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The Institute for Christian Ethics: The Social Engagement of Lutherans in Society

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Seeing Who We Are and Who We Might Become

At a conference in October 1988 organized by the Institute for Christian Studies in Toronto, *The Churches and Canadian Culture*, I had the privilege of presenting a paper, *The Lutheran Witness in Canadian Society*, in which I reflected on how Canadian Lutherans had had an impact on Canadian culture. It was a presentation that I had given before and was continually in the process of refining. Following my presentation, a history professor from Queens University spoke with me and said that he was very interested in my paper since it offered a new perspective for him. He went on to say that he had always considered Lutherans to be a "rump group" in Canada. His view was that the progressive forces of Lutheranism had all sided with the revolutionary forces in 1775 or remained in Europe, and it was only the more conservative, less imaginative, and more ethnically focused Lutherans who came to Canada.

Initially, I was highly offended as I am sure any Canadian Lutheran might well be! It is not a view that I shared. But upon more sober reflection, I came to think it is a perception of Lutherans in Canada that needs to be taken seriously. Dr. William Hordern made a very similar observation:

When we turn to the Canadian scene we find that the Lutheran tradition has had very little influence upon the building of a Canadian ethos...Canadian Lutherans have tended to remain inward looking. Lutheran churches have been constructed to "serve their own", often with worship in languages other than English and French. They have been slow to an outreach into the total community. Taken as a percentage of the population, Lutherans have been under-represented among politicians and elected officials.¹

Admittedly, Dr. Hordern was using this observation as an argument in support of Lutherans playing more of a public role and in support of the development of an independent Canadian Lutheran Church. While not a particularly flattering historical portrayal of Lutherans, such observations provide an important reminder of how Christians from other denominations and from beyond the community of faith are evaluating Canadian Lutherans in their ministry. As well, it was the argument for a more effective mission and voice in addressing the Canadian context that pressed many Lutherans toward an indigenous Lutheran Church in Canada. Even more importantly, it served as a challenge to who we might become.

Hopes For Strengthening the Lutheran Public Witness

Beginning in 1978, Lutherans in Canada began a discussion that led to the formation of the Evangelical Lutheran Church In Canada. Central to the debate about this chapter of the merger history in Canada was the promise of a more effective public witness in Canada. Much of the debate that led to the eventual formation of the Evangelical Lutheran Church In Canada (ELCIC) was caught up in the effort to address issues facing Canadians from the perspective of a Canadian Lutheran Church that could be a full partner in the national discussion about the future of this nation. Both the predecessor churches, the Lutheran Church in America–Canada Section and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Canada, believed this was an important and essential part of the proposed new denomination. This commitment came from years of inter-Lutheran collaboration in addressing basic human needs.

For example, following the war, the Canadian Lutheran Commission for War Services received word on the very desperate situation facing people in Europe. Following an invitation from the Canadian Department of War Services, Lutherans met in Ottawa to consider what relief could be provided. In 1946 Canadian Lutheran World Relief was established to assist in delivering emergency relief to a devastated Europe and to aid in resettling refugees from Europe.²

During the 1950s and 1960s, based upon the experiences during World War II in collectively providing Lutheran chaplains for the military and resettlement work with displaced

persons in Europe following the war, there was an increased awareness among Lutherans of the domestic needs for social welfare. Through the Canadian Lutheran Council a committee was struck to consider what role the Council could play on behalf of the member churches. It was observed that many social welfare needs were being filled "... largely by individual pastors who were much concerned but usually cannot give the time and effort necessary for an adequate program".³ Following a survey of the needs, the report called for congregational welfare committees, annual workshops at the regional level, provincial Lutheran Welfare Councils and a Lutheran Welfare Council of Canada.⁴

From these experiences, the Lutheran community in Canada matured to become more socially and politically engaged. By 1986, the two merging churches had three national staff people working on issues of social justice. There was shared staff in a number of the then LCA-Canada Section synods, the Eastern Canada Synod's Office for Public Policy and Governmental Affairs (OPPGA) in Toronto, and serious discussions were beginning on the possibility of establishing a national Lutheran Governmental Affairs Office in Ottawa similar to the Washington based Lutheran Office for Governmental Affairs. During the 1960s Lutherans participated in the establishment of the major ecumenical coalitions. Involvement in these ecumenical projects was an effective means for addressing broader social questions in addition to being an expression of the visible unity of the church. In addition, there was developed a whole body of social teaching that included some thirty-two major social statements in addition to countless resolutions at church conventions and hundreds of letters and exchanges with government on a wide range of issues.⁵

As the Lutheran community began discussions about a possible reconfiguration of the two Lutheran denominations to form the Evangelical Lutheran Church In Canada, one of the crucial hopes was to strengthen the witness of the Lutheran community in Canada. No longer were Lutherans merely a rump ethnic group that was inward looking. This was to be a church that could participate in shaping the future of Canada. Vincent Eriksson, a history professor at then Camrose Lutheran College, expressed this hope as a rationale for an indigenous Canadian Lutheran church at a consultation on the

Canadian Lutheran identity convened by the Lutheran Council in Canada in Edmonton in 1976. Professor Eriksson argued, "Looking again at the question of an indigenous Canadian Lutheran Church, we might ask about the necessity of such a church under the heading of what it would do. Basically, we would hope to create a church (or let God create it among us) which is able to recognize and speak to the problems of the country where it is located."⁶

Clearly, a major part of the dream for the new church was to strengthen the church's social service, public witness, and participation in Canadian society. In addressing the former ELCC convention in 1979, Lutheran theologian and then Vice-President of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Canada (ELCC), Dr. Roger Nostbakken recognized that the church cannot isolate itself from its social context. He said,

The day is over when the pastor can go about his holy business and not be a functioning part of the community in which s/he lives. The church does not stand over and against the world, it is in the world, a part of it—as Christians we share the life of communities in which we live. As Christians we are not intrinsically smarter, or better, or more righteous than others. We share the same kinds of problems and personal ambiguities as everyone else. The difference is that the Christians face life with a different perspective and a different set of loyalties. That perspective and those loyalties are bound up in the belief in and commitment to serve Jesus Christ. But this is a view of life and an orientation to be expressed in this world. It is not a style of life to be lived in isolation from others.⁷

Dr. Nostbakken's observations summarized the prevailing hope for the new Evangelical Lutheran Church In Canada. Interestingly, shortly after this convention, in a survey of some 2000 Canadian Lutherans, 56.1 percent of the laity and 78.5 percent of the clergy responding to the survey, felt the church should be involved addressing government on social issues.⁸

This vision of serious social engagement was embodied in the newly formed ELCIC at the national constituting convention in Winnipeg in 1985. The convention adopted the proposed constitution which clearly mandated the new ELCIC to "study issues in contemporary society in the light of the Word of God and respond publicly to social and moral issues as an advocate for justice and as an agent for reconciliation".⁹ The convention went even further in endorsing a *Global Hunger*

and Development Appeal which included advocacy and development education as a key thrust. The convention further supported the ecumenical commitments which have been central to the movement for social justice as an important aspect of the new Lutheran expression in Canada.

The Institute and the Lutheran Office for Public Policy—Two Sides of the Same Coin

It was in this spirit that in 1986, the Institute for Christian Ethics at Waterloo Lutheran Seminary was established. There were a number of converging factors that enabled its creation. The commitment by the Rev. William Huras, Bishop of the Eastern Synod and Dr. Richard Crossman, Principal-Dean of Waterloo Lutheran Seminary was vitally important to the creation of the Institute.

One of the first developments that led to the creation of the Institute was the decision by the Eastern Synod to relocate the Office for Public Policy and Governmental Affairs (OPPGA) from its previous location in Toronto to Kitchener-Waterloo.¹⁰ In 1982, the former Eastern Canada Synod of the LCA-Canada Section had established the OPPGA to assist the church and its members in exercising responsible participation in society and in addressing continuing crucial social questions particularly those related to issues of hunger and poverty.¹¹ The underlying principle of the Office is the Lutheran understanding that God rules in both the spiritual and civil dimensions of life. Therefore it is both important and appropriate that the church and the government relate creatively and responsibly to each other as social institutions to shape our social life. The decision to move the Office to Kitchener-Waterloo was intended to make it more accessible to the Lutheran community.

Following this decision, Dr. Crossman invited the Synod to locate the Office at the seminary. Waterloo Lutheran Seminary was committed to supporting the broader mission of the church in society and to broadening its programs in the formation of pastors and lay people for social ministry. In essence, the Institute for Christian Ethics and the Office for Public Policy and Governmental Affairs were two sides of the same coin. While the OPPGA was engaged in the public witness of the church in society, the Institute was a way to utilize the

resources of the theological community and assist students in understanding how to engage in ethics and social ministry. It is important to emphasize that the Institute and the Lutheran Office for Public Policy are complementary in their role within the public ministry of the Church.

Fundamentally, the Institute was to serve as a centre for ethical reflection. In a time when the world was facing complex ethical questions, it was felt that the Institute might be one place to help the church participate effectively and responsibly in the broader social discussion. At the time Bishop William Huras articulated some of these expectations for the Institute in helping the church through research and reflection on important social questions. "We don't always have the time to do the research... (the Institute) will be a tremendous asset in terms of the research potential it has. It is a tremendous step forward. It will allow an arm of the church to immerse itself in a discussion of social and ethical issues before it makes firm pronouncements one way or the other".¹²

As a centre for ethical reflection in the life of the church, the Institute has a variety of purposes. The Institute has tried to enhance social ministry by:

- helping to articulate the basic biblical and theological principles needed to address current social questions;
- pursuing research and analysis of the social context in which issues were emerging;
- providing a forum for discussion of ethical questions;
- assisting clergy, seminarians, students and lay people in their spiritual formation for social ministry;
- assisting and supporting the wider church in its social ministry;
- being a resource to congregations engaging in social and service ministries;
- working ecumenically to express further the witness of the church catholic.

The Institute was to be a place where the church would be able better to prepare itself for its public work in the world.

On the other side of the coin, the Lutheran Office for Public Policy was to be a vehicle for the public witness by participating in the social discussion on issues of concern in Canada and

the world. As a public ministry of the church, the Lutheran Office is a corporate ministry under the discipline of the church's witness to the Gospel. It is not the result of the efforts of one person or a small group, but is instead guided and directed by the church. As a disciplined ministry, its initiatives are reflective of the collective deliberation of the church. As a representative ministry, it is not the voice of every Lutheran in Canada. Rather the Lutheran Office for Public Policy is a collective voice of the church as expressed through the holy scriptures, the Lutheran tradition, and the teaching of the church as expressed through its social and policy statements. The Institute is a place to prepare for this broader social conversation while the Lutheran Office for Public Policy is the means to participate in this broader social conversation.

The Institute—A Centre for Ethical Reflection

Ethics is fundamentally about discerning the possibilities for the future. Personal ethics involves those individual choices people make about their lives. Social ethics involves the more complex systems and patterns of relationships that shape powerfully the broader social context and ultimately the questions people face. The Institute has tried to focus on the broader enterprise of social ethics. When confronted by the ambiguities of collective life together, social ethics is not just about right and wrong answers but more importantly about uncovering a range of options for action. In this process there are a variety of methods that people use and there are a variety of voices. The Institute has tried to listen creatively in this process and to introduce into the discussion an analysis of the broader social context and a Lutheran theological perspective.

As a centre for ethical deliberation and reflection, the Institute has undertaken a wide range of activities in this effort. It has sponsored a wide spectrum of speakers at the seminary from places like Namibia, South Africa, Nicaragua, El Salvador and various places in Canada. Through the Institute's cable television programming, the perspectives on various issues and regions of the world have been shared with the broader public. Television programs have focused on issues from apartheid to human sexuality, international development, human rights in Latin America and the nature of ecumenism. The Institute has

also published numerous resources such as *Horizons for Justice* which in one volume brings together the social statements of the two predecessor churches and those recently adopted by the Evangelical Lutheran Church In Canada. The Institute has on behalf of the ELCIC also published resources on racism, a paper to describe how the church makes public statements, background papers for convention resolutions, as well as drafted pastoral letters on issues such as the crisis in Central America, the situation facing the recently independent Baltic States, and the Persian Gulf War.

For the past five years, the Institute has coordinated *Challenge for Change—A Social Justice Institute* for people interested in social issues and for people training for social ministry. This event is now sponsored by many denominations and has brought together people from various denominations and the wider community to consider various issues with internationally renowned speakers on such subjects as social policy, the new world order and the environment.

The Institute has also played an important role in helping Waterloo Lutheran Seminary develop a global education program to comply with the Association of Theological Schools' new globalization standard for accreditation. In addition to participating in regular course offerings, the Institute recently developed and offered a course entitled *Mission in the Global Context*. As part of this course students, laity and clergy travelled to Guatemala and El Salvador to share in the life and mission of the church there.

The aim of these programs has been to enrich the church's understanding of the work in which it ministers. More importantly, it endeavors to help the church understand the questions that need to be asked. In creating moments for such deliberation through events, visiting speakers, resources, publications and television programming, the Institute has tried to provoke, creatively and sensitively, a more serious consideration of the social issues facing Christians.

Challenges to a New Church

Clearly, Canadian Lutherans hoped for a more effective and serious engagement of society with the establishment of the Evangelical Lutheran Church In Canada. The Institute for

Christian Ethics was born from that expectation. The great civil rights leader, Dr. Martin Luther King, preaching on Jesus' warning that his disciples should be "as wise as serpents and innocent as doves" (Matthew 10:18), is reported to have said that Christians need to be "hard headed and soft hearted and they dare not confuse the two".¹³ The point was that Christians need to understand the world in which they live. Care and compassion alone are not sufficient to engage in the mission of the church in the world.

With the *cultural disestablishment* of the church in Canada, and with fewer people considering themselves active in church life, Canadian Lutherans will need to earn a place in the social conversation. Canadians no longer look automatically to the churches as a source for moral authority on social questions. Yet at the same time, the churches have a very important perspective and crucial insights to contribute based upon their partnership and solidarity with vulnerable and marginalized people in particular. Noted United Church pastor, teacher and journalist Rod Booth has observed that, "If the central theological problem for the early church was death, for the Reformation guilt, and for the social gospel evil, then surely for industrialized humanity the central theological quest is for meaning".¹⁴

In this social quest for meaning, God extends the gracious perspective of faith. But it remains for those named Christians to be bearers and interpreters of this invitation. For the many people who are cynical and skeptical or disinterested in the church, the degree to which our presentation of the Christian faith addresses the difficult life issues will be an important evangelical moment. The church's witness will not be effective if Christians merely offer answers to questions that no one is asking or ignore the questions altogether. In response to the challenges of this changing world, Lutherans through the formation of the ELCIC sought a more effective vocation in the Canadian context. The Institute and the Lutheran Office for Public Policy seek to serve the church in that vocation struggling with the ambiguities of our collective life, wrestling with God's intentions for the human family, and provoking Canadian society to a more just and hopeful vision for our future.

Notes

- ¹ William Hordern, "The Interrelation and Interaction between Reformation Principles and the Canadian Context," in *In Search of Identity—A Look at Lutheran Identity in Canada*, ed. Norman J. Threinen (Winnipeg: The Lutheran Council in Canada, 1977) 27.
- ² Ibid. 46.
- ³ Ibid. 106.
- ⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵ Many of these social statements are included in a single volume entitled *Horizons for Justice* published by the Institute for Christian Ethics at Waterloo Lutheran Seminary in Waterloo, Ontario.
- ⁶ Vincent E. Eriksson, "Rationale for an Indigenous Lutheran Church in Canada," in *In Search of Identity*, ed. Norman J. Threinen, 45.
- ⁷ Dr. Roger Nostbakken in an unpublished paper which was presented to the national convention of the Evangelical Lutheran Church In Canada, 1979.
- ⁸ *Profiles of Lutherans—1980*, H3. This was a survey sponsored by Lutheran Life Insurance Society of Canada. Interestingly, in reporting the results the writers choose to express the results not in terms of a majority opinion but rather that about one-third of the clergy and only half of the laity opposed the church being involved in addressing government.
- ⁹ "Called to be One," Minutes of the Constituting Convention, The Evangelical Lutheran Church In Canada, May 16–19, 1985, Winnipeg, MB, 72. (ELCIC Constitution Article IV Section f.)
- ¹⁰ More recently the Office for Public Policy and Governmental Affairs has been referred to as the Lutheran Office for Public Policy in order that it be more easily recognized by government officials and other organizations.
- ¹¹ The decision to maintain the OPPGA was reaffirmed at the constituting convention of the new Eastern Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church In Canada, in London, Ontario in 1986.
- ¹² John Asling, "A Forward Step," *Kitchener-Waterloo Record*, November 8, 1986, B5.
- ¹³ This was included in a sermon study in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.
- ¹⁴ Rodney M. Booth, *The Winds of God* (Geneva: The World Council of Churches, 1983) 87.