

FORUM LETTER

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Knock their brains out

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“Of the cursing Psalms I suppose most of us make our own moral allegories —well aware that these are personal. . . Thus in 36, ‘My heart showeth me the wickedness of the ungodly,’ each can reflect that his own heart is the specimen of that wickedness best known to him. After that, the upward plunge at verse 4 into the mercy high as heaven and the righteousness solid as the mountains takes on even more force and beauty. From this point of view I can use even the horrible passage in 137 about dashing the Babylonian babies against the stones. I know things in the inner world which are like babies; the infantile beginnings of small indulgences, small resentments, which may one day become dipsomania or settled hatred, but which woo us and wheedle us with special pleadings and seem so tiny, so helpless that in resisting them we feel we are being cruel to animals. They begin whimpering to us ‘I don’t ask much, but’, or ‘I had at least hoped’, or ‘you owe yourself some consideration.’ Against all such pretty infants (the dears have such winning ways) the advice of the Psalm is best. Knock the little bastards’ brains out. And ‘blessed’ is he who can, for it’s easier said than done.” — from *Reflections On the Psalms* by C. S. Lewis, 1958

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Texas residue



Word was announced April 12 of a settlement in the Marshall, TX child molestation lawsuit against the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and Trinity Lutheran Seminary, Columbus, OH (see previous coverage *FL:33:4*). That means the matter is over, mostly. The case against the ELCA’s Northern Texas/Northern Louisiana Synod, headquartered in Dallas, is going forward. We think. Things still are rather fluid as we go to press. In any event, a jury was seated April 5 to hear the case. Principal defendants in this part of the lawsuit are the former synod bishop, Mark B. Herbener, and his assistant, Earl Eliason. Eliason, who resigned from the ELCA clergy roster in June 2002, was the assistant to the bishop at the time and responsible for the synod’s call process that put Gerald Patrick Thomas — convicted in 2002 of multiple counts of criminal sexual contact with teenage boys — at Good Shepherd Lutheran Church in Marshall. Eliason is also the synod staff member arrested on three occasions for misdemeanor charges involving indecent exposure. At least two of those arrests occurred while he served on synod staff. The plaintiffs will attempt to prove that Eliason’s habit of engaging in restroom sex with men colored his judgment about Thomas’ known “boundary issues” with boys. Synod officials are saying they didn’t

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know about Eliason's misdemeanor record. A defense motion to exclude the admissibility of that evidence from the case was overruled by Judge Bonnie Leggat.

Settlement details

Full details of the settlement, however, are presently sealed at the request of the plaintiffs while the trial goes forward against the synod. Reliable word, though, indicates the ELCA's insurers will be paying out some \$40 million, about \$2.85 million per victim. Funds for the boys who are still minors will be placed in trust; for the boys now 18 and older, the funds will be put in annuities with an annual allowance. After the lawyers collect their fees, of course.

In announcing the settlement, the ELCA's spokesman, John Brooks, emphasized that "the ELCA admitted to no wrong-doing by the church." At the same time Brooks said the ELCA "will review its guidelines and procedures for candidacy for the public ministry."

Close readers may be forgiven if, to them, the statement sounds like, "We did nothing wrong and we'll make sure it never happens again." But that, to be entirely fair, often is the language of a statement announcing a settlement. Millions of dollars get paid out due to the absence of wrongdoing.

Also in the statement, "Prior to [Gerald] Thomas' arrest, the ELCA was unaware of the former pastor's reprehensible conduct toward the plaintiffs." True, absolutely. But that wasn't the point of the lawsuit, was it? The question raised was, did the seminary exercise appropriate caution in passing Thomas along for ordination, knowing he had "boundary issues" with pubescent boys?

The plaintiffs said the actions of the seminary officials constituted negligence. That we cannot say and due to the settlement, no civil court jury will ever decide. But that shall not prevent us from venturing something of an opinion.

Based on the memos and depositions we have in hand, we must say the seminary people involved at best made a poor decision. At worst, they were willfully ignorant. And in either case, we will readily grant, for all the best of reasons. Seminaries, not just ELCA seminaries, are hard places from which to get bounced for any reason. There is al-

ways the nagging suspicion, frequently valid, that ejecting a particular student would somehow thwart God's call to that individual. Somehow, in some fashion, by some means, the Holy Spirit has a plan and a place for this candidate. It is a subjective choice, and sometimes made in the face of objective evidence to the contrary, yet most times it works. Contrary to pre-settlement propaganda by the plaintiffs, the ELCA is not hiding hordes of child molesters. This case appears to be a singularly egregious exception.

Protecting Thomas

Nonetheless, the seminary had the report of Thomas' internship "incident" — where he showed teenage boys a same-sex pornographic video and provided them with alcohol — and yet withheld it from the synodical candidacy committee. They were also aware that a Columbus, OH pastor had banned Thomas from her after-school program, due entirely to his demeanor with boys.

Why he wasn't summarily dismissed from internship is a troubling question, for which we have found no adequate answer. Why he was not stopped at other points in his seminary life is equally troubling. He reportedly misspelled his own name on his entrance application, failed both Old and New Testament classes, and was regarded as a poor preacher. "It's as if," one close observer reports, "they were protecting Thomas, not the church."

Inaction by the seminary in preventing Thomas from graduating is bad enough. The behavior of synod and seminary officials once Thomas' criminal behavior became apparent possibly is worse. Talking with sources very close to the case, we keep hearing a couple words to describe the reaction of ELCA principals. "Stonewalling" is one. And by insisting they carry no responsibility, "mendacity" is the other.

Feeling stupidly foolish

Forum Letter has heard the story of one of the parents of one of the boys victimized by Gerald Thomas. She was a single mother, having trouble with her then 15-year-old son — minor things on the whole but thoroughly worrisome. Along comes this pastor from a church she'd never been in before in her life, and he takes what she regarded as a

caring interest in her son and in a number of other “lost” boys. None of them were members of the congregation. She recalls attending worship at one point, just to especially thank Thomas for the effort he was making with her son. Then all this breaks out. She describes feeling just so stupidly foolish. No ELCA official, as she tells her story, ever once personally bothered to express any concern for what her son experienced. An apology, we are

told, would have done much to avoid the present situation.

Instead, our distinct impression is, the families were met with what amounted to indifference. “This is when *your* church people,” a Marshall news reporter told us, “should have fallen prostrate before the Lord and begged for forgiveness.”

ELCA readers should not miss the “your church” reference. — *by the editor*

Two quotes and a comment



The first quote: “Institutions also share a pattern of response to the misconduct of an authorized representative and to the public disclosure of that misconduct. An institution acts first on what it perceives to be its self-interest. Seldom does it identify its self-interest to be the same as the interests of the people it is supposed to serve. Thus it tries to protect itself by preventing disclosure of professional misconduct. It prefers instead to shoot the messenger, that is, to denigrate whoever had the courage to tell the secret. But protecting unethical individuals from the consequences of their unprofessional conduct ultimately undermines the credibility of the entire institution. As a result, all the designated leaders become implicitly untrustworthy and the institution becomes a sham. Eventually, the institution may realize that its interests are in fact served not by avoidance, but by facing the reality. . . . The institution has the power and responsibility to protect the people it is called to serve, thereby safeguarding its own credibility. Once it accepts this responsibility, it has the capacity to name the evil in its midst and to act justly in order to rectify harm done.” — *Is Nothing Sacred? When Sex Invades the Pastoral Relationship* by Marie Fortune, 1989

The second quote: “When introducing [Dr. Jim] Childs’ report to the [Division for Ministry] board, the Rev. Stanley N. Olson, executive director of the Division for Ministry, said a published commentary on a Texas court case concluded by calling for Childs’ resignation as director of the [ELCA sexuality] studies [task force]. Olson expressed his appreciation for Childs’ work with the task force and across the church. ‘Childs has re-

ceived some personal attacks and has handled them with grace,’ he said. The call for Childs’ resignation is ‘a complete “non sequitur” for me,’ he said. “I want to express my absolute and complete confidence in Jim,” Olson said. Speaking on behalf of the Rev. Rebecca S. Larson, executive director of the Division for Church in Society, ELCA Presiding Bishop Mark S. Hanson and himself, Olson said he wanted and expected Childs to continue his work as director of the studies.” — from a March 16, 2004 ELCA press release covering the ministry division’s board meeting of March 12-14

Carrying baggage

Pr. Olson’s reference to “a published commentary” refers to *Forum Letter*’s April issue. That’s about as close as some ELCA officials can bring themselves to identifying this publication by name. No matter. We reject the suggestion, however, that our call for Dr. Childs to resign as director of the sexuality task force was in any way a “personal attack.” Dr. Childs has endured them — most notably from SNAP (Survivors’ Network of those Abused by Priests) — but not from us. We gave Dr. Childs an advance copy of our commentary and offered space for a response. Initially, he planned to make one. But we have heard nothing since and our deadline has passed, for this issue at any rate. The offer remains open.

But we regretfully renew our call for his resignation. There are equally qualified ELCA folk who can direct the task force to its conclusion, and who carry no baggage from Gerald Thomas or the lawsuit. — *by the editor*

Methodist jury nullification



We had expected that the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) would be the next American church body to come apart at the seams over sexuality, but now it appears that the United Methodists have cut in front of us.

A church trial in Washington state has led to the acquittal of a pastor who is a lesbian in a “partnered, covenanted, homosexual relationship.”

The charges against Karen Dammann were made after she admitted in writing to her bishop in 2001 that she was in such a relationship. The bishop, under some pressure from United Methodist authorities, filed charges against her for violating the church’s policy against clergy who are “self-avowed practicing homosexuals.” When the annual conference (similar to a synod or district) refused at first to try the case, they were informed that they must do so by the church’s judicial council, sort of a supreme court of the United Methodist Church.

So the trial proceeded in March. On the eve of it, Ms. Dammann and her partner eloped to Portland, OR which was going through a flurry of issuing marriage licenses to same-sex couples.

Debating what “is” is

The trial jury, composed of thirteen of Ms. Dammann’s pastoral peers in the annual conference, deliberated for ten hours before returning a “not guilty verdict.” They did a remarkable job of agonizing over the case, and in the end it boiled down to their being unable to determine “what the meaning of ‘is’ is.” Since the Methodist *Discipline* places the prohibition of actively homosexual pastors in a conditional phrase, the jury decided they

simply couldn’t determine that the church had actually declared such practice to be “incompatible with Christian teachings.”

The real shocker is that the thirteen member jury couldn’t muster even one vote for conviction. Eleven voted for acquittal, and two abstained. But even the pastor charged with prosecuting the case allowed as how he was glad he lost. Great process they have over there.

Safe language

On the other hand, one might argue that at least the Methodists were able to bring an errant pastor to trial. ELCA Lutherans, especially bishops, have generally decided that’s a bad idea. It’s safer to do nothing, and to wrap it all up in the language of “local option” and “situational mission needs.”

For the Methodists now, the expectation is there will be a major push at this spring’s general conference (their version of a churchwide assembly) to tighten up the language in such a way as to forestall similar results in the future.

Good luck with that. The United Methodists are as conflicted as Lutherans and Episcopalians about this issue, and nobody expects the general conference debate to be bloodless.

But even if the language is tightened up, don’t look for it to make much difference in the real world. The Seattle pastors practiced jury nullification, pure and simple. And that typically doesn’t depend on how clear the language of the law may be; it requires simply jurors who are willing to say, “I know that’s the law, and I don’t really care.”

Antinomianism is alive and well, in case you needed a reminder. — by *Richard O. Johnson*, associate editor

Avoiding a train wreck



It seems that lots of people are thinking very hard about how to avoid a train wreck over sexuality at the 2005 ELCA churchwide assembly. Perhaps it is the specter of what is happening to the Episcopalians (and what is likely to happen to the United

Methodists, when their convention meets this spring in the wake of the acquittal of an openly partnered lesbian pastor in Washington). Perhaps it is the increasingly unsettled echoes around the church of pastors and congregations asking, “If the ELCA approves sexually active homosexual pas-

tors, can we stay?" All, of course, rational reasons for thinking about how to avoid a confrontation at this moment in history.

Cultural cave in

Bp. Peter Rogness of the St. Paul Area Synod recently floated a trial balloon in a letter to his synod. Bp. Rogness is about as close as the ELCA gets to "bishops for life," having been one since the ELCA's beginning and having remained one by getting elected in St. Paul after being termed out in Wisconsin. He is one of only four synod bishops, as we count them, who has served in that office since the ELCA's founding. His is thus an opinion to be reckoned with. It is rumored that former presiding bishop Herbert Chilstrom (whose omnipresence on this issue over the past few years makes him a contender for the "bishop for life" category, too) agrees with Bp. Rogness and would like to find a way to avoid a showdown in 2005.

Bp. Rogness maintains that we "ought not cave in to the culture's hysteria over sexuality issues" — an opinion with which we thoroughly agree, though we suspect we may mean something a bit different by it. Rather we should concentrate on what he calls "core stuff." Again, his definition is one with which we might take issue. We'll buy that "telling the story of Jesus" is pretty core; we're not quite so sure that "putting forward shared principles around the work of ending poverty" is "core stuff," but that's another topic.

The bishop cuts to the chase. On questions of homosexual pastors "in committed relationships" and the blessing of "same-gender relationships," he plaintively asks "Can we find a way not to vote?"

Take no action

What he proposes instead is that we "allow our church to live with the ongoing diversity of view and unfolding discernment that will happen in God's good time." He fears that a vote, if held, will be a "de-facto [*sic*] victory for the status quo." Whatever the sexuality task force comes up with, he is certain it will "warrant our consideration." But perhaps it would be best if we just didn't take any action.

Of course "taking no action" for Bp.

Rogness entails nothing less than affirming the much ballyhooed "local option" — increasingly the sexual revisionists' fallback position. He wants us to "trust congregations to seek to faithfully do God's mission in their own place," without, apparently, the bothersome intrusion of churchwide standards, of what we call "vision and expectations." In short, he wants the ELCA to affirm what is happening in his synod, and others, as bishops simply ignore their pastoral and constitutional responsibilities by allowing congregations and pastors to do whatever they darn well please. And he wants to affirm all this without the bother of a vote, thank you very much.

Bound by a pension

In our view, "local option" ultimately means the end of the ELCA. If we cannot agree on such basic "core stuff" as the moral teaching of the church and the moral expectations of pastors, then in what real sense do we remain a Christian church? If we can't actually make decisions about these things, but have to say to each synod and congregation, "Well, do it your way," we have nothing that binds us together but a pension program.

We admit that we are not all that eager to have the churchwide assembly vote in 2005. To that extent we agree with Bp. Rogness. Voting is a polarizing thing — as if we aren't polarized enough. But let us point out, "our" side didn't ask for a vote. "His" did. Voting also suggests implicitly that 2,000 years of moral teaching is something that can be tossed aside by a simple majority of an assembly dominated by laity.

But if not voting on these issues means *de facto* approval of "local option," we find it hard to imagine a worse scenario. Not only would it mean we have bought into an "anything goes" mentality that belies any sense of unity; it would also only encourage continued agitation and argument for years to come, until all the benighted "conservatives" finally accept and rejoice in the wonderful new thing that God is doing.

From our perspective, we think it would be best for the churchwide assembly simply to vote down any proposal for change (whether it comes from the task force or from synodical resolutions), and specifically to reaffirm the teaching and the

policies of the church. Further, we believe the assembly should make it clear that bishops and synods and congregations who want to continue to be part of this church should follow their own constitutions by upholding the teaching and policy of

this church.

Anything less is simply a continued excursion into chaos, where we've been lingering long enough. — by *Richard O Johnson, associate editor*

Obedience within the body of Christ

by Cathy Ammlung



At a Society of the Holy Trinity retreat, I reflected on the significance of obedience. A primary emphasis of the Society is faithfulness to ordination vows. Faithfulness and obedience are closely related. "Obedience" implies submission to the authority, guidance, and will of another. "Faithfulness" marks the constancy of submission.

To whom do pastors pledge faithful obedience? First, we promise this to Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Second, we place ourselves under the authority and guidance of Scripture, Creeds, and Confessions as they reveal the Person and will of God. Third, we promise obedience to the spiritual disciplines of Word and Sacrament, prayer, service, and a godly life, for the sake of those entrusted to our care and to God's glory.

All this intensifies the affirmation of our baptismal covenant:

Question: Do you intend to continue in the covenant God made with you in Holy Baptism: to live among God's faithful people, to hear his Word and share his supper, to proclaim the good news of God in Christ through word and deed, to serve all people, following the example of our Lord Jesus, and to strive for justice and peace in all the world?

Answer: I do, and I ask God to help and guide me."

The unautonomous self

Such submission to God's authority, guidance and will, in the midst of and for the good of his people, indicates that no Christian, certainly no pastor, is an autonomous self. Everything — including personal experiences and beliefs — stands under God's judgment and good pleasure.

St. Paul uses a striking image for this reality: we are the body of Christ; Christ is the "head

of the body, the Church." Each member individually relates to the head; each relates to the rest of the body, and each exists and works for the benefit of the body as the head wills.

What happens to the Body when individuals, or groups, refuse faithful obedience to the authority, guidance, and will of the Head?

Cancerous quirk

It's instructive to see what happens in our ordinary human bodies when cells and organs "refuse" to abide by the organizing principle guiding the whole body. One major outcome is cancer.

Certain cells proliferate wildly and abnormally, disrupting even their parent organ's proper functioning. They disseminate widely, transgressing organ boundaries, and appropriate the body's resources for self-replication, impoverishing the rest of the body. They perpetuate themselves in a perverse form of immortality, even past the collapse and death of the body. Some lines of cancer cells have lived for decades in the lab.

Scientists discovered a genetic quirk that helps us understand cancer. Most genes have *telomeres*, or ending sequences, that tell them — and by extension, cellular functions affected by them — what their limits are. Certain functions, such as growth and division, occur only for so long; then the process shuts down and the cell dies. These processes ensure the orderly function of the entire body, so that, as St. Paul said, the entire body doesn't consist of a hand, ear, or eye. *Telomeres* ensure that hand, ear, or eye cells don't try making the whole body in their image. *Telomeres* also ensure that cells are properly individualized, able to take their proper place as part of distinct organ systems, rather than being amor-

phous or abnormal “free agents.” They help ensure the proper *telos*, the useful and proper purpose of a cell or organ.

Without limits

Cancer cells frequently lack *telomeres*. They have no limits; no brakes on expansion, appropriation, intrusion, or co-optation. One medical author spoke with passion about the incredible selfishness of cancer cells. They really do try to take over, regardless of the havoc wreaked upon the body as a whole.

How does this have any bearing on the church’s self-understanding of being the Body of Christ? Perhaps the clear distinction of God’s Word as Law and Gospel functions as a *telomere* to our individual and corporate fallen wills. Left to our own devices, we — as Martin Luther put it — become wills curved in upon ourselves. Instead of living as integrated parts of a whole body, directed by the head, we insist on our own way. God’s Law reins us in, limits our co-optation, imposes an order “from above.”

And when we rebel against it and bump into it, it’s as rude an awakening as chemotherapy, radiation, or surgery must be to cancerous growths.

Gospel transformations

The gospel does not simply remove the barriers, limits, and imposed order under which we are to live. To say that would be saying, mistakenly, “Cancer is really God’s gift of self-realization to each of us. Claim the gift and live in God’s love.”

Instead, the gospel transforms us into healthy cells (day in and day out) who *do* live

within the limits God imposes for the good of the body; who *do* find their perfection and goal and purpose in expressing the Head’s purpose, not merely their own.

Living in faithful obedience therefore is not a perverse form of works righteousness nor a narrow legalism. Instead, it’s living as “spiritual cells” with whom God is constantly tinkering, replacing those *telomeres*, performing “spiritual genetic engineering” so that we conform to Jesus Christ, not to our unbounded self wills.

Martin Luther’s sacristy prayer sums up this obedience within the Body:

O Lord God, Thou hast made me a pastor and teacher in the Church. Thou seest how unfit I am to administer rightly this great and responsible Office; and had I been without Thy aid and counsel I surely would have ruined it all long ago. Therefore do I invoke Thee. How gladly do I desire to yield and consecrate my heart and mouth to this ministry! I desire to teach the congregation. I, too, ever desire to learn and to keep Thy Word my constant companion and to meditate upon it earnestly. Use me as Thy instrument in Thy service. Only do not Thou forsake me, for if I am left to myself, I will certainly bring it all to destruction. Amen.

Cathy Ammlung is a previous contributor to Forum Letter and presently serves St. Paul’s Lutheran Church, Fulton, MD. She is a member of the Society of the Holy Trinity.

Omnium Gatherum

On sources ● No sooner had we released our coverage of the Texas lawsuit last month than I was subpoenaed by the plaintiffs’ attorney to testify at the trial. As it turned out, it wasn’t necessary for me to go. But, so the story is, ELCA defense attorneys started kicking six kinds of dust about our piece, charging that the plaintiffs’ attorney was my

source for the story in violation of a gag order. I was to testify to the contrary. For the record, no, no one from the plaintiffs’ legal team was a source — though certainly not for want of me trying. In fact, both sets of attorneys studiously ignored all my efforts at contact. But do let me say, no one should think that everyone close to the case on the ELCA

“side” was altogether pleased with the way church officials responded to the victims.

Settling the Missouri Synod ● Solving some of the troubles in the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod depends on whom you are speaking with. An ELCA pastor tells this experience. Seated at lunch with him was an LCMS pastor during a clergy gathering. The LCMS pastor indicated much coming improvement could be expected once Gerald Kieschnick was defeated for the LCMS presidency this summer, with Kurt Marquart or Daniel Preus sent in to replace him. At lunch the next day, seated with a different LCMS pastor, he was told much of the present agitation would be settled in the LCMS once Kieschnick was safely reelected, and both Marquart and Preus turned back. The conference ended that day so no third opinion was ever rendered. Our next issue should contain a preview of the coming LCMS convention.

Gloria, laus et honor ● Too late for Palm Sunday, drat, but tuck this away for next year. I recall Pr. David Risch, Faith, Whitehall, OH doing a Palm Sunday children’s sermon in 1978. He arranged the kids on the chancel steps, picked one of them up, declared the child Jesus, and processed into “Jerusalem.” The children cheered. The point of the sermon was, as I recall, if Jesus borrowed the donkey, would he return it like he promised? Of course he would, the kids agreed. Does Jesus keep his promises? Yes. If he promises to love you, will he keep that promise too? Yes, yes, yes. I found this so inspiring that I, every year since, have reen-

acted this same children’s sermon. I always ask, where did Jesus get the donkey? They are supposed to say, he borrowed it. (In an inner-city neighborhood where I once did this, the children’s consensus was Jesus likely stole it, but that was quickly cleared up.) Now, it should not require too much imagination to figure it out: if the kid being carried is Jesus, then the donkey is readily visible. Older children usually find this more than amusing. Which is all a round about way of brining to mind John Mason Neale (1818-1866). Neale translated into English “All Glory, Laud, and Honor” by the Latin hymnist St. Theodulph of Orleans (c. 821), one of the traditional Palm Sunday entrance hymns. While Neale was faithful to the Latin in every way, almost no American hymnal ever repeated this verse:

Be thou, O Lord, the rider
And I the little ass
That to the Holy City
Together we may pass.

Theological typography ● *Forum Letter’s* new design, introduced with the January 2004 issue, was greeted with universal acclaim. Well, about as universal as our acclaim ever gets. One reader, however, wants us to produce right-justified columns. There’s a problem, theology vs. typography. That would require me specifically opening the tools bar and purposely clicking the button to set the page mode for a right-justified margin. Which amounts to little else but act of self-justification. Lutherans naturally frown on that.

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