

## The Failure of Dissent and New Beginnings:

### I. Introduction:

- a. When asked to consider doing this presentation I was in a state of great discouragement. I think my wife Bev summed it up on the Sunday morning at the end of the Convention in Saskatoon. "I feel like an orphan." The church that I remember as "life giving", where there was fellowship and even when there was disagreement could still produce a fellowship where there was an enjoyment of life together . . . Indeed it was a church of acknowledged sinners who lived by God's grace and who treasured the Lutheran heritage steeped in the study of the scriptures and involved in the encounter with our Lutheran Confessions to help bring the life changing work of God's Word and spirit into our own lives so that we could translate that life into service throughout the world. It too struggle with imperfection. That will never change.

In 1986 we began the new venture of merger. Two Lutheran bodies of quite different character came together under the slogans of unity. We have struggled with that ever since.

- b. From my own background, some of the Hallmark functions and agencies of life, ministry and Christian Service as Lutherans were:

1. Worship
2. Christian Education and the place of Scriptures and Confessions
3. Canadian and World Missions
4. CLWR
5. Christian Service
6. Fellowship

1. Worship life continued with little change in themes and practice except in the view of the sacraments. After the new statement on sacramental practices it seems less emphasis was placed on proclamation. The primary nurture of life and faith was now sacraments. The debates over liturgical and contemporary worship continued. With all the themes of change, the liturgical arts were not as prepared for change, and tended to entrench in what some would call a more high church tradition, though in the church at large there was some breadth of diversity in practice that continued without hindrance.
2. We have had a struggle with our seminary . . . LTS in Saskatoon is part of my roots and I am not familiar with Waterloo. Tensions at LTS were recognized in the 1991 Convention. For some, this became a hostile environment. The concerted effort to "crush" pietists (affirmed by a prof that this was a planned strategy of the faculty) .

. . made many abandon that part of their heritage to be accepted. This abuse for many created a negative experience of seminary training and has likely had at least three consequences . . . seminary was viewed as hostile ground . . discouraged more people from attending. . . perpetuated an environment that was condescending to any who were labelled pietist.

In an inadvertent way I believe the Sacramental Practices Statement resulted in the reduction in emphasis on Christian Education. The move to a more sacramental theology (Sacramental Practices Statement approved in 1991) caused many to register dissenting votes for a number of reasons tied to interpretations of our Lutheran Theology and the Scriptures. But I would propose one of the consequences of the theology presented in those documents was to reduce Christian Education to a low priority and the role of Christian Education progressively diminished. Theological training became diverse, with less emphasis on our own seminaries . . . indeed, one can trace the developments in education which lost much of our Lutheran identity as we developed a “consumer” theology looking for marketable product.

Our own colleges found little support among our leaders. The gifting of Augustana to the Alberta government for many of us was the final declaration of indifference to Christian education.

Though Bishop Sjoberg emphasized the importance of Christian Education in his report to the 1991 Convention there was very little done. If Eucharist is the primary nurture of the baptized . . . then Sunday School, Adult Christian Education, Augustana University College, Luther College, LCBI and our affiliated Bible School (CLBI) have minimal value. The schools had great difficulty to gain any visible support from the new church, though in the 1985 Convention which formed this church the presence of the College Choirs provided one of the extremely enriching parts of the inaugural experience of the ELCIC.

We still had education in this church but it seemed to become primarily an indoctrination into the particular agenda of the leadership, less intent on discussion and more intent to bring about submission to the ideology of the leadership. Less concerned with scripture, and more concerned to form Task Forces of selected individuals who represented the goals of the leadership. Task Forces produced statements. Though there was opportunity for response to these statements, there was little sign of influence. These documents then became the documents for study and reflection and often were directed to outcomes on particular agendas (such as the abortion debate, sacramental practices statement and human sexuality.)

3. Canadian and World Missions lost their identity (the loss of Divisions had a huge influence in the disorientation of our ELCIC). There have been a number of convention themes on growth and mission, but little has come out of it. Canadian Missions is struggled since the loss of Divisions, and World Mission has been transferred to the ELCA. The ongoing debate about mission in a pluralistic society has left this area in a state of hesitance and uncertainty but there seems no attempt to find a resolve except in “social justice” which seems more about politics and lobbies and making statements, which (through what has become a too critical eye on my part) seem to have more purpose in creating an image than in achieving anything that is life giving. It becomes mostly adversarial . . . and that adversarial spirit seems to be nurtured till it has taken over our leadership and is used also against its membership.
4. CLWR was pushed out of direct contact with the ELCIC through the positioning of GHDA which, though set up initially as a fund appeal, became a separate agency for domestic relief and development and to promote education on the causes of poverty.

CLWR was finally barred from buying advertising in the Canada Lutheran and was not allowed to approach congregations except under the umbrella of GHDA. The final high-jack of CLWR happened before the 2009 Convention in Vancouver. The new memorandum of understanding established by NCC moved the offices into the ELCIC offices. Now the ELCIC designates 13% of CLWR offerings for the GHDA mandate and CLWR does not administer the balance of those funds. Instead they are managed through a joint program committee with ELCIC members appointed by NCC together with CLWR. It is an interesting aside that the convention mandate for GHDA expired with the Vancouver Convention. These decisions came to the convention as decisions made by NCC. There was no request for ratification. And few people are even aware of what has happened, since communication seems to be very minimal to the grass roots of what is going on behind the scenes.

5. Fellowship: But in the years that followed merger, the Church built on the theme of “unity” has found difficulty to live together. At one time, Clergy gatherings were a highly anticipated event. Though there was diversity among us as clergy, there was still a great fellowship and with all our differences a common purpose that held us together. Today clergy relationships are like walking through a mine field. There is tension, and it is not difficult to step on issues that cause explosions. There is little conversation about ministry . . . with most discussion and debate directed to “the issues.” Most of the fellowship of a clergy gathering is at the bar when the meetings are done. (Those who don’t drink must be pietists).

- a. An aside . . . in our PA Conference Pastor's gathering I suggested we talk about our ministries and the people we serve. It was amazing how much we had in common. Underlying the conversation the tension of the "issues" remain, but there still seems to be a new appreciation of each other.

The alienation of clergy and congregations who represented some form of what was labelled "pietism" has been a significant part of this history. Those so labelled are viewed as outsiders . . . and were often faced with public scorn as expressed by one bishop "those damn pietists."

That labelling process nurtured in the educational institutions of theology became a model for pastoral response which has caused great grief in many congregations and conflicts that seemed to be without end. It was even acknowledge by some clergy that they had to disassociate from their pietistic roots to be accepted in the church.

The legalism of pietism produced problems in life and faith, but what is missed is that legalism is not unique to pietism but has a huge attraction to all people who are "by nature sinful." The legalistic responses of current leadership . . . denying congregations nominations for call, removing congregations, refusing to nominate some pastors for call, excommunication of congregational members . . . gives one pause for thought. Something has flourished in unexpected places that destroys fellowship and that outstrips the history our leadership so adamantly condemn.

6. The focus for ministry and Christian Service has become narrow. Spiritual nurture and the redeeming and sanctifying work of the gospel has been largely abandoned and turned over to sacramental practice. Evangelism and Mission related to the teaching of the scriptures and proclamation of the gospel are diminished. Christian service was now primarily defined in the social justice agenda seeking new life for the world through socio economic reform and redistribution of wealth , which naturally plays into the environmental issues needed to provide hope for the future. These can be noble tasks, but seem to have lost the birthright for a mess of pottage.
7. The former Division of Social Service in the old ELCIC had much in common with this emphasis. The change is that now this became mainstream for the whole church while the emphasis of other divisions seemed to fall into a background position. Socio-economic issues prevail along with material concerns of the environment. A materialistic culture believes that "food clothing and shelter" are the fundamentals which establish quality of life. This is as old as history and has found new impetus in the age of enlightenment that has ruled God out of the world.

8. We have drifted a long way . . . and one cannot help but hear an echo of the voice of Jesus “you cannot serve God and mammon.” God knows we need all these things, but when Jesus was teaching he taught “seek first the kingdom of God” and all these things would find their place. It is interesting to note that even in the National Bishop’s directives for spiritual renewal, the items of service identified are all tied to what we normally think of as social justice issues. I would suggest that as important as these are it is far too narrow to be adequate. (The emphasis on Spiritual Renewal is still to be celebrated. The mind of distrust fears this is a political move . . . but that is not gracious. The directives are still good.)

The central parts of the life of the church which have been deeply treasured seem to have lost their place. That is maybe why many feel they live in a different church.

But the major issues have been the issues of abortion and human sexuality. Likely no issues have been so divisive. In the midst of these issues the understanding of the scriptures and our Lutheran Confessions have been seriously confused. It would seem that all the confusion of the culture has become embodied in the life of the church and the scriptures that were once the sole authority for life and faith seem to have succumbed to the ideologies of progress which views the contemporary mind as superior to all that has gone before. The past is antiquated. So also are the scriptures and the confessions. Everything presumably has changed. (It is true there have been huge changes in technology . . . but the human creature has not changed . . . and the directions they stray seem to bring back so many of the same symptoms. (it is worth reading history and the Old Testament . . . one finds so much with which one can resonate. Indeed . . . in all the changes, some things still have not changed). Human rebellion returns to its own interests and always seems to destroy what can be rich blessings in life for all.

In the issues of the ELCIC the closest dissenters came to success was the convention of 2007. The 2005 Convention in Winnipeg attracted one of the strongest registrations of lay delegates. The convention of 2007 was still strong in lay delegates. This was the year of a strategic move to elect a bishop who represented a different direction for the ELCIC. Until the final vote the candidate had the largest number of votes but lost because of the last ballot in which the third party votes went to the other candidate. Following these conventions, if you look at lay representatives at the convention in 2009 there was a huge drop and only a small rally for the 2011 convention when the rather stacked agenda seemed to provide the last battle which has led to the present despair. It seems many had given up on the ELCIC.

Dissent has failed. The merger of 1986 was a negotiated merger of the former ELCC and the LCA Canada Section. The merger commission forged a document which made concessions to two very different heritages of Lutheran form and function. The LCA was

predominantly an Eastern Canada Church . . . The ELCC dominated the West. The LCA in Canada was the Canada Section of the American body. In structure it was much more top down than was the ELCIC. The ELCIC tended to be a more grass roots organization . . . and later I believe it was discovered had developed a quite agile leadership having had to develop some of the gifts of its people having become autonomous as a Lutheran body in Canada in 1967. The early years were congenial . . . though in reading the Canada Lutheran in the first year the struggle with unity could be seen:

*“A grief process is very much with us. Any new relationship requires the disposition of some thing held dear. Only now are many of us beginning to realize that the new church is not going to be the same as the one we left. . . . A second thorn in the side of our fledgling unity is that there is presently too much influence from one group of relatives. Whether by will or by default, the “western” in-laws seem to possess inordinate strength as we go into the first season of life together. . . . The eastern Church is rich in established values and experience. The western church is resourceful; willing to risk; eager to assume responsibility and to take the initiative. The new family will need to celebrate and implement aspects of both traditions (Canada Lutheran March 1986 Vol. 1 Number 3) Wayne Holst (former LCA)*

In many ways what followed was a major reversal of the negotiations of the merger commission which crafted this church. Those who were maybe more agile with a surprisingly able leadership were not as agile and astute in the political manipulations which followed. There was a theological environment that supported this shift. The systematic and planned attempt to crush pietists at the seminary made any progressive and future looking Pastor know that there was a need to disassociate with this heritage to be accepted. Dissenters were often name “pietists” as an automatic disqualification. Any attempt at debate was usually terminated by the labels that automatically condemned anything spoken. That does not mean that all debate was well founded, but that was too true on all sides.

And though one has heard words that the ELCIC wants to build a church on acceptance and tolerance, open conversation and respect, and goals of diversity; those who have challenged the issues and shifts of this church have no illusions that this is more than words. So today many feel a great deal of discouragement, a sense of failure, convinced that the ELCIC has abandoned its heritage and the hallmarks of our Lutheran disciplines for life and faith. We wonder what to do. One has difficulty to find any visible signs of hope nor do any statistics one can measure to define the journey of the ELCIC as anything but downhill. The direction and the trajectory of this church would suggest that the future can only get worse. Sometimes one’s place on the road today is not half as serious as where this road will take us. That future look is worth some evaluation as well, and certainly is equally important when one looks for a new beginning that might not end as the vision of 1986 seems to be ending.

## **Part II.**

**That leads to the second part of this presentation. It appears we need some new beginning. So what are the options for new beginnings?**

**I propose a few:**

1. Continue to work for change in the status quo with an on-going commitment to a time line much longer than we have endured and pray that the Lord of the harvest will raise up new leadership and new vision that is life giving instead of fellowship destroying.
2. **Luther's model** has some perspectives. Luther never wanted to leave the Church of his day. He was a dissenter who would not be ignored. He was a scholar and had a deep understanding of the history of the Church and of its function in His time. He likely would have failed if it had not been for Prince Fredrick. On the other hand some of Luther's friends kindled fires of discontent , which resulted in the peasant revolts with up to 150,000 people killed. Unwittingly, many of Luther's "friends" took his dissent to fuel their own agendas and the destruction ran away.

I would not suggest that this model would end in revolts, but it is not hard for conflicts to become very destructive, and that is possible for us. Building fires of discontent is easy and gives some people a sense of power. The outcome can be as destructive as what one opposes.

The reformation however has changed the western world landscape . . . and the humiliation of the church in its fragmentation may have been what has kept the church from aspirations of power. I think it could be argued that the servant role of the Church in this world that God loves would not have the influence it might have otherwise had. "Denominations" are to me like light refracted through a prism . . . no part of that refraction can claim to be "THE' light. We are a part of the whole.

Some of my mourning for our ELCIC is that I believe we have abandoned our unique place and the hallmark gifts of our church with its emphasis on Scriptures and Confessions as a discipline to our life and faith and our life of worship and Christian Service.

Have we contended to the point of excommunication ? This solves the problem of "leaving" I have often felt the only faithful way out is to bounce twice once thrown . . . but to seek reform till one sees reform or reaction of exclusion is what I call Luther's model.

3. **The eighth Century Prophets** spoke what God laid on their hearts. They were not however self-appointed voices, but felt a compelling call from God which they would have preferred to escape. They were prophets of necessity by calling, not by choice. They did not strategize an exodus of the people from the cultic community of Israel or Judah, but they did challenge the Priests and the formal spiritual leadership as well as the rulers of their day who shared in the overall life of the nation(s) of God's people. For all practical purposes for the most part they at least initially failed . . . Only with the consequences of the actions of God's straying people did they finally begin to see and understand what the prophets spoke and wrote . . . only then was their voice recorded for

history and held as instructive for their life and faith. (Since this is God's call, we do not have the ability to create it . . . but to encourage those called and support wherever we can).

4. We can leave the ELCIC as Lutheran Individuals and congregations. That process has already begun for some. In some sense, the fragmentation which followed the moves for reform that appeared a number of places in Europe is still happening and can happen with us. The most recent decisions of the ELCIC in convention make it impossible for congregations to escape the divisive debate, and in some ways in every microcosm of this church represented in its congregations, the destructive process we have experienced must continue.

Even in the vote for departure there will be collateral damage as some will hold their faithfulness to the church they have loved and served . . . and the divisions will be real . The public testimony of our Lutheran family has been marred by the decisions of our church in convention. The struggles which follow will have an impact in our communities for good or evil. How one proceeds should this be the case is crucial.

If congregations leave . . . the question remains . . . where does one go. Where the history of the Lutheran Church in North America has been a journey of mergers (at one time apparently there were 100 synods in N.A. based on settlement patterns and ethnic and language backgrounds). In Canada in recent years I believe we have an increase to about 12 Lutheran configurations of Congregations of Lutherans. How does one decide where to go? The question cannot be only "What serves us" but what would best serve the call and purpose of our Lord to whom the Great Commission still gives us direction?

Should one seek leadership to organize a more careful exodus of congregations with a more serious evaluation of the options and seek to make a move in common that maintains the fellowship salvaged from the experience of the past years

5. **Lutheran Protestants:** to localize our focus and endure the (from our perspective) the humiliation of what our church is doing.
  - a. Decisions would have to be made: would one cut off benevolence and choose other ways to support mission in our world while seeking to call the leadership to hear the concerns and maybe change direction so that we can find a common ground in our Lutheran heritage again?
  - b. Would one work with delegations of pastors and people to meet with leadership in a more direct way. (sometimes dissent is standing on the opposite side of the river and shouting our concerns . . . would it be better to seek to work "inside" the ELCIC while stating our "position of protest").
 

Would you call that Protestant Lutherans in the ELCIC who take on a new commitment to faithfulness to the call of God and work with vigour to be faithful in each congregation while seeking to live out new models for ministry which might

become attractive for their own sake and bring new visions of renewal for the whole church.

Those are some thoughts on new beginnings. Paul's instruction to the Philippian Christians who faced issues in the early Church "Only conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. (Phil. 1:27). It is an ensnaring rule of life . . . you always become what you fight (and have to be a little uglier to win). On the other hand . . . the model of Jesus shows us that love is so much more than just "acceptance." Love is committed to the well being of those loved. It sometimes affirms, sometimes is silent, sometimes speaks with harsh words . . . even throws tables in the temple; always calls sinners to repentance and the message of forgiveness, and often instructs (Jesus was known as "rabbi" which means teacher), and also will die so that sinners can find new life. Isaiah 55:8 reminds us that God's thoughts are not our thoughts and God's ways are not our ways. You are in a radical enterprise in this world. Beware when you sound no different than the world.

So where do we go from here? May the Lord of the Church be our focus. May humility be genuine. May the Spirit prevail, and whatever we do . . . may it be the fruit of the spirit that flourishes in us and through us.

What do you think?

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