

Consensus

Volume 22

Issue 1 *Canadian Lutherans and Social Justice:
Sampling of a Heritage*

Article 6

5-1-1996

Toward Future Ministry in Canada

Julianna Wehrfritz-Hanson

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus>

Recommended Citation

Wehrfritz-Hanson, Julianna (1996) "Toward Future Ministry in Canada," *Consensus*: Vol. 22 : Iss. 1 , Article 6.
Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol22/iss1/6>

This Studies and Observations is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Commons @ Laurier. It has been accepted for inclusion in Consensus by an authorized editor of Scholars Commons @ Laurier. For more information, please contact scholarscommons@wlu.ca.

Toward Future Ministry in Canada

Julianna Wehrfritz-Hanson

*Pastor, Shepherd of the Hills Lutheran Church,
Calgary, Alberta*

These days life in the church may feel as if it is getting up and heading in all directions at once, or else not getting up or heading anywhere at all. It is becoming apparent to most people that the church is facing major crises; some are even forecasting its demise. There are increasing demands for programs and services with decreasing numbers and resources.

The church in Canada faces an urgent task of attempting to meet an uncertain future in a rapidly changing world. Loren Mead has pointed out in his book, *The Once and Future Church*, that the mission of the church is on our doorstep and the very survival of the church depends upon its struggle to discover the means whereby that mission can be accomplished and setting the goals to do it.

Yet the possible future of ministry and the form that the church may take are determined by projecting the consequences of present trends—which may change abruptly or disappear, or new factors may radically alter the course of history. Nevertheless, the church is compelled to look forward, in so far as is possible, and try to prepare itself and its ministers to serve effectively in the future.

Loren Mead makes a good point about what is needed to make the paradigm shift of mission in this age: "Churches must learn to encourage innovation and even fund it, rather than handicap and punish it."¹ A fundamental requirement is an attitude of openness and support that is willing to take risks to try various things, as well as allowing others the grace and freedom to experiment with innovative ideas and programs. Yet this attitude is not sufficient by itself, but needs to be supplemented with input from those who are keenly aware and

sensitive to the dynamics and needs of persons as well as the societal trends around them. Even as the church tries new things and analyses the situation to understand what is needed, it must continue to maintain a clear sense of what its mission is and of the message that is at the heart of the Christian faith. Furthermore, the role of ministry and leadership within the church calls for continuing reconsideration in light of these factors in addition to defining the priorities and the use of power that govern decision-making at all levels of its life.

In considering the conditions of the present with an eye toward the future, and the needs of ministry to meet it, there are many things in transition which are connected in various ways. However, from my own perspective I can identify several major threads in the tapestry of the present which seem to be of considerable importance, and which challenge us to deal with them in our life as church.

The culture has changed dramatically since the advent of television and the development of the recording industry. One of the dramatic changes accompanying this technology has been a shift in popular music since the 1950s, significantly affecting the young and the baby-boomer generation that is now entering middle-age. Upon asking a number of younger adults about what needs to be changed in the church to make it more inviting for their peers and themselves, the overwhelming answer has been that more modern and upbeat music would be helpful. The middle-aged and younger generations are at home with the sounds of guitars, drums, and electronic keyboards. New hymns and new liturgies that utilize these as well as various other musical instruments are desired. However, not only is new and varied music necessary, but also services with new words and motifs. The youth in particular complain of boredom in the weekly repetition of the same order of worship, including both the music and the words. There are many images and powerful expressions of worship in the scriptures that could be utilized. Liturgies could be developed around different major themes, for example, the various emphases connected with the words of institution, or images from the parables could be included in the words of the liturgy. The church is more likely to be able to maintain the flow and the form of a sung liturgy if it provides a greater variety and style that meet the younger folk at their level of experience and circumstance, so

that the sound of the music is familiar and inviting, and the variety of images and emphases in the liturgies broaden their repertoire and hopefully their experience of worship, in addition to keeping their interest. At this time in the church's life the particular gifts and contributions of creative writers, poets, musicians and liturgists are necessary.

Another factor that has impacted significantly upon the spiritual state of Canadian culture has been the mobility of the population, coupled with an elevated number of marriage breakdowns resulting in a high rate of single-parent families. Many people are looking for a caring friend, someone who will be dependable and compassionate. The transient relationships experienced by many have made it difficult for them to trust; consequently, they maintain relationships only at a superficial level. Uncertainty and fear have crept into the relationships of a substantial number of families. Some young teenagers living with a natural parent in a common-law relationship, say they feel that their parent doesn't, or can't really listen to them or give them the care that they are seeking because that parent fears that she or he may offend the common-law spouse and lose them. This is coupled with the fact that the youngster may not like the new adult living in the house and resent that person and resist accepting anything they may say in relation to the youngsters. As well, there are the problems of addiction and abuse in some homes and the attendant problems of dysfunctional interactions. Those in the teaching profession state that there are an increasing number of students coming through the school system who have severe problems of various sorts that require more attention and care than they can give. There are major problems in many families and one wonders what will happen to these troubled people and to the society in the future.

In the midst of all this instability and fragility of relationships there is considerable anxiety, lack of freedom, and a sense of being of little worth. How do we bring the word of God's great love to these who need it so desperately? Surely a caring, patient ministry and dependable presence are needed. Not only is it vital that such ministry be encouraged and continued by the clergy, but also that we continue to aid and challenge our members to grow in their ability and commitment to being good neighbours and friends to those in great need around them.

The foundation which can best supply the basis for this kind of ministry and community is a desire and pursuit of greater maturity in the faith including greater knowledge, insight, and devotion to God. At this time in our society it appears that there is a recognition of the need for "spirituality". As persons inquire into what our church believes and the nature of our "spirituality", will the richness of our tradition be made accessible and apparent to them by those who belong to the church? For the sake of our neighbours, our society and the church itself, it becomes increasingly important that church leaders and members be not only informed and knowledgeable about the faith, but also have the experience of faithfulness as ones who have responded to grace and have striven to live it out in all areas of their lives. The church shall be better equipped to do its ministry by cultivating the exercise of prayer, confession, reflection upon the word and one's own life, and by the sharing of who we are and the resources that we have been given—especially those who have been called to shepherd the flock. In preparing candidates for the ordained and diaconal ministry an intentional study of the history and practice of the area presently called "Christian spirituality", and the encouragement to develop some of these skills and attitudes, would be an asset for the future, providing them with resources that are, in fact, already needed now.

While there is need for a more intentional consideration and practice of "Christian spirituality", it will also be increasingly necessary to be able to communicate the basics of the faith to those who have no knowledge about it at all. Since a significant number of people have grown up or are growing up outside the church there will have to be some means of gently introducing them to the stories, teachings, and practices of the Christian community when they are drawn into the church's life and worship. Perhaps our church will find it helpful to pursue a similar course as has been taken by other churches in the world who have equipped and sent forth "lay catechists" or "Bible women" (or men) to provide basic instruction about the Bible and the Christian faith. Preparation of such personnel will affect the work and curriculum of Bible schools, colleges, and seminaries.

The future well may pull the work and the mission of the church in two quite different directions: on the one hand the

cultivation of greater knowledge, depth and maturity among the faithful; on the other the provision of very simple and basic instruction or guidance to those who are beginning the journey of discipleship or who are inquiring about the church and its beliefs.

Canadian society, like the rest of the western world, is at a juncture of change having come through a period of emphasis on "development" and "progress". Life has been measured by a materialistic measuring stick, where the acquisition of goods and the pursuit of pleasure and comfort have been presented as the chief purposes of life. Though society continues with these preoccupations Canadians are having to adjust to increasing unemployment and a decreasing standard of living as well as increasing concern over the environment and the damage caused by consumer practices and industry. Unless the political climate changes in Canada the erosion of the social programs will continue as taxes climb.

Further exacerbating the situation is the climate of insecurity and uncertainty. Many citizens are uncertain about what to train for or pursue in order to find employment. No longer is there the assurance that if one attains the proper credentials, and is an honest and industrious worker, one will be able to get a job or keep it. Children are staying in their parental homes longer because of the difficulties of finding and keeping employment and because the cost of living independently is so high. Some middle-aged and elderly people are concerned about how they will live if government pension funds are bankrupted before or during their retirement. All these factors erode the sense of confidence and self-worth and are disorienting, so that initiative, the sense of meaning and of place within the society are undermined. Perhaps in light of these pressures people will be forced to begin to depend upon one another more than they have, and there may be a shift toward the importance of relationships and away from emphasis upon things. Uncertainty about the future creates an increasing need for the word of hope and support which is so inherent in the message of the gospel.

That same gospel challenges us in our society where the gap between the poor and the rich is widening and where the poor are finding less and less support or assistance from the community. The church may once again find itself trying to

provide the support for the little ones and to a greater degree having to speak out on their behalf. Already the churches are major supporters and organizers of food banks, soup kitchens, and second-hand clothing shops. We have grown accustomed to the government handling most of the charitable work in the nation. If institutions and programs of aid were to be organized and sustained by church bodies, it would make sense that these services be operated in a manner consistent with the spirit and beliefs of the church. Thus, there would be an increasing need for deaconesses, deacons and theologically trained lay professionals to administer these ministries of the church's life.

Related to the social structure of our society is the issue of feminism which has already had significant impact on western culture and will continue to do so into the future. As women more fully participate in most areas of the life our nation, women clergy and women lay leadership will have a vital place in the church's future. It will become increasingly important that women fully participate in all areas of the church's life, so that the church will have the needed perspective of women as well as men in its celebrations, and in pursuit of its mission. How will women in positions of leadership in the world, or in the institutions that employ them, take the church seriously if the church hasn't provided for capable female leadership?

Furthermore, the feminine and the feminist points of view are significant to the major struggles in which the church and the society are engaged, including issues around the relationships between women and men, and those that arise as women enter positions of authority not accorded them before. Other concerns that call for a feminist and feminine perspective include those around issues of employment, justice, violence, militarism, and the dynamics of power, as well as those concerning the more intimate ones related to family, singleness, and spirituality. The future of the church includes a necessary place for women in all areas of its life, calling forth and utilizing their full contributions in the development of educational materials and seminary and college courses, as well as a greater participation as faculty.

Another area that will affect the life, mission, and the theology of the church in the future is ecumenism. As the main-line churches shrink in size and resources they can no longer

afford the divisions among themselves. For the sake of the mission and ministry of the church the differences and difficulties among the churches need to be resolved; cooperation is necessary and to be sought where possible. The significant definitions, clarifications, and understandings that have come out of the ecumenical conversations and the work of the World Council of Churches over the past decades could be more helpful in the fostering of understanding and further growth in cooperation if they were gathered into a more concise form that made them more accessible to clergy, seminarians, and congregations. However, even if such a document isn't forthcoming in the near future it would be useful to have a course offered at the seminary about this area and the theological discussions that are part of the ongoing dialogues among the churches.

The ongoing work to bring reconciliation among the various denominations is essential in order that the church may present a more credible witness to the gospel which the Christian bodies claim as basic to their existence. The brokenness of the Christian church, especially here in Canada and the United States, is a scandal. Furthermore, the duplication of efforts, and the competition between the churches is poor stewardship in a time of shrinking resources and increasing needs and opportunities.

In a society which is becoming more pluralistic, the church and its members will increasingly have to deal with the differences of belief, practice, and perspective that are associated with a variety of non-Christian religions. While we grow in knowledge of and appreciation for our Christian faith, our members will be in relationships with persons of other faiths; how shall they react and interact with them? No doubt these dynamics raise issues and new challenges for the church. Church members and clergy are looking for helpful teaching resources to gain understanding into these faiths and cultures.

Another quite different yet significant factor that is affecting our society is the computer. Human lives and the life of the planet are being revolutionized by this technology, and for most people the form of culture and lifestyle that will result is still uncertain. It certainly will be wise for the church to try to keep informed about the issues and the impact that the computer age will generate.

Other areas of change could be and shall need to be included in the ongoing consideration of the mission and ministry of the church as it attempts to engage the present for its own sake as well as for the sake of the future. Effective preparation will include consideration of attitudes, dreams and possibilities, willingness to step out in faith to take calculated risks, and allowing room to explore innovative and experimental programs. Likely this will have an influence upon how decisions are made and how the church decides which courses to pursue and which to alter, and how to set-up structures and support systems that will encourage and care for those ministries which are creative and on the cutting edge of the society and the church.

During a time of change or upheaval, the tasks and adaptations that appear to be called for may seem overwhelming. Yet from within the Christian tradition the church and its members have access to some perspectives that can provide needed confidence and hope. The church is Christ's body and the ministry ultimately is God's work designed to fulfill the divine purposes which include new life not only for the people of God but for the creation as well. In faith we trust that the Triune God will provide what is needed and will help the church to make the changes that are required for it to meet the future and be able to minister in that time and reality.

Notes

- ¹ Loren B. Mead, *The Once and Future Church: Reinventing the Congregation for a New Mission Frontier* (Washington, DC: Alban Institute, 1991) 73.