Letters

The previous issue of CHARIS elicited a fair amount of correspondence. As a result, the editorial staff has decided that future issues will contain a “Dialogue” section. Among the stated purposes of CHARIS is the desire to foster dialogue about problems and issues facing the Church. To the extent that such dialogue is shared with the editor in response to articles published in the journal, it will be printed so the entire readership can benefit.

Most of the correspondence came in reaction to Mr. Bruce Eberle’s article on pastoral leadership. Most letters were from pastors and most were appreciative of his insights. Others raised questions about the extent to which pastors should be held responsible for the growth or decline of their congregations. Some argued that the only criterion for judging the effectiveness of pastors is whether they have been faithful to their callings to preach the Word and administer the sacraments. Still others took issue with his use of a business metaphor to describe the ministry of the church. All letters were greatly appreciated and all were answered personally by Mr. Eberle.

And of course, I took my fair share of praise and criticism for things I wrote in Anschauungen. Some expressed great appreciation for sharing the excerpt from Prof. Koehler (The Ecumenical Christian). Readers will find the first half of his paper, entitled Gesetzliche Wesen Unter Uns, in this issue. The second half will be printed in the Winter 2003 issue of CHARIS. Although written almost 90 years ago in a very different cultural and ecclesiastical climate, it argues against legalistic practices in the Church and could just as well have been written today. Some also expressed concern about my questioning whether or not there were appropriate places to debate doctrine and practice in the Church (Where is the Castle Church Door?). Included in this issue is an invitation to submit proposals for papers for the first annual “Church Door Symposium,” to explore the issues related to leadership in the church.

Regardless of their positions, those who have cared enough to write deserve to have their voices heard. Hence, our new Dialogue section. Of course, the editor reserves the right to publish all or part of such correspondence and to provide responses where deemed appropriate. Every effort will be made to be fair and unbiased when printing letters.

While there is not enough space in this issue to permit printing every letter, we have determined to make available all the correspondence on our web site. Readers interested in the reading the entire “dialogue” can find the correspondence at www.charis.wlc.edu/dialogue.

Readers are encouraged to help sustain the dialogue by writing to the editor. Letters of 300 words or less are preferred.
Leadership Redux

Of course the search for a new president at Wisconsin Lutheran College was on everyone’s mind this past year. Finding and calling the next leader represents one of those momentous occasions in the life of a college. Dr. Timothy Kriewall answered the divine call extended to him in the affirmative and assumed his duties on July 1. We are all extremely excited about the style and substance of leadership he will bring to the college.

The Wisconsin Ev. Lutheran Synod also met this past summer and reelected Rev. Karl Gurgel to another four year term as synod president. This time around it took three ballots to achieve a majority – not surprising after a year of financial and administrative turmoil. More than a few had vocally called for a change in leadership. The majority voted to face the challenges and opportunities of the future with the current leadership team.

The occasion of a change in leadership necessarily begs questions about which style of leadership is the most effective. No doubt, Dr. Kriewall will be accorded a honeymoon during which time people will be extremely gracious in their appraisals. But human nature being what it is, he will eventually undergo the scrutiny and critical analysis to which all leaders become subject and he too will eventually be judged according to others’ expectations. Rev. Gurgel will have no such honeymoon, but must be able to adapt to new challenges within the structures and systems of synod organization. I admire his courage, but I don’t envy him his position.

Regardless of which leadership style is deemed more appropriate for a college – and it is certainly expected that diverse opinions would be held by the board, faculty, staff, and administration – the need for someone with vision and ability to lead it goes without saying. In a college, that person must be the president. Which leadership style is most appropriate (or even possible) at the synodical level is an open question.

Bruce Eberle argued in the past issue of CHARIS that in a congregation, that person must be the pastor. I think that part of the debate which ensued was the result of different viewpoints on the form and content of leadership. In schools, few would argue that leadership is vested in the principal. In business it is the president or CEO. However, in light of financial and leadership crises emerging in numerous Christian denominations, one is left wondering who is in charge in the various branches of the Church.

At the heart of this problem in the church seems to be a systemic aversion to having any one person in charge. The ecclesiastical culture in American Lutheran churches seems to be averse to such leadership. In fact, it can be argued that the large and unwieldy board and committee structures upon which most synod administrators rely militates against leadership and decision-making. There also appears to be a fundamental confusion between governance and management. The former is driven through policy, the latter by procedure. The former is the domain of boards, the latter is executed by administrators. When these functions become confused, then both governance and management are hindered.

This systemic fear of vesting leadership responsibility in elected officials is not unique to the Wisconsin Synod. Friends and acquaintances of mine in both the LCMS and the ELCA confirm that those Lutheran denominations are likewise suspicious of placing authority for exercising policy in the hands of elected leaders. Somewhere in this confusion I think is a misguided application of
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Western democratic ideals that seems to suggest that large representative bodies of elected officials are the best way to ensure that we don’t look anything like the papal hierarchy.

I’m sure some will disagree with this assertion, but to support my observation, consider the distinction between two commonly understood forms of leadership: transactional and transformational. Transactional leadership consists of collaborative decision-making through consensus building. It assumes that leadership is broadly shared, that all stakeholders have an equal voice, and that decisions collectively arrived at are the most wise. The role of a transactional leader is to facilitate discussion, balance competing political forces, engage all interested constituencies, and broker decisions that best meet the needs of all interested parties. Faculties in colleges love this type of leadership style. Churches seem to believe that it affords greater lay participation. On the other hand, most non-profit boards don’t like transactional leadership because they believe that effectiveness is diluted, the quality of decision-making falls to the lowest common denominator of consensus compromise, and accountability is diffused.

In contrast to the transactional model, at the heart of transformational leadership is the necessity to empower and then trust those who are in positions of leadership. It assumes that those with the power to make decisions are also those who are most directly accountable to their boards. Transformational leaders are those who have the ability to speak to and for their stakeholders, interpret institutional actions in visionary terms, and empower and motivate those who work around them. Transformational leaders aren’t afraid to fail, either. But “failing forward” is acceptable when lessons are learned and the failure isn’t the result of neglect or ineptitude.

Centuries ago, Plutarch perceptively noted that “In times of crisis, nearly everything may depend on the regard and confidence placed in some man who possesses the experience and qualities of a leader.” I agree. Many denominations are in states of systemic and organizational crisis. Some are actually in danger of division, defection, disintegration, or bankruptcy. Now is not the time to convene committees or to generate ponderous agendas for boards to labor over. This is certainly also true of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod with which this institute is affiliated. Now is the time for transformational leadership provided by one individual who has the skills, abilities, and disposition to lead the WELS out of this crisis into its next “golden age.” Now is the time to break down the cultural and organizational barriers that effectively handcuff church leaders and insulate them from accountability. Whether it is a college, a congregation, or a church body, people desire to be led by leaders who have the courage to challenge them to rise to the challenges of the day.

Of Magpies and Other Birds

We welcome to the publishing scene a new rag entitled, The Motley Magpie, so named because of the calumny uttered by a 17th century Calvinist in Anhalt against Lutherans who wore traditional vestments, specifically, the surplice and cassock. Although this quarterly journal is “dedicated to the promotion of Lutheran ceremony in the evangelical catholic tradition as confessed in the Book of Concord AD 1580/1584,” its inaugural issue devoted much of its space to a critique of Bruce Eberle’s article on pastoral leadership. Strange connection, that – pastoral leadership and the smells and bells of high church.

The magpie allusion is more amusing. My Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary defines a magpie as “any of a genus of birds related to jays, having black and white plumage and a long tail.” The second
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A definition is more telling: “a chatterbox; a garrulous gossip.” Indeed, the content and tone of the first two issues seem to capture the essence of both definitions nicely.

Now I don’t begrudge these pastors the Christian freedom to lead their members in historic forms of worship. But there are several troubling aspects about the tone and content of their journal. Among them are the use of traditionally Roman Catholic terms such as “mass,” “catholic,” and “father.” This last, according to the editor, is used as “an identifying mark for those who have an evangelical and Christological understanding of the ministry and not a functional or CEO view of it.” It’s nice to know those are the only two choices!? Worse, however, is the demeaning manner in which the editor treats those who write to express differences of opinion. Such critics, although members of the same ministerial and confessional fellowship, are not referred to as “the Reverend Father” (emphasis, mine). No, they are just called, “Reverend.” Is this intended as a left-handed insult to fellow colleagues in the ministry? Is this a judgment on their un-Christological understanding of the ministry? I hope not.

Now I realize that I run the risk of being labeled a “pot calling the kettle black.” But rather than discussing on intellectual terms the merits of restoring certain “catholic” rites to the Lutheran church, these few men seem intent on acting like magpies, that is, noisy chatterboxes more intent on hearing themselves quote Latin than on edifying others, more intent on proper genuflection than on passionate interpersonal ministry to real people. Instead, as the Reverend Father (my title of affection for him) Rolf Westendorf astutely observed, the tone was unloving. “Such love was nowhere apparent in (the) critique of Mr. Eberle’s constructive criticism in CHARIS. Even the respect was minimal. If we can’t disagree with love and respect, we should be quiet.”

I argued in the last issue of CHARIS that we need a place (or two or three) to discuss doctrine and practice. I’m publishing 19 pages of such dialogue and debate in this issue and am committed to providing a place through this publication and other CHARIS events to openly and freely discuss those things about which we are passionate. But passion doesn’t justify invective. The editors of the Magpie need to honor the right of others to disagree, and to treat ideas with respect.

Lay Ministers

At the risk of convincing readers that I am totally over the edge, I have to confess to being a subscriber to Martin Marty’s monthly newsletter entitled Context. It consists mostly of brief musings on various items he has stumbled across in his broad reading. It takes me to sources I would never find on my own.

In a recent issue, Dr. Marty shared an excerpt by John D. Alexander, rector of St. Stephen’s Episcopal Church in Providence, Rhode Island in which he argues that the “notion that baptism confers the call to ministry has become almost a point of dogma” in many churches. His concern is that use of terms like “lay minister” and “ministry of all the baptized” does a disservice to both the called ministers of the Church, as well as to all baptized Christians in the Church. The author argues that placing the mantle of “ministry” on everyone (as in the book, Everyone a Minister) confuses both laity and those in the public ministry. I found myself nodding in agreement.
Consider what baptized Christians are called to do. The Apostles’ Creed tells us that we are to “thank and to praise, and to serve and obey him.” We are to “live under him in his kingdom, and serve him in everlasting righteousness.” Baptized Christians are called to be Christians. This translates into active and regular worship, growing in grace and holiness through the means of grace, and witnessing to Christ in the total conduct of one’s life at home, at work, at school, and at leisure. Our vocation, as Gene Veith would describe it, is to live in the Gospel, no matter what occupation or avocation we may enjoy.

Because it is not possible for all to engage in formal proclamation of the Gospel, God “gave some to be apostles, ... prophets, ... evangelists, ... pastors and teachers” (Eph. 4:11). Referring to everyone as a “lay minister” does not detract from one’s calling as a Christian. Alexander argues the public ministry is important, “but secondary to such pursuits as worship, prayer, contemplation, and growth in grace and holiness.” The contention is “simply that exclusive use of the term ‘ministry’ to describe this universal calling tends to collapse rather than expand our vision of the laity.”

How important, therefore, to honor the specialized work of the public ministry – in any and every form in which it may appear. But let’s also keep the primacy of the call to be a Christian at the forefront of discussions about Church and ministry.

**Gays and Lesbians in the Church**

This summer also saw US Episcopalians gather in Minneapolis for their convention. Capturing the headlines and the attention of television networks was the historic ratification of Gene Robinson, a practicing homosexual, as bishop of New Hampshire.

Conservatives within the church fiercely opposed Robinson’s election on the grounds it violates Biblical teaching. Their opposition brought to light the real heart of the debate, namely, the nature of the Scriptures. It would appear that the US Episcopal church is headed for a major division between those who still hold that the Bible is God’s Word and those who maintain the more mainline view supported by higher criticism that the Bible is an anthropological artifact that is subject to reinterpretation to meet changing cultural mores.

Speaking of his homosexual union, Bishop Robinson referred to it as a type of sacrament through which he could better understand and appreciate God’s love for man. Gack! How sad that Robinson’s god doesn’t transcend the earthly and that the “communion” of believers bound together by this type of love is more important than the true communion of saints who share a faith in Jesus Christ as God and Lord.

While it is easy for the confessing church to show disgust toward the likes of Robinson who demonstrate little regard for what God’s Word says about homosexual conduct, it is not as easy to decide how to relate to those homosexuals in our confessional midst who struggle with their sexuality. Without entering into a debate about the pathology of homosexuality, it would seem fairly obvious that there are Christians who struggle with their homosexuality in the same way that there are those who struggle with controlling their heterosexuality.
Of course, it is part of God’s natural creation that men should be attracted to women. Jesus said, however, that it is sinful to lust after a woman and that to do so is the equivalent of adultery. Sexual relations are good within the bounds of marriage; outside of marriage, the very same acts are considered fornication. Homosexual inclinations, while not natural, do occur in some men and women. When such attraction turns to lust it is sin, and obviously, acting on such lust is also sin.

The Church is at war against sin and Satan – in whatever forms they may appear. And because its members are constantly attacked and tempted by these enemies, the church ministers to its members with the only effective weapon it has, the means of grace in Word and sacrament. The church ministers to the fallen, the weak, and the lowly. Jesus calls out to the adulterer, the addict, and the murderer. There is no human alive who does not deserve damnation for his or her sins. “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,” (Rom. 3:23).

Homosexuality, however, has been stigmatized in the confessing church to such an extent that one must wonder whether those homosexuals who strive to remain chaste find the comfort and acceptance that others with more “acceptable” temptations are able to gain. Does the gambling addict find acceptance from the fellowship of the church? Does the repentant adulterer who wants to restore his marriage find support from the faithful? Does the ex-convict find help and encouragement?

The open homosexual lifestyle is clearly offensive to God as the Scriptures make plain. But a real danger exists for homosexuals in the church who also need the help and encouragement of the believing community to resist sinful temptation and remain chaste. Can they find the love of Christ among us? Or is our attitude “Don’t ask, don’t tell?”

**Hog Heaven**

Milwaukee recently survived a week’s invasion of more than 300,000 Harley-Davidson motorcycle enthusiasts and their machines celebrating Harley-Davidson’s 100th anniversary. Aside from more noise, more leather, and more tattoos than normal, our town adjusted very well and played the gracious host.

Much has been written about the “Harley mystique.” What is so fascinating about 800 pounds of vibrating steel that captures the attention and investment of middle-aged business and professional people? Yes, I too am a proud Hog owner and have been totally captivated by the thrill of the open road.

There is something about being alone in the open air on a country road. Many times I find myself smiling at the sheer enjoyment of the experience. Almost always I find the experience to be an opportunity for thought, prayer, and meditation. And it has occurred to me that this happens because the motorcycle makes it virtually impossible to be distracted by so many of the things that compete for our attention. Not everyone should buy a Harley just to find time for prayer and meditation. But time alone - freedom from distraction - are requisites for talking to God. Such time is increasingly a rare commodity in our “wired” world.

Jesus often escaped to the hills to pray. Where can we go for quiet, solitary time with God? I’d bet if Jesus lived today, he’d ride a Harley.