



## **A United Church of Christ Perspective**

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Truth to tell, I find difficulty in separating personal experiences with North American Lutherans from perspectives on Lutheranism gained from my place in the United Church of Christ (UCC). The twenty-seven years since my ordination have been spent in Pennsylvania and Minnesota, where the Lutheran church is the dominant Protestant communion. My first parish included a "Union Church," i.e., a Lutheran congregation and a UCC congregation shared a building and a Sunday school, but each Sunday alternated liturgies. That arrangement, at one time widespread in Pennsylvania, had nothing to do with ecumenics but everything to do with Pennsylvania German economics! By the early 1970s most of those unions were dissolved. The lesson to be learned is that ecumenical relationships must be grounded theologically. In two subsequent pastorates, the UCC churches I served were across the street from Lutheran churches. In all three settings I enjoyed the warm friendship of the Lutheran pastors, and there were from time to time opportunities for cooperative activities among the parishes, including joint Eucharists on Ascension Day. I mention these personal relationships of a quarter century because no doubt they influence my perspective.

For more than twenty-five years I have asked myself where Lutheranism is going. Along the way I have discovered that that question cannot be answered as it is so stated. For what is Lutheranism? How is it to be distinguished from other Christian communions? To this non-Lutheran, a significant distinguishing mark is the role the historic Lutheran confessions play in Lutheranism. Nevertheless, the "symbols" of Lutheranism may not be as powerful a source for Lutheran unity as the Book of Common Prayer is for Anglicans. While the second half of this century has witnessed major Lutheran unions in North America, there remain large Lutheran churches which do not have "altar and pulpit fellowship" with each other. North American Lutheranism today seems to be at once more united and more

divided than before, with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America the great example of Lutheran unity.

As others have observed, world Lutheranism is changing in color, and, I suspect, in its theological and ecumenical commitments. Perhaps this is the most historic change in Lutheran history. By the year 2000, if it has not already happened, the majority of Lutherans may be neither North American nor European. My guess is that this will change two things: (1) the classic Lutheran doctrine of the "two kingdoms" will be challenged as Lutheran leaders and theologians from the two-thirds world continue to confront political and economic oppression; and (2) Lutherans will become more ecumenical when denominational (dare one say,

confessional!) differences pale as Christians confront a non-Christian world. I do not know to what extent and how seriously North American and European Lutherans take the theological and political contexts of their Lutheran sisters and brothers in Africa, Asia, and South America, but I hope more seriously than my own United Church of Christ takes those of other United Churches overseas.

In its ecumenical relationships Lutheranism presents a bewildering mosaic. The bewilderment is greatest when I look at the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. There are important leaders and other pastors in that church who assert that the first priority in ecumenical conversation should be with Rome since the Reformation was only a “mid-course correction” in the long history of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church. There are others who maintain that the Reformation was a theological revolution, and that other Protestant bodies are theological heirs of blessed Martin.

Lutherans should be aware that this is not simply an intra-Lutheran issue. A few years ago I was on a panel with a distinguished Lutheran theologian who later became a bishop. He told me that the United Church of Christ was not a “church” because of my church’s polity. I was astonished. Until then I had not known that the form of church government belonged to the “essence” of Lutheran understanding of the church. I thought that for Lutherans, as for us Reformed, church is where the gospel and the sacraments are properly preached and administered. In the North American Lutheran-Reformed dialogues, the Lutheran group was willing initially to recognize two of the three Reformed churches, the Reformed Church in America and the Presbyterian Church (USA), but not the United Church of Christ. The reason, again, was polity. Only after an explanation of UCC polity by my late colleague, Louis Gunnemann, did the Lutheran group recognize the UCC as a church. For the UCC this was a sad moment since one of the four streams which comprise the UCC comes directly from the Church of the Prussian Union among whose symbolic books were the Augsburg Confession and Luther’s Small Catechism.

While there has been important Lutheran presence in North America for more than two centuries, only recently has North American Lutheranism entered the American mainstream. That may say more about American prejudices than it does about Lutheranism. It may also say something about the ethnic character of immigrant Lutheran churches. While a Roman Catholic has been elected President of the United States, no President has been Lutheran despite the fact that second to the Baptists, Lutherans are the largest Protestant church in the United States. However, the current dean of Harvard Divinity School and the leading systematic and

historical theologians in Yale Divinity School are Lutherans. Martin Marty, a Lutheran, is the most distinguished contemporary interpreter of American Christianity. I take these as sure and certain signs that Lutheranism is fully entering the mainstream of American church life.

In Central America, Southern and Eastern Africa, Germany, the Baltic states, and in other places, Lutheran pastors, bishops, and theologians are in the vanguard for social and political change based on Christian values. There appears to be a new sense of Lutheran social activism in the two-thirds world. With this activism one begins to read new third world theologies from a Lutheran perspective. Renewal in theology can only be a hopeful sign of where Lutheranism is going.

I am reluctant to say where Lutheranism *should* be going. What I do have are these hopes for Lutherans:

I hope Lutherans will continue to be a people who take the Scriptures seriously. Scripture study and fidelity to the Word are among Lutheranism's great gifts to the whole church.

I hope Lutherans will continue to be faithful to the Lutheran confessions. In an age which has given short shrift to historical theological statements and has sometimes disparaged theology, the ways in which Lutherans take theology seriously are to be encouraged.

I hope Lutherans will be more open ecumenically to sisters and brothers in Christ and their churches. In a word, I hope that all of us will realize that unity is what has already been given in Christ. Lutherans and Anglicans may be bridge churches for the coming, great church. The current danger is that churches on the left wing, i.e., Reformed, Anabaptists, Baptists, and Pentecostal, may be left out. While I rejoice in various examples—one thinks of Virginia and Minnesota—of Roman, Anglican, and Lutheran cooperation, I remind those three churches of the millions of Christians who are not part of those three traditions.

Lutheranism is one of the Western church's great traditions. Its many gifts, especially its faithfulness to Word and Sacrament and to the historic confessions, are needed. The whole church needs the Lutheran witness to continue to be articulate, open, and forceful.