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The Birth of *Consensus* – Twenty Five Years Ago

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The Setting for the Journal

As a church historian, I have been struck with how much the journals which theologians produced tended to reflect their editors. While it is always difficult to be completely objective about one's self, I believe that this is also true of *Consensus*, which I was privileged to found as a small, unpretentious journal twenty five years ago. I feel it is appropriate, therefore, to begin this article on "*Consensus*, Twenty five Years Ago" on an autobiographical note. I feel justified in doing so, also, because I believe I was not untypical of the young pastors who served the Canadian Lutheran Churches in the 1970s.

Muriel, I and our two children, David (8) and Deborah (6) arrived in Winnipeg in summer 1971. We had left Edmonton where I had been the pastor of St. Peter's Lutheran Church for the previous nine years. I had accepted the position of Executive Secretary of the Division of Theological Studies of the Lutheran Council in Canada. In this position, I also had staff responsibility for Joint Commission on Inter-Lutheran Relationships (JCILR). Initially the Commission purchased a third of my time from the Division. Later this was increased to half.

I came to Winnipeg with experiences which somewhat prepared me for the work to which I had been called. As a student at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis in the late 1950s, I had become aware of the fact that the mood of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod had changed significantly from earlier days. Our professors in biblical studies did not

feel compelled to justify their conclusions by recourse to the "position" of the Synod. Many of our professors favoured a closer relationship with other Lutherans. Ecumenism was not a bad word.

Arriving in Edmonton in 1962 with my doctoral studies already begun, I experienced parish ministry for nine years in the optimistic context of oil-rich Alberta. With St. Peter's situated on Edmonton's "church street", there was ample opportunity to rub shoulders with other Lutheran and other Christian pastors and priests. Thus, when pulpit and altar fellowship had been declared between the Missouri Synod and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Canada (ELCC) in 1969, I had made it a point to meet with the pastor of nearby Central Lutheran Church to see whether there were ways in which our two congregations, located only five blocks apart, might translate this fellowship into occasions for joint worship and concrete forms of joint ministry. Ultimately the ethnic character of each congregation (St. Peter's had German roots; Central had Norwegian) prevented this from happening on the congregational level.

Then in 1970 I had participated in three-way discussions in the Edmonton area which were aimed at discovering unity on the Scriptures at the grass-roots level. Edmonton was one of twenty-nine areas throughout the country where pastors of the three Lutheran bodies met under the auspices of the Division of Theological Studies to get to know each other and to probe this topic. The document which we studied had been prepared by the faculty of the Missouri Synod seminary in St. Louis. I had also participated in a study of health care institutions in Edmonton which resulted in the installation of an institutional chaplain for all Lutherans in Edmonton just before I left for Winnipeg.

These experiences reflected my attitude toward working toward fellowship with other Lutherans. They also prepared me in a practical way for work which I had been called to do in the context of the Lutheran Council in Canada for the next thirteen years of my professional life.

My first task with the Division of Theological Studies was to become familiar with the state of Lutheran unity in Canada. The files of the Division and the JCILR provided a perplexing picture. There were areas where the doctrinal discussions on the Scriptures appeared to reveal complete unity among the pastors in Canada. There were other areas where no doctrinal consensus at all seemed to have been discovered. How was one to make sense of this situation? I was led to a deeper study of the history of Lutheranism in North America and particularly in Canada.

I probed the Lutheran Confessional concept of unity in this historical context. I reflected on the non-theological factors which caused disunity among Lutherans. I began to travel to most of the twenty-nine areas where discussions had taken place to become acquainted with as many of the pastors as I could.

The more I mulled over this whole matter, the more I became convinced that if Lutheran unity were to be discovered and union were to occur, Lutherans in Canada would need to achieve a better understanding of themselves as Lutherans. I came to believe that if Lutherans truly understood who they were historically, they would be drawn to recognize their common identity and be ready to put aside their suspicions of each other and their prejudices, many of which came from their separate development as ethnic churches. Furthermore, I knew that if I were to facilitate this process of holding up a vision of authentic Lutheranism, I would have to get to know and understand Lutheranism in Canada inside out. I would need to be ready to see and understand the hopes and dreams, as well as the concerns, of each group of Lutherans better than they knew themselves so that I could help build bridges and create connections in the interest of Lutheran unity.

Why did some areas find consensus and others did not? Perhaps, I thought, those who had not found consensus were too close to their own situation. I felt that information about the merger negotiations needed to be shared so that people throughout Canada could more objectively see the broader picture and be encouraged to buy into the process even if their personal experience in inter-Lutheran relationships was negative. How could this be done?

A Journal is Born

Given the situation which I have described and the fact that the Division of Theological Studies had as one of its specific mandates to carry out studies aimed at addressing the issues of disunity among Lutherans, it was clear that the Division needed to issue a theological journal. It would need to be a journal which would go out to interested laity as well as to all Lutheran pastors throughout Canada. For various reasons, the journal did not get off the ground until I had been in my new position for three years. But in its meeting in November 1974, the Division of Theological Studies authorized the publication of a small quarterly for a trial

period of one year. The first issue of the journal appeared, dated January 1975.

A major concern which many of us had was that such a journal would not be affordable. The Lutheran Council was experiencing financial difficulties and the Division of Theological Studies had very limited funds in its budget to cover such a venture. This fear was ill-founded. Limited advertising revenues were located. Voluntary subscriptions of \$5.00 were received. The type-setting was done at minimal cost by *The Shepherd*, the publication of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Canada. The layout and paste-up were done in-house, largely by myself and my secretary.

Another important question which we had to face was whether the journal should be restricted to sharing results from the Division of Theological Studies or whether it should be a broader vehicle for sharing study results from all Divisions of the Lutheran Council. The Division of Theological Studies was the only Division which continued to meet as a committee until the structure and function of the Council was drastically changed following the merger which produced the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada (ELCIC). It was therefore felt that the journal should be restricted to the concerns of the Division of Theological Studies and the Joint Commission on Inter-Lutheran Relationships.

The name chosen for the 32 page journal was *Consensus*. As the introductory page indicated, the name did not imply that "everything in the Journal will receive unanimous approval of every Lutheran in Canada". Rather, it was intended to provide a place where Canadian Lutherans could "struggle with the implications of the Gospel for the mission of our church in Canada". "In such a struggle," I as editor wrote, "there is value in dialogue between varying points of view and differing emphases which come out of a common commitment to the Scriptures and loyalty to the Lutheran Confessions."

The First Issue

The contents of the first issue of *Consensus* provide a window on what was occurring in inter-Lutheran relationships at the time.

The lead article in the first issue was a paper which had been presented to a meeting of the Division of Theological Studies Committee by

Dr. Adrian Leske of Concordia College in Edmonton (now Concordia University College of Alberta) on "New Testament Directions for Future Ministry". Leske was one of the members of the Division Committee and this paper was presented as part of the Division's mandate to study issues which tended to divide Lutherans. Thus, while the article does not address head-on the issue of "women in the pastoral office" which would later de-rail the three-way merger talks, it does get into the topic of "the ministry of women". It is an attempt to get at the question exegetically.

The lead article was followed by one entitled, "Focus on a Forum, A Resume From a Forum on Lutheran Unity". The seven jurisdictional conventions during the spring of 1974 provided the opportunity to give the broadest possible exposure to the merger discussions. I attended every one of these conventions and every one of these conventions had a forum on Lutheran unity at which two participants from each of the three Lutheran bodies presented their viewpoints and was available to answer questions. Participating in the Forum highlighted in the January 1975 issue of *Consensus* were the three Canadian church presidents: S. T. Jacobson, Evangelical Lutheran Church of Canada, the late Otto Olson, Lutheran Church of America – Canada Section and Louis Scholl, Lutheran Church – Canada, as well as Al Stanfel (Ontario District, LCC, president), Otto Reble (Eastern Canada Synod, LCA-CS, president), and Bill Riekert (an ELCC pastor from Ottawa). The article was based on the tape-recorded comments of the six participants, as well as questions from the floor dealing with finances, the place of the laity, the reason for union, and finally, a statement of encouragement from someone who had been in Australia when church merger among Lutherans had occurred there.

The third item was entitled "JCILR Documentation". In an attempt to "solve" the problem areas which some held to be divisive among Lutherans in Canada, the Joint Commission on Inter-Lutheran Relationships had appointed a Theological Committee to draft theses on such topics which could then be discussed and possibly adopted by the commission as a whole. The committee, made up of Leon Gilbertson (ELCC), Robert Jacobson (LCA-CS) and Walter Ritter (LCC), had drafted such theses on ecumenical relationships and on the mission of the church which had been adopted by the commission and these were shared through the pages of *Consensus* as Theses on Inter-Church Relations and Theses on the Mission of the Church.

The fourth item was Part I of a "Special Report on Lutheran Unity and Union in Canada". A questionnaire, drawn up by the Steering Committee of the JCILR, was distributed to all of the delegates at the seven jurisdictional conventions. Approximately 1,100 questionnaires were ultimately returned and this special report attempts to analyze the results. Profiles were graphed as to jurisdictional units, age, and geographic distribution. A summary analysis indicated that a majority of Lutherans (82%) favoured union of the churches while a very small number (less than 2%) opposed union. The bulk of those who had mixed feelings about or were opposed to union were in the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod which had never actually participated in a merger and had a short history of involvement in cooperative Lutheran activities. Parts 2 and 3 of the "Special Report", which appeared in subsequent issues of *Consensus*, analyzed the questionnaires as to the perception of the constituency regarding areas of tension and how serious these areas were perceived to be.

Finally, the first issue of *Consensus* reviewed two recent Canadian books. One of them "Prospect and Promise of Lutheran Unity in Canada" by Walter Freitag, professor at Lutheran Theological Seminary in Saskatoon, dealt with the Lutheran union movement in Canada.

Assessment

Except for a couple of negative letters, the first issue of *Consensus* seemed to have been well received. As I look back to that shoe-string operation undertaken without any experience and without any of our modern computer equipment, I am somewhat amazed. The first issues were obviously not of the print quality that they are today. We were faced with severe financial stringencies but we felt a need for the journal and we did what we had to in order to achieve that. I applaud the seminaries of the ELCIC for continuing the journal after the Division of Theological Studies (by then the Division of Theology) of the Lutheran Council in Canada ceased to exist in 1985.

Much has changed over the past twenty-five years. Where there were three churches, two of which were regional units of larger North American Churches, now there are two churches, both of them indigenous to Canada. Theologically and ecumenically, the two churches have greater difference in viewpoint today than the three churches had then. The

publishing of *Consensus* to provide an outlet for information about the merger discussions and for the studies undertaken by the Division of Theological Studies responded to a felt need at the time. As such, the early issues provide a window for observing the focus of Lutherans in the 1970s.