
Lutheran Forum: Advocating an Evangelical Catholic Lutheranism

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Lutheran Forum began publication under that name in January 1967, but there is quite an extensive back story. The journal is published by the American Lutheran Publicity Bureau (ALPB), a New York-based agency established in 1914 by a group of Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod (LCMS) pastors and laity. Their concern was twofold: they wanted to introduce the Missouri Synod’s confessional Lutheranism to the North American public, and they wanted to encourage the Synod to engage more deliberately with North American culture. Not surprisingly during that age when the advertising industry was blossoming, these Lutherans believed that “publicity” was the key to both goals.

In 1918 they established a monthly magazine called the *American Lutheran*. Edited for the next twenty years by Paul Lindemann, the *American Lutheran* conceived of itself as a magazine of “practical church work.” It had much to say about church publicity, but it soon evolved into a magazine that offered suggestions about a wide variety of practical matters—everything from how to recruit Sunday school teachers to how to design a new church building. It advocated for a more aggressive home mission policy, a more sophisticated understanding of stewardship, and better “church decorum.” It featured articles about liturgy from theologians, such as F. R. Webber, Luther Reed and Arthur Carl Piepkorn. While the magazine tried scrupulously to avoid doctrinal and political controversy, it was not always quite successful. By 1942 Adolf Meyer, who had succeeded Lindemann as editor after the latter’s death in 1938, could argue that doctrinal disputes had in fact become a “most practical matter” because they were “preventing the progress of the Kingdom.”

So the *American Lutheran* began to give close attention to theological matters, and particularly to the search for Lutheran unity. Its columns gave increasing space to Lutherans outside the Missouri Synod, as it argued for greater openness and less rigidity. The famous “Statement of the 44,” which in 1945 challenged the “loveless attitude which is manifesting itself within Synod,” was in fact largely the work of the editors and advisors of the *American Lutheran*.

Arguing for Lutheran unity was tough sledding in those days, but the *American Lutheran* kept at it. Finally in the mid-1960s there appeared to be a significant thaw in inter-Lutheran relations, as the old National Lutheran Council closed its operation and the Lutheran Council in the U.S.A. was born, with the Missouri

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Synod as a full partner. The ALPB, recognizing this new reality, decided to bring the *American Lutheran* to an end and replace it with *Lutheran Forum*, a consciously inter-Lutheran, though still independent, journal. To edit the new publication the ALPB board chose Glenn Stone, a Lutheran Church in America (LCA) pastor (formerly Augustana Synod), who had been editing the National Lutheran Council’s *National Lutheran*. The latter publication was going out of existence with the Council and, while *Lutheran Forum* was not an official merger of the *National Lutheran* and the *American Lutheran*, it really conceived itself as “continuing” both publications.

Lutheran Forum had a clear sense of its mission. In his inaugural editorial, Stone noted that this was “a time of new breakthroughs in Lutheran cooperation. The dead-end roads of a century... appear to have been largely bypassed, yet Lutheran unity has not yet achieved full expression.” So the new magazine would provide a true “forum,” seeking to reflect “the variety within Lutheranism [with its] richness of life,” while recognizing the “common ground which makes discussion possible and the existence of tensions fruitful.” Yet that did “not mean that *Lutheran Forum* itself has no unique point of view,” and it intended to express its own vision, serving as “an independent, responsibly critical voice” within the Lutheran churches.

The new journal was greeted with enthusiasm by many in the churches and was seen as a primary vehicle for increased Lutheran cooperation and unity. There was, for example, an ultimately aborted effort to make *Lutheran Forum* also the successor to *Event*, an American Lutheran Church-sponsored (ALC) magazine of Christian social concern. Church and society personnel of the ALC, LCA, and LCMS were enthusiastic about cooperating in what they thought might be a regular social concerns section in *Lutheran Forum*—not too much of a reach, since the *American*

Lutheran had often discussed church and society issues. But church officials in all three bodies put the kibosh on that possibility. ALC President David Preus especially was concerned about *Lutheran Forum's* "political image" and what it might do to ALC/LCMS relations which, after a period of warming, now seemed to be threatened by LCMS conservatives.

More successful were discussions with leaders of the Lutheran Student Association of America (LSAA) and its LCMS equivalent, Gamma Delta. The two groups were in conversation about merger; the LSAA's magazine *Frontiers* was having financial difficulties and the possibility of *Lutheran Forum* providing a forum for Lutheran students was discussed. It was agreed that, while the journal would not be the "official organ" of the student group(s) and there would be no direct relationship, *Lutheran Forum* would be recognized, promoted, and recommended for students; in return, *Lutheran Forum* would have regular and substantial coverage of student concerns. This informal relationship lasted for several years, with *Lutheran Forum* dedicating one issue a year to a focus on higher education and campus issues.

Still another example was *Lutheran Forum's* continuation of *Una Sancta*, an independent publication devoted largely to liturgical concerns that had been published off and on since the 1940s. Stone had actually edited it for several years; he had been succeeded by Richard John Neuhaus, who was a regular columnist for *Lutheran Forum* in its early years. *Una Sancta* had ceased publication in 1970, but now several interested individuals raised funds to enable *Lutheran Forum* to begin a regular "Una Sancta Supplement." It appeared, usually annually, beginning in 1978 and continued on a regular basis until 1993, and thereafter more occasionally as a special section in *Lutheran Forum*.

Early in *Lutheran Forum's* run, it became clear that a monthly publication schedule was not financially feasible. A number of options were considered, but finally the ALPB board agreed to what they came to call the "Forum Package"—*Lutheran Forum* as a quarterly journal, supplemented by *Forum Letter* in a monthly newsletter format. *Forum Letter* was first edited by Richard Koenig, an LCMS pastor and *Lutheran Forum* editorial associate who had already been publishing a private newsletter that now essentially morphed into *Forum Letter*; it primarily offered news and analysis by Koenig.

Lutheran Forum, in contrast, offered more substantive thematic articles. In those early years there were many articles on the church and social issues. The journal tackled civil rights, war and peace, urban problems, and anti-Semitism. For several years Neuhaus, then in his "left-wing radical pastor" phase, wrote a regular column that often (though not always) dealt with the church and social responsibility; one early essay, for instance, argued that the draft deferment for clergy and seminarians ought to be ended. The journal also published many articles dealing with liturgical change; this was the period when the Inter-Lutheran Commission on Worship was working toward what would become the *Lutheran Book of Worship*, and *Lutheran Forum* gave that process a lot of attention.

It also began to focus quite extensively on the developing

political situation in the Missouri Synod. It provided perhaps the most widely read analysis for Lutheran pastors and laity in the other Lutheran bodies, many of whom were quite puzzled at what was unfolding in the LCMS. Koenig's three-part analysis, "What's Behind the Showdown in the Missouri Synod?" was so popular that the ALPB published it as a stand-alone reprint. Further coverage was offered by Neuhaus, who had taken over the editorship of *Forum Letter* in 1974; he began to include a supplement at first titled "As Missouri Turns" and then "The Continuing Crisis."

Glenn Stone was succeeded as editor in 1988 by Paul Hinlicky, who stated his intent to "foster cross-disciplinary discussions of issues in the life of the Lutheran churches in America." He began the practice of assigning a theme to each issue of the journal (though there were plenty of articles outside the theme as well). Hinlicky was an academic, and *Lutheran Forum* under his editorship showed a considerable change from the more popular journalistic approach of his predecessor. Articles were longer and more scholarly.

A more important difference, however, was a shift toward an increasingly critical view of American Lutheranism, and particularly the newly formed Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). Editorials and articles discussed what Hinlicky called "the crisis in American Lutheranism." Critiques were offered of the ELCA's ecumenical conversations, "the mess our seminaries are in," and the pressure for "inclusive language" about God. The Missouri Synod, while not as prominently featured, also came in for criticism. *Lutheran Forum* was hardly the only journal raising the alarm about the perceived problems of American Lutheranism; in 1990 it joined with *Lutheran Quarterly* and *Dialog* to sponsor "A Call to Faithfulness" at St. Olaf College, an event that brought together hundreds of Lutherans (mostly ELCA members) to discuss the theological state of the church. A similar event was held the following year.

In these years *Lutheran Forum* began to identify itself more and more with what came to be called the "evangelical catholic" perspective in Lutheranism. The ALPB, publisher of the journal, adopted a mission statement, drafted by Hinlicky and printed on the title page of every issue, which specifically committed it to "an understanding of Lutheran tradition as evangelical and catholic." An underlying theme of many of the journal's articles was the question of Lutheran identity and an advocacy for the evangelical catholic answer.

Hinlicky resigned in 1993 to take a teaching position in Slovakia, and the editorship came into the hands of Pastor Leonard Klein. Klein continued the sometimes caustic critique of the ELCA (perhaps best expressed in his furor at the ELCA Church Council's decision to require the Board of Pensions to fund abortions: "Real churches don't kill babies"). As the ELCA began to be rocked by challenges to the traditional Christian view of homosexuality, *Lutheran Forum* spoke editorially against the "revisionist" arguments. At the same time, under Klein's leadership there was much room in the journal for dissenting opinions, and the journal became a "forum" in perhaps a more robust way than it had previously been.

Its focus was hardly exclusively on ethical matters like abortion and sexuality; there were stimulating discussions of ministry, liturgical theology and practice, and public theology. Hinlicky's voice continued to be heard in a regular column that dealt primarily with biblical and theological discussion.

The journal was often accused of being "too negative," and Klein tackled the accusation head on. "The adjustment to full participation in American culture has been terribly difficult for American Lutheranism," he wrote in 1994. "Questions of confessional identity, cultural distinctiveness, and catholic substance have mixed and melded with issues presented by American pragmatism, voluntarism, and pluralism. The identity and direction of Lutheranism will continue to be a battlefield for us, and *Lutheran Forum* continues to be eager to help interpret where the skirmish lines genuinely are."

Klein resigned in 1996 (he soon thereafter was received into the Roman Catholic Church and, like Richard John Neuhaus before him, ultimately ordained). His successor was Pastor Ronald Bagnall. The journal continued to offer meaty theological conversation; Bagnall added a hefty dollop of "tradition," with extensive quotes in each issue from patristic, Reformation, and other theologians. Editorial opposition was voiced in 1997 to the ELCA's proposed ecumenical agreements with the Episcopalians and the Reformed Church, but the same issue featured articles arguing alternative perspectives. Two years later the revised Episcopal full communion agreement was endorsed by Bagnall and all three of his editorial predecessors—but again the opposing position was argued elsewhere in the issue.

Bagnall retired in 2006. Pastor Paul Sauer acted as interim editor for a few months (the first LCMS pastor to serve in this capacity since the *American Lutheran* became *Lutheran Forum*), and then Sauer became associate editor as ELCA Pastor Sarah Wilson took the editorial reins in 2007. In the years since, the journal has toned down what had often been perceived as harsh polemics. In Wilson's first issue, she and Sauer wrote a joint statement outlining their intent: "We are interested in rational arguments, rationally made, properly nuanced, with generosity towards one's opponent, taking into account the readership of *LF* and the broad demands of Christian charity." In addition to thoughtful essays by both editors on a variety of topics, the journal has offered a number of regular features, including Old and New Testament exegetical essays, studies in North American Lutheran history, global Lutheranism, liturgy, hymnology, the Lutheran Confessions, and public witness. *Lutheran Forum* has also developed a lively online presence (lutheranforum.org), with regular contributions by a diverse group of North American Lutherans.

A word should be said about *Lutheran Forum's* companion piece, *Forum Letter*. During the years it was edited by Richard John Neuhaus, the newsletter moved away from the "newsy" nature of its first days and became more analytical, always arguing (perhaps earlier and more consistently than *Lutheran Forum*)

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for the evangelical catholic perspective. When Neuhaus resigned in 1990, he was succeeded by Pastor Russell Saltzman. Saltzman brought a sense of humor and irony that lightened *Forum Letter's* tone, though it continued to offer sharp critiques of both the ELCA and the LCMS—and, later, the newer Lutheran church bodies. Saltzman was in turn succeeded by Pastor Richard Johnson (ELCA) as editor, with Pastor Peter Speckhard (LCMS) as associate editor. In recent years *Forum Letter* has taken over the primary task of covering church political and institutional issues (not without an occasional note of ironic humor) as *Lutheran Forum* has moved more toward theological and historical essays.

As *Lutheran Forum* faces the future, its editors continue to contemplate its role in American Lutheranism. It still proudly regards itself as one of the few places where Lutherans across synodical boundaries can have honest dialogue—though one may wonder how significant this really is in an era when prospects for Lutheran ecclesiastical unity have never been dimmer, and when indeed Lutheranism is fracturing in new and sometimes unexpected ways. The journal at present seeks to encourage theological study among Lutheran pastors in a time when synodical structures seem to regard such study as only minimally relevant to the bigger priorities of church growth and public witness, and when denominationally sponsored "continuing education" consists mainly of workshops on sexual misconduct, anti-racism training, and conflict management in the parish. Like all journals, *Lutheran Forum* is grappling with declining circulation, increasing costs, and a cultural shift that seems determined to make print media obsolete. We are trying to develop a lively online presence at lutheranforum.org.

We at *Lutheran Forum/Forum Letter* are convinced that there is a place for responsible and respectful dialogue about matters theological, liturgical, and ecclesiastical, and particularly when that dialogue can take participants outside their own echo chambers and give them the opportunity to learn from those whose views are different. We remain committed to grounding that dialogue firmly in the catholic tradition as renewed and interpreted by the Lutheran confessions.