

The Story of Our North American Lutheran Church:

From Whence it Came, How it Came to Be, What it is, and Where it is Going

Short Sketches of Our History

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Part One: A Brief History of American Lutheranism from its Beginning Until 1988

Lutherans arrived in North America as early as 1619 — Danish explorers who died, but their pastor conducted the first Lutheran services on the North American continent. Settlers who survived arrived in New Amsterdam (New York) in the 1640s and established churches throughout the North East, particularly in Pennsylvania. The 18th century featured a large German immigration to the colonies. Virginia Lutherans arrived as indentured servants in 1717. The churches gathered into Ministeriums and then Synods, which were regional organizations. In the latter part of the 19th century large numbers of Germans of various sorts of denomination migrated from Pennsylvania down the Shenandoah Valley. These colonial Lutherans sent missionaries west to pastor the congregations of later immigrants. They founded colleges, seminaries, hospitals, and orphanages. In 1918 Eastern, Southern, and newly founded Midwestern Lutheran Synods were gathered into the United Lutheran Church, which used a common hymnal, *The Common Service Book*.

A huge immigration of Lutherans from Northern Europe arrived in the late 19th century, most settling in the Midwest. These Lutheran ethnic groups — Germans, Swedes, Norwegians, Danes, Finns and even some Icelanders — founded their own churches along with their own seminaries and colleges. The mid-twentieth century featured the gradual coming together of these ethnic churches into two major churches: the Lutheran Church in America (a merger of the older and larger United Lutheran Church, the Augustana Synod of the Swedes, the Suomi Synod of the Finns, and one of the churches of the Danes) in 1962, and the American Lutheran Church (a merger of the American Lutheran Church of the Germans, the Evangelical Lutheran Church and Lutheran Free Church of the Norwegians, and another branch of the Danes) in 1960. One group that didn't merge was the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod, founded in 1847 by German Lutherans who were very strict in their doctrinal commitments. This did not prevent them suffering a serious division in the 1970s.

The Lutheran Church in America, the American Lutheran Church, and the offshoot from the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod conflict continued the trend toward Lutheran unity by organizing a planning process in the 1980s for a new Lutheran church that would gather the majority of Lutherans into one church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Little did the planners foresee that the move toward more unity would result in division and finally schism.

In the next installment, we shall reflect on why the dream of unity became a nightmare of division.

Part Two: The Flawed Formation of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

In Part One we examined how Lutherans in America slowly overcame their ethnic divisions. What was envisioned to be a grand conclusion to this quest for Lutheran unity in the late 1980s turned into division and, finally, schisms. What were some of the factors that led to that unexpected calamity? To understand them, we need to recall the revolutionary changes wrought by the 1960s, which really is the decade from 1965-1975.

It took some years for the revolutionary impulses of the 1960s to affect the mainline Protestant denominations in their “long march through the institutions,” to quote the famous phrase of the German student activist, Rudi Dutschke. But the liberationist themes borne by radical feminism, gay liberation, multiculturalism, and anti-imperialism did indeed reshape mainline Protestantism. Those who thought that confessional Lutheranism would prevail against these themes in the establishment and governance of the new Evangelical Lutheran Church in America were soon to be sorely disappointed. The older leaders of the merging churches were quickly “taken to the cleaners” by a band of radicals who injected a destructive virus right in the midst of the new church. That virus was a quota system based upon group identities.

That fateful move occurred in the establishment of the Committee for Lutheran Unity in the early 80s. The composition of that crucial group was constituted on the basis of a quota system, which was the instrument employed for “inclusion of the marginalized” — women, persons of color and persons whose primary language is not English. It was argued that such stringent — and disliked — methods were needed for the church to be truly committed to inclusion, diversity, and justice.

Quotas insured that those selected to plan the new Lutheran church would have a significant contingent of activists shaped by the liberationist themes mentioned above. That turned out to be the case, and the new church was then planned by the Committee for a New Lutheran Church (CNLC) made up of quota-generated membership. The church that then came forth was one in which a multiplicity of interest groups held sway. Strong feminists and multiculturalists were given powerful offices of their own in the emerging bureaucracy. Theologians and Bishops were viewed as distrusted interest groups, because at that time they were made up of white men. They were given no official role in decision-making, leaving that up to a central bureaucracy shaped by activists. Experienced leaders were cast aside in order to make the church “really new.”

What emerged was disheartening, to say the least. In one planning meeting of the CNLC, it voted to retain the name of the Holy Trinity as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit by a vote of 33-30! Feminists argued that the classic name was sexist and oppressive. Such shenanigans finally led, after the foundation of the ELCA in 1988, to huge gatherings of concerned clergy and laypeople at St. Olaf College in the early 1990s. These gatherings were titled “Called to Faithfulness” conferences.

Those impressive protests did not impede the revisionist juggernaut for long. A social statement on sexual ethics, emanating from the Chicago headquarters of the ELCA in the early 90s, was so radical it had to be withdrawn after a withering backlash. But another attempt was begun that, in the end, would lead to victory for those who wanted to revise Christian sexual ethics. The ELCA transformed its ministries to politicians into heavily partisan “advocacy” offices. Initiatives to legitimize homosexual conduct were begun and pressed forward through many offices of the church bureaucracy. Organizations such as Lutherans Concerned emerged to agitate relentlessly for the gay agenda in the congregations, synods, convocations, and assemblies of the church. Images of God and the language of worship and prayer were purged of masculine pronouns to conform to feminist convictions that such language was oppressive and exclusionary. The ELCA adopted policies that were more and more critical of Israel. In short, the ELCA was conforming to the trajectory of liberal Protestant denominations, only a few steps behind the Episcopalians and the United Church of Christ.

All of this was alarming to many traditional Lutherans, but organized resistance was slow in coming. However, contributions fell off and fiscal problems began escalating. ELCA membership began to decline sharply. But organized opposition to the “new church” had to wait for several dramatic changes that were legislated around and after the turn of the century. We will turn to those “last straws” in our next installment.

Part Three: The Last Straws and the Foundation of Lutheran Congregations in Mission for Christ (2001) and the North American Lutheran Church (2010)

In the last installment, I chronicled the disturbing trajectory of the ELCA that began even before its formation in 1988, but intensified in the next two decades. The movement to revise basic Christian teaching on ordination, evangelism, and marriage was relentlessly pressed forward by interest groups and the ELCA bureaucracy throughout the 90s and early 2000s. Though there were other distressing changes having to do with the language of worship and the church’s stance toward Israel, it was the triumph of those three disturbing revisions that finally became the “last straw” for many ELCA Lutherans. They were serious enough to provoke the establishment of two new Lutheran bodies, one an association of congregations (Lutheran Congregations in Mission for Christ) and one a more traditional church (North American Lutheran Church).

Let’s take up the three issues briefly. The first emerged when the ELCA forged an agreement with the Episcopal Church in 1999, entitled “Called to Common Mission” (CCM), that required three bishops in historic succession to consecrate a new Lutheran bishop, and that a bishop must always ordain Lutheran pastors. This went against Lutheran teaching that such a requirement was not necessary for an authentic consecration or ordination. The passage of CCM stimulated the formation of WordAlone Network, an organization that resisted the agreement.

So much resistance was organized that the ELCA had to backtrack and allow limited exceptions to the rule that bishops always ordain pastors. But the damage was done. WordAlone, not knowing the ELCA would allow any exceptions, formed Lutheran Congregations in Mission for

Christ (LCMC) in 2001. Initially, ELCA congregations joined the association with dual membership so they could call and ordain Lutheran seminarians who resisted the requirement that they be ordained by a bishop. Within a few years LCMC congregations began leaving the ELCA, and new congregations joined the association as they left the ELCA. More than 300 congregations had joined the LCMC by 2009.

Covered over by the many ruckuses in the ELCA in the 1990s was an even graver revision of Christian teaching, having to do with the Great Commission itself. Convinced that all missionary activity was corrupted by Western colonialism, the ELCA had decided soon after its formation in 1988 to forgo “pioneer” missionary efforts, i.e., bringing the Gospel to peoples who had never heard it before. Instead, it opted for “accompaniment,” i.e., helping already-established, younger churches in whatever way they determined. While “accompaniment” itself is a noble enterprise, the refusal to carry the Gospel to those who had never heard it was a direct repudiation of the Great Commission to “go and baptize all nations.” The number of missionaries of the Gospel plummeted, while more social service helpers increased. “Pioneer” missionary societies went unsupported and were “orphaned,” i.e., cast loose from any connection to the ELCA.

The third “last straw” occurred in the ELCA Churchwide Assembly of 2009 when classic Christian teaching on marriage and sexual ethics was repudiated. From the founding of the ELCA there had been constant agitation by Lutherans Concerned and several divisions of the ELCA bureaucracy to legitimize homosexual conduct. That was radical enough to elicit resistance in the form of an organization called Solid Rock in 2003, which became Lutheran CORE (Coalition for Reform) in November 2005. Solid Rock was successful in defeating the effort to revise Christian sexual ethics in the 2005 Churchwide Assembly, and CORE at the Churchwide Assembly in 2007. But in 2009, CORE and those who believed in orthodox teachings lost on all three counts: the ELCA approved the “blessing of gay unions,” which soon morphed into the acceptance of gay marriage; the ordination of married gays; and a social statement that was ambivalent about marriage itself, gay marriage, and cohabitation.

In September 2009, CORE sponsored a large meeting in Fishers, Indiana. It was not CORE’s intention at the time to form a new Lutheran Church, but the feedback at Fishers and in the weeks following overwhelmingly called for a new church. In response, CORE announced in November 2009 it would form a new church. At its next gathering in Columbus, Ohio, in August 2010, the North American Lutheran Church (NALC) was formed. That church, which pledged to maintain orthodox Lutheran teachings on these contested items, began with several dozen congregations and the Rev. Paull Spring, a former ELCA synodical bishop, as its presiding bishop. It also was founded with a more traditional church structure than the LCMC. Since then it has grown to a church of more than 144,000 members in over 420 congregations in the United States and Canada. In our next installment, I shall write further about its formation, structure and mission.

Part Four: Up and Running — the Formation and Mission of the North American Lutheran Church

In Part Three, I wrote about the break-up of the ELCA because of its acceptance of teachings that orthodox Lutherans could not accept, and the subsequent founding of two new Lutheran groups: Lutheran Congregations in Mission for Christ — an association of local congregations — and a more traditionally-structured church, The North American Lutheran Church.

The NALC defines itself as committed to the “theological center of Lutheran belief and practice” and devoted to four key values: Christ Centered; Mission Driven; Traditionally Grounded; and Congregationally Focused. It has also committed itself to the Great Commission, accepting as partners in mission those “orphaned” missionary societies that bring the Gospel to peoples who have never heard it and sending missionaries abroad to difficult situations. The NALC has about 40 start-up missions in North America. Its leadership provides oversight and pastoral care for its many congregations and pastors. Further, it has committed itself to helping each congregation “make disciples.”

The NALC has a very lean structure with these key full-time officials: Bishop, General Secretary, Assistant to the Bishop for Ministry and Ecumenism, and Assistant to the Bishop for Missions, as well as a small number of office administrators and secretaries.

It runs a seminary, North American Lutheran Seminary (NALS) in conjunction with Trinity School for Ministry, a seminary of the Anglican Church in North America. Both seminaries are committed to training students in evangelism. The NALS has about ten seminarians in residence and quite a few more in online programs. More than 30 other NALC candidates for ordained ministry are studying at other orthodox, evangelical seminaries in North America.

The NALC pursues relationships with other orthodox churches, two in North America — the Anglican Church in North America and the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod. It partners with both to guard nascent life and to preserve religious liberty. Internationally, the NALC has relationships with very large Lutheran churches in Ethiopia and Tanzania.

The NALC has several councils, commissions and auxiliaries, including an Executive Council, a Commission on Theology and Doctrine, and a Court of Adjudication. It has produced a number of “letters of counsel” on important issues such as the sanctity of life, religious freedom, care for the poor, marriage, and physician-assisted suicide. The NALC Bishop acts on the national level with ecumenical partners on behalf of the sanctity of life, traditional marriage, and religious freedom.

The North American Lutheran Church is organized into 28 Mission Districts, covering most of North America, including Canada and the Caribbean. Each district has a Dean, an NALC pastor who provides pastoral care for the pastors and congregations and encourages the formation of new mission churches.

The NALC gathers each summer for a “Lutheran Week” in which several events occur. The week is led off by a seminar for “younger theologians,” who grapple with theological topics. The purpose for this gathering is to “incubate” theologians for the future for the NALC, which has had an impressive stable of senior theologians. Then there is training for youth ministry and a gathering of the Women of the North American Lutheran Church. Next are the Braaten-Benne Lectures in Theology. These lectures are typically attended by several hundred people and are published in volumes by the American Lutheran Publicity Bureau. The week concludes with the NALC Convocation and Mission Festival. The convocation, fortified by fine worship, makes policy for the church, while the mission festival celebrates and educates for evangelism.