sent to Rome. Newly active printing presses (the “social media” of the times) made it possible for Luther's writings – and there were many – to be widely distributed.

By 1521, Luther had been excommunicated and a decade later his followers, soon to be called

“Protestants” or “Evangelicals,” had abandoned the church headed by the pope, often with vitriolic rhetoric, sometimes even with violence.

Glad we weren't Catholics

When I was ordained a Lutheran pastor 49 years ago, Reformation Day was when we preached how glad we were that we were not Catholics. The wounds of the 16th century seemed to be still bleeding.

This year, I am ready to declare the Reformation over. Lutherans and Roman Catholics have been in intensive dialogue for 50 years, reaching remarkable agreements on matters of faith and piety. We still disagree on many things, but we no longer consider each other enemies and believe we are on the way to further unity. Some of our agreements are on the very issues at the heart of Luther's dispute.

On Oct. 31, Pope Francis was in the Lutheran cathedral of Lund, Sweden, leading a prayer service with Lutherans from around the world. In the 1980s, as an aide to Presiding Bishop James Crumley of the Lutheran Church in America, I took part in private audiences with Pope John Paul II and other Vatican leaders, including Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (who would become Pope Benedict XVI).

Our talks were friendly and hopeful.

The day is not long in coming

This past August, when the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, this country's largest Lutheran church, met in New Orleans, Catholic Bishop Denis Madden of Baltimore, head of the U.S. bishops' ecumenical committee, embraced ELCA Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton as the churches endorsed a *Declaration on the Way*, marking our agreements and outlining the path that lies ahead.

Given a Communion chalice by the Lutherans, Bishop Madden raised it high and said, "I wait for the day, not long in coming, I am sure, when we can share this chalice of the precious blood together."

And the thousand Lutherans at the meeting cheered and wept. I said to nearby friends, "I guess the Reformation is over."

Other issues arise

But of course, it isn't. While we agree on some of the things contentious 500 years ago, history has layered other matters upon the churches. Some of these will be difficult, but — after 50 years of dialogue — we know we do not need perfect agreement in order to be closer together. There are also thousands of Christian denominations still in bitter dispute with each other and with Rome. They mock our Lutheran-Catholic agreements as heresy.

Lutheran and Catholic lay people, inspired by the Vatican Council and the new openness that brought to the Catholic church, have drawn closer together in ways that sometimes exceed the high-

level theological agreements. Some Lutherans receive Communion at Catholic masses, although that is technically forbidden. Lutherans are now free to invite Catholics to commune in Lutheran churches, something not possible when I was ordained.

That Reformation is over

The Reformation was a world-shaking series of events (not all of them good) that shaped the world we live in today. While it brought needed reforms in the church, it also brought wars and civil unrest.

Today, we in the church stress what we have in common rather than our disagreements, and we seek further unity rather than keep old wounds open. Catholics sing "A Mighty Fortress," a hymn that Luther wrote that became our "theme song." Most Lutherans no longer consider the pope the anti-Christ, as we did in the rhetoric of 500 years ago.

We aren't going to "merge" our churches or create a Lutheran-Catholic "Vatican." But because we want people to understand the Gospel of Jesus Christ and share in the fellowship of the church and its mission, we are not going to act as we did in the 16th century. That Reformation is over.

Charles Austin is a retired ELCA pastor, currently serving as interim pastor at Church of the Savior-Lutheran, Paramus, NJ; he is also a long-time journalist who has worked for several different newspapers and organizations. A version of this piece originally appeared in The Record, a newspaper in Hackensack, NJ, Oct. 22, 2016.

The ELCA's liturgical present and future

by Kevin L. Strickland



[Editor's note: We continue our series of reflections from various quarters on the present state and future direction of Lutheran liturgy in North America.]

I once had a college professor who began each class with the following written on the board: "Where are we? What are we doing? Where are we going?" Those three questions that seem so simple are not always easy to answer, but perhaps they can be helpful in framing a discussion about our liturgi-

cal present and our liturgical future.

Perhaps we should begin with a prior question: "What is worship and why does it matter?" Worship begins with the simple act of gathering. Woody Allen is often quoted as saying, "Showing up is 80% of life." Yet worship doesn't start with our showing up. The pattern for worship in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* [ELW] gets the direction straight and raises that number: "The Holy Spirit calls us to together as the people of God" — not 80% but 100% of the time. Article 7 of the *Augsburg Confession* de-

finest church: God calling us together around Word and Sacraments. God shows up, all the time! Because of what God does, we are church.

ELCA Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton helps to center this church's mission in what it means to gather as a church together around Word and Sacrament. "When we gather for worship," she has said, "we hear God's word of promise. We confess our helplessness and receive forgiveness. We pray and we welcome new brothers and sisters through baptism, promising to support them in their walk in faith. We are fed with the bread of life and receive our Lord poured out for us. And then we are sent back into the world. Worship is essential for the church's life and service." Worship is at the heart of what we do as the church. There we find the crucified Christ in risen form.

Where are we?

To ask where we are, we also have to ask where we have been. There has been a renewal of worship that has been taking place over three centuries among Lutherans in North America and the Caribbean. Throughout this time, renewal efforts have been marked by the continual movement of a variety of Lutheran immigrant traditions toward a greater similarity of liturgical forms and a common repertoire of the assembly's song.

The introduction to *ELW* puts it this way: "The liturgy set out in 1748 by Henry Melchior Muhlenberg and the Common Service of 1888 are two earlier milestones along this path. In the twentieth century, the consolidation of various immigrant Lutheran church bodies and those more established on this continent was reflected in the primary worship books used by mid-century, namely *Service Book and Hymnal* and *The Lutheran Hymnal*. In 1978 *Lutheran Book of Worship* was published, the fruit of an ambitious inter-Lutheran project that sought to unite most North American Lutherans in the use of a single worship book with shared liturgical forms and a common repertoire of hymnody."

As renewal efforts continued in the 21st century, *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* was published. It bears not only a rich tradition of Christian worship practiced among Lutherans, but it also seeks to renew that tradition for a new generation. As a church we center ourselves and our mission as God's people in worship—worship around word, bath, and

meal, worship amidst the assembly gathered to sing, pray, and praise God. We bring who we are into worship. We bring the culture of our own upbringing, the cultures of our neighborhoods, the cultures with which we are called into ministry, mission and service, and we join with the cultures that everyone else brings with them into that worship.

The gifts of diversity

How can the beauty and diversity of those cultures be seen as gifts in our assembly's worship life? How can culture help to shape our liturgies and even our understanding of worship in much deeper ways? How can these intentional conversations lead us into becoming a church richer for its diversity? All of these questions and more are ones that are crucial to nurturing the worship life of each of our worshiping communities, and are all questions that *ELW* is intended to address.

Evangelical Lutheran Worship is not just a hymnal for this church, but a core that brings with it a plethora of resources; it is much more expansive than previous worship books. *ELW* is grounded in Lutheran convictions about the centrality of the means of grace. The ten musical settings of Holy Communion highlight a vast and rich diversity of expression in this church. Within those ten settings, there is a strong commitment to gathering regularly around both God's word and the holy supper.

Evangelical Lutheran Worship uses throughout its resources the phrase "freedom and flexibility." This builds on renewal efforts fostered by its predecessor, *Lutheran Book of Worship*, whose introduction had declared that "freedom and flexibility is a Lutheran inheritance, and there is room for ample variety in ceremony, music, and liturgical form." Throughout its design and interpretive materials, *ELW* seeks to be more transparent in the use of this principle of encouraging unity without imposing uniformity.

Ten years of expansion

This year marks the tenth anniversary of *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*. Over the course of these ten years, more than 150 resources have been created that lift up *ELW*'s core principles and promote the ongoing renewal of worship within the ELCA. Approximately two-thirds of our 9,300 congregations are now using this resource—and many

congregations who have not bought the *ELW* nonetheless use the related online resources published by Augsburg Fortress in crafting their weekly liturgies.

These primary resources do not presume to be all things to all assemblies; rather, they provide a strong *core* for our liturgical life together, to be enriched, expanded and contextualized as desired and needed. At the center of all worship is Jesus Christ, the incarnate word of God, crucified and risen. God invites everyone to enter through the open doors of our congregations to encounter the living Christ and be nourished by word and sacrament and sent out to be about God's mission in the world.

Surveying the present

In 2015, a Faith Communities Today study (see www.faithcommunitiestoday.org for more information) surveyed six denominations (ELCA, Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, United Church of Christ, Seventh-day Adventist Church, United Methodist Church, and the Unitarian Universalist Church). The questionnaire focused on worship, congregational programs, congregational mission and identity, participation, young adults, leadership, vitality and change, technology, finances and history.

The report from this survey pointed to a decline in all of these denominations' worship attendance, but those surveyed (particularly within the ELCA and LCMS) reported that they continued to experience a clear sense of reverence and a sense of God's presence. Vital congregations tend to emphasize three relationships: those between members and God, members and one another, and members and the world.

Worship is central to our relationship with God, and many congregations also give considerable attention to prayer and the study of Scripture. Relationships with one another are also built through worship; however, times of education and fellowship, including programs for youth and young adults, are also important. Kenneth W. Inskeep and Daniel Taylor, in a study of the 2015 survey, reported, "In many ELCA congregations, the principal contact between a member and the congregation is worship. The Eucharist and the preaching of the Word are central. Many members are less frequently engaged in other programmatic activities of the congregation."

Liturgical but flexible

Lutheran Christians still are drawn to liturgical worship and see this as a gift. Rather than a legalistic set of prescriptions, Lutheran liturgy offers the gift of flexibility and a freedom that can be contextualized while still respecting historical foundations. We are creedal people. We believe that through the liturgy, we tell and re-tell the great story of salvation and hear how we are intractably included in that story. As Gerhard Forde has pointed out, "The cross puts to death our best intentions and we can get out of the way for God to do what God does best."

We are able to experience this freedom most fully in worship. In worship we are church—gathered by God, each and every time. In worship we are Lutheran—hearing and proclaiming the story of salvation, law and gospel, the cross that raises us to life. We are together for it all, yet as we move toward and around the table, that togetherness becomes even more deep and wide, seen and unseen.

What are we doing?

The ELCA is not currently in the process of creating a new hymnal or primary worship resource. However, we continue to offer new resources that expand that core that is the *ELW*. Most recently, we have created a Braille edition of *ELW*, a number of new Spanish resources and translations of the *ELW*, and a prayer book for armed forces.

In 2000, 2007, and 2015, the ELCA hosted "Worship Jubilee" gatherings that lifted up worship in the life of this church. We introduced the renewal of worship process in 2000, introduced the *ELW* in 2007, and in 2015 we began a visioning process to create a three-to-five-year plan for the continued renewal of worship for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

Where are we going?

As we walk into the future, we do so with the cross of Christ at our center and the promise of hope that comes in the resurrection. We will continue offering workshops and events around the country and throughout the ELCA that point people to the resources that already exist and help them catch the vision of how transformative worship can be and should be.

Worship becomes the "balm" in all the

“Gileads” of our lives, however we may define or understand them. Leading God’s people in worship is a holy and awesome responsibility that we have been given. Every week in countless assemblies, the body of Christ – the church – gathers. In that gathering, we assemble all of our wounds, our brokenness, our inequalities, our complacency, our lethargy and our greatest moments of joy. We gather all of that together and we wash in a bath of forgiveness, dine at a table of mercy and are fed with words of grace. When we leave worship, we don’t leave the same. We have been changed to offer “balm” for a world in need.

Go in peace

Bishop Eaton has often said that “we should come to worship expecting to be changed. We are touching, tasting, feeling, hearing and seeing the one who knows us and loves us completely. Our lives are restored. We are set free. Fed for the journey, we are set loose to go in peace and serve the Lord. Thanks be to God.”

Our pattern for worship ends with the Sending. Or does it? In *The Sunday Assembly: Using Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, there is a simple diagram that shows the fourfold pattern as a never-ending cycle, continuously repeated. Gordon Lathrop writes, “Sending is . . . movement: from the communion table to the cross in the world . . . the life cycle

continues. The ending inevitably leads again to the gathering.”

When we say, “Go in peace, serve the Lord,” does our worship end? Worship is work that is never completely done. After we are fed and nourished by God’s word and by bread and wine, we don’t settle in for a long nap. We are not the same people who gathered. We have been formed again, remembered, as Christ’s body and are ready to be sent into the world that God loves.

Evangelical Lutheran Worship contains a prayer for use after worship, based on the 5th century Liturgy of Malabar: “Grant, O Lord Jesus, that the ears which have heard the voice of your songs may be closed to the voice of dispute; that the eyes which have seen your great love may also behold your blessed hope; that the tongues which have sung your praise may speak the truth in love; that the feet which have walked in your courts may walk in the region of light; and that the bodies which have received your living body be restored in newness of life. Glory to you for your inexpressible gift; for you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.” May it be so!

The Rev. Kevin L. Strickland is assistant to the presiding bishop and executive for worship of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

Omnium gatherum



Making sense of seminary worship •

My, my, things just don’t seem to get much rosier at Luther Seminary in St. Paul. In October, President Robin Steinke announced some “changes in our worship patterns to better accommodate the needs of our community.” What do you think? New time schedule? Adding a service? Switching the Eucharist to a different day? Introducing regular vespers and compline? No, none of the above. Noting that there are lots of students working off campus and doing distance learning, the seminary has decided that “it doesn’t make sense to hold chapel five days a week.” There are some things in that formulation that are really odd. First, the idea that chapel is something that you “hold” – sort of like a rally, I guess, or a committee

meeting. And then the concept that worship is evaluated on the basis of whether it makes sense. Or on the basis of how many people show up. Out here in the real world, we don’t cancel church because the attendance is down, and you’d think that might be a good thing to teach seminary students. Oh, and they’re eliminating the position of administrative assistant in the seminary pastor’s office. I suppose that makes sense; the fewer the number of chapel services, the less administrative assistance needed. This was followed several days later by the announcement that the seminary pastor herself, Laura Thelander, has decided to leave the seminary, having discerned that “her call and the evolving position don’t align well.” The president urged the community to “pray that worship will continue to be an

important part of our community." I can certainly appreciate the sentiment, but one just hardly knows how to articulate that kind of prayer.

Probably not just Luther • Of course I don't mean to leave the impression that the other ELCA seminaries have a robust worship life. I suspect that Luther may be the last to actually "hold chapel five days a week." Hard to tell, though; a little browsing around on other seminary web sites makes it difficult to tell just what the worship life looks like at most of them. Of course I went to seminary in the last millennium, and I didn't go to a Lutheran school, but at Yale Divinity School we had a chapel service five mornings a week, and a late afternoon Eucharist four times a week. A small bunch of us also unofficially gathered for compline several nights a week. I know, I know, it didn't make any sense. But that's how it was.

Management • Another Luther staff person, Carrie Carroll, has already left. Her title was "vice president of enrollment management, dean of students and chief diversity officer." I'm not making this up. Far as I can tell, "enrollment management" means that she dealt with admissions. What was that Luther said about a "theologian of the cross"? You know, that line about "calling a thing what it is"?

Weddings • Our recent reflections about weddings [FL Oct. 2016, p. 7] prompted one of our readers to send us a document entitled "Disclaimer of Liability," provided by the good folks in the courthouse of Columbia county, PA, to persons intending to marry

in that county. "Applicants are advised," it reads, "that persons who have been ordained over the Internet may not be persons permitted to perform marriages in Pennsylvania. A recent Court decision held that persons ordained over the Internet are not ministers as defined in the marriage law of Pennsylvania IF they do not regularly preach to a congregation that regularly meets at a place of worship. You are advised to consult an attorney concerning the legality of such marriages. This office will not determine what is/is not a church and/or congregation." [emphasis in the original] It goes on to advise that if a couple chooses to be married by someone "other than the officiants specifically . . . authorized" by Pennsylvania, "the burden of proof will be on you regarding the legality of your marriage." I got married in Pennsylvania, but I think we met the requirement. Of course that was nearly 40 years ago. Sometimes it takes the law to bring a little sanity.

About giving • Maybe you grow weary of my suggesting that you give a *Forum* subscription to someone else, but I have to say: I am surprised at how often I receive notes from retired pastors about one thing or another in *Forum Letter* who mention, just in passing, that they are able to read the *Letter* because some friend provides them with a subscription as a gift. (I'm not exactly penurious in my retirement, at least not yet, but I know what they mean. I had to drop, usually reluctantly, some subscriptions when I retired. More time to read, less money to spend, you know.) You may also be surprised at how pleased some retired pastor (or lay person) of your acquaintance would be if you were that generous with him or her.

– roj

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