11-1-1987

Pivotal points in early Canadian church history

Norman J. Threinen

Pivotal Points in Early
Canadian Church History

Norman J. Threinen

Associate Professor of Historical Theology
Concordia Lutheran Seminary, Edmonton

In a book on Canada between 1939–1957. entitled *The Forked Road*, Donald Creighton says that "in the eighteen years from 1939 to 1957, Canada made a number of crucial decisions about its direction. It chose one fork of the road to the future; and the Canada we inhabit today is, for both good and ill, very largely the result of that decisive choice."[1] In this paper, the term Pivotal Points will be used in the sense that Creighton uses the expression Forked Road. that is, as points where decisions were made which had considerable significance for the future of the church in Canada.

How does one identify pivotal points in the history of the church in Canada? One of the problems in looking at church history in Canada as a whole is that there is an unevenness about it. Not all churches experience the same turning point at the same time. Furthermore, since there is not the separation of Church and State which is the hallmark of the United States church scene, the churches which are tied into the dominant culture of Britain have a different experience than those which are not. For this reason, I will take the Lutheran church in Canada, with which I am most familiar, and look at the pivotal points in it against the background of similar events within other Canadian churches, as well as against the background of the social and political history of the country.

To pick turning points in the history of the church has a degree of arbitrariness about it. Depending on one's particular interest, there are a variety of forks in the road which one might detect. There is also the question, how deliberative does a particular choice have to be or might a choice be made instinctively or even be thrust upon one? For the purposes

of this presentation, three pivotal points in the history of the Canadian church have been identified. One focuses on the issue of established religion or multi-denominationalism. The second focuses on the issue of Canadianization, limited however to the period around Confederation. The third focuses on the issue of ecumenism, particularly as it was called for in the crucible of service during World War II and its aftermath.

I

The first pivotal point for Lutheranism in Canada occurred at a time when Lutherans first appeared on the scene in Canada to take up permanent residence. The year was 1749. The place was Halifax, the new fort which the English had established in Nova Scotia to enable them to keep a military eye on the French fortress of Louisburg. To counteract the presence of the Acadian French Catholic population, the English had also decided to settle Nova Scotia with British subjects or with people who would gladly become such. Among the latter were a sizable number of German Lutheran families, some of whom settled permanently in Halifax itself but most of whom eventually found their way to the nearby settlement of Lunenburg. The major issue for these German Lutherans, who had come to Canada as this country was beginning to embark on the course which we know today, was: Should they expect the church in Canada to be supported by revenues collected by the government? Should the clergy be given a salary by the government? And, because the English church establishment was Anglican, should the Lutherans become Anglican?

The view of the British government officials and of the Anglican church establishment was that indeed Lutherans should abandon their own faith and become Anglican. While the British authorities did not absolutely oppose non-Anglican religious development among the foreign Protestant population, their policy was to seek to win all divergent elements of the population in Nova Scotia "to the obedience of the Church of England".[2] Perhaps because of their desire to cling to the German language but perhaps also because they valued their Lutheran heritage, these Lutherans in Nova Scotia

opted to establish their own distinctively Lutheran congregation. With the precedent of a royal charter which gave non-Anglican Protestants in London the right to worship in their own languages and according to their own customs as far back as 1550,[3] the colonial government could hardly deny them the privilege. Indeed the governors had been directed to permit liberty of conscience to all persons "so they be contented with a quiet and peaceable enjoyment of the same, not giving offense or scandal to the government".[4]

The establishment of a Lutheran congregation did not, however, assure that the religious future of these early Canadian Lutherans was secure. There were still significant problems which faced them. One of them was the fact that, in the minds of almost everyone, being English meant being Anglican, at least in some sense. The governors were directed to provide glebe lands for the Church of England and to insist on the reading of the Book of Prayer "as by law established".[5] A problem, therefore, arose when it came to the matter of pastoral supply for the fledgling congregation.

At first, no German Lutheran pastor could be found who could or would serve these Lutherans. But when a German Lutheran pastor by the name of Burger finally did arrive, he was prevented initially from functioning fully as a minister. One of the things which he was not permitted to do was to officiate at the Lord's Supper; he was reduced to tutoring the local Anglican priest in German so that the latter could conduct the communion services. In order that he might be able to function fully as a minister of his congregation he soon made his way to England to receive Anglican orders. An important fringe benefit was that he was promised also the financial support of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel. Before he could return to Halifax, he mysteriously disappeared. It is difficult to imagine that the course which the congregation later took would have been different if he had come back. For a number of years the congregation continued to hold on to its Lutheran identity with schoolmasters in charge of confirmation classes and reading services. However, since all of the official acts and the communion services were conducted by the neighboring Anglican priest. it is not surprising that the congregation eventually became Anglican.

The congregation which had developed in Lunenburg fared somewhat better because the number of Germans was larger.

As had been the case with the congregation in Halifax, the Lutherans in Lunenburg opted to follow the pattern which they had experienced in Germany. This was to have the government provide and pay for their pastor. The government, in turn, was quite prepared to provide funds for such a pastor. Yet, because of the involvement of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, the Lutheran pastors who came to the settlement also soon made their way to London to be ordained Anglican, if they had not already taken this step before their arrival. In 1772, however, the first Lutheran pastor who did not follow this pattern arrived from New York. Whether by coincidence or not, his arrival marked the beginning of an arrangement whereby the congregation committed itself to provide financially for its own pastor.

When the United Empire Loyalists arrived after the American Revolution, the situation was both very similar and quite different. The Lutheran congregations which developed on the St. Lawrence did not, apparently, have the same expectations that their clergy would be provided by the government and supported financially from public monies. However, its experiences with the rebellious colonies convinced the imperial government in London that only the Church of England would ensure loyalty to Britain within the remnant of the empire in North America. Thus, while still not denying toleration to dissenters, the government's fixed policy after 1785 was to promote Anglicanism as the surest antidote to those democratic tendencies which had led to the American Revolution. This fact, along with the extreme scarcity of Anglican clergy for Upper Canada, prompted considerable pressure to be exerted on Lutheran pastors who found their way into the Loyalist colonies to turn Anglican. In inflationary times they were particularly vulnerable and at one point two successive Lutheran pastors succumbed to the temptation of a more secure salary which the Anglican fold could provide.

The struggle of the Lutherans to retain their identity under considerable pressure must, of course, not be divorced from the general religious conditions in early Canada. The realities of the situation were such that, in spite of the claim of the Anglican church that it was legally the established church of Canada, it was woefully unprepared to provide spiritually for the Protestant population in the colonies of Upper and Lower Canada.

There was initially only one clergyman to serve the entire 600-mile long line of settlements which extended along the banks of the St. Lawrence and down into the Niagara Peninsula, and he was simultaneously the missionary to the Six Nations Indians. Not only were their numbers very small, but those who came were often completely unsuited to serve on the frontier; the second missionary sent by the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel came directly from England but his unsociable character and eccentric manners—he bathed daily—soon led his flock and his fellow clergy to wish he had stayed in Britain.

To the inadequacy of Anglican spiritual care must be added the fact that most of the Loyalists had religious affiliations in Protestant denominations other than Anglican—one report showed only eleven Anglican communicants in a particular settlement of more than 1500 souls. Given, particularly, the scarcity of Anglican clergy to support Anglican claims of spiritual jurisdiction, it did not take long for a highly efficient and flexible Methodist circuit organization to make extensive inroads into these settlements. Indeed, Lutherans who found their pastors being picked off by the Anglicans also found their members being drawn into the fold of the Methodists. A major factor in the latter phenomenon was the fact that German Methodists had settled in close proximity to the German Lutherans, the former originating from Ireland where their ancestors had been won from Lutheranism to Methodism.

In general, then, the pattern which very early began to emerge was one of religious pluralism. This can be seen, for example, by the fact that the Marriage Act, which had earlier limited to Anglican clergy the right to perform marriages, was amended in 1798 to extend this authority to Lutherans and Calvinists; Methodists were excluded because they were American and did not meet the theological requirements. Then, after the War of 1812, the Church of Scotland pressed its claim to be coestablished in the empire and therefore entitled to share in the Clergy Reserves, a claim to which significant concessions were ultimately made.

One cannot here trace the struggle between the Anglican pro-establishment people headed up by the Archdeacon of York. John Strachan and the Methodist anti-establishment people exemplified by Egerton Ryerson, but one must recognize that it was going on in the background as the Lutheran

church wrestled with the question of its relationship with the established church and with the state. Today, of course, all churches look to their own members for the financial support needed to run their own programs, and Lutherans are part of the religious mosaic of the country.

II

The second pivotal point for Lutheranism in Canada occurred around the time of the formal founding of our nation. This is not to say that Lutherans viewed Confederation as that great event; I have yet to read a contemporary statement by any Lutheran leader which commented one way or another on what was occurring politically in 1867. However, the effect of Confederation on the way in which the Lutheran church viewed itself and the most effective way in which it could do its work is unmistakable. In other words, a major issue for Lutherans around 1867 was, in a preliminary but nevertheless significant way: Should we regard ourselves as a Canadian church? What does it mean to be a Canadian church? Do we have a mission to carry out which is distinctive from that carried out by the mother church in the United States? That church leaders would not have worded the issue in this way does not change anything.

Initially, of course, the Lutheran congregations which developed in the Loyalist settlements on the St. Lawrence, in Markham and Vaughan Townships north of Toronto, and in numerous other locations throughout Upper Canada, constituted a distinctively Canadian Lutheran church presence, because formal ties between these congregations and the emerging Lutheran bodies in the United States were non-existent. Lutheran pastors who had come to serve these congregations, even where they had been licensed by and had become members of these Lutheran bodies, functioned by necessity of circumstances and probably also by choice, totally independently of any broader Lutheran body; they were rugged individualists who saw themselves answerable to no one except themselves and their Canadian congregations.

This arrangement in which pastors and congregations were independent of any larger body of Lutherans proved very unsatisfactory for the congregations involved. Every time a congregation had a pastoral vacancy, it faced a crisis; where was it

to get a successor? It was not unusual for a particular congregation to be without a resident Lutheran pastor for a decade at a time. The independent, lone-ranger attitude of these frontier pastors seems to have precluded any attempts to form a Lutheran body which was indigenous on the Canadian scene. Part of the problem seems to be that a vision was lacking for the training of a ministry which came out of the Canadian population. In the United States this had occurred for some time, initially following a tutorial approach and by this time through the founding of a seminary. Instead of attempting to establish some system of pastoral training in Canada, one soon finds that congregations began to look for pastoral supply to the Lutheran bodies which had begun to develop in the United States. And, on their side, Lutheran bodies in the United States began to see Canada as an extension of their field of responsibility.

By the mid-1850s the Pittsburgh Synod and the New York Ministerium, in particular, had become involved actively in sending missionaries to Canada and organizing new congregations. Such was the extent of the Pittsburgh Synod's activity that by 1853 it could organize its work in Canada into a Canada Conference. This development gave further impetus to the work so that in 1860 the Canada Conference requested that it be granted permission to become a separate synod in Canada. The following year, when it had been given permission from the Pittsburgh Synod to take this step, the new Lutheran body—the first for Canada–unanimously affirmed the reason why this step was felt to be necessary when it said, "The need of a distinct and independent Synod has long been expressed by members of this Conference as a general and urgent necessity *for the furtherance and spread of the Lutheran Church in our province of Canada*".[6]

The Missouri Synod, which by this time had made contact with Lutheran congregations in the Niagara Peninsula and had also become involved more widely within the province in the organization of scattered Lutherans, faced the same question and came to a similar conclusion. Adam Ernst, the father of the Ontario District of the Missouri Synod, wrote in the church paper which he edited, "We are a geographical unit which has no easy access to fellow-congregations in the neighboring States of New York, Pennsylvania or Michigan, due to the necessity of

crossing the international border—these circumstances cause
us to contemplate and urge the organization of a District in
Canada".[7]

He re-iterated these sentiments in his impromptu speech
after he was elected president at the founding convention of
the Canada District in 1879. "We in Canada are confronted
with many conditions that are different from those facing our
brethren beyond the border. Because of political and geograph-
ical differences between us and the States there is a certain
antipathy in our congregations toward what members feel is
'foreign'."[8]

The issue of Canadianization for Lutheranism needs also to
be seen in the context of the general religious scene in Canada.
Anglicans, such as John Strachan, had as early as 1812 articu-
lated the need for a native ministry of Canadian-born men or
at least Britishers able and willing to accommodate themselves
to the highly fluid society of homey but enterprising individ-
ualists which constituted the Canadian church. Because of its
connection with the state, the Anglican Church was able at
that time to assume a more Canadian appearance. However,
after the Clergy Reserves had been nationalized in 1854, the
Anglican Church moved rapidly toward a Canadian structure.
A new structure of the self-governing Church of England in
Canada was completed in 1860.

Through different sets of circumstances, other churches had
also achieved a high level of Canadian identity by the 1860s.
The Methodist preachers in Upper Canada, for example, had
initially been almost exclusively American—not more than
seven out of 76 missionaries in Canada between 1790 and 1812
were Canadian-born. But, as the probability of war between
Britain and the United States grew after 1807, the position
of the American-organized and American-staffed Methodist
church became increasingly difficult. When war finally did
break out in 1812, the Methodists were forced to begin the
process of separation. The first positive step toward autonomy
was subsequently taken in 1824 when a Canadian Conference of
the Methodist Church was created. But the event which moved
the Methodists to become solidly Canadian in orientation was
the controversy between Strachan and Ryerson which was oc-
casioned by the former's 1825 sermon which challenged the loy-
alty, learning, and intelligence of Methodist preachers. Thus,

in spite of its early American image, Canadian church historians generally assess the Methodist church as having achieved the highest degree of Canadianization of any of the churches in Canada, "advanced by their flexible system of circuit riders which brought preachers into immediate contact with the problems and aspirations of a pioneer people, a process more difficult to achieve in those churches closely bound to and by the European tradition of the static parish organization".[9] Thus, by the time of Confederation, most churches had achieved a degree of Canadianization, though some like the Lutherans were to retain a very tentative kind of independence and in subsequent years would regress as centralization and modern big business practices became the mark of the church in mission.

III

The third pivotal point for Lutheranism in Canada occurred in a more recent time—a time which is recent enough for some of us to remember—World War II and its aftermath. The date was 2 April 1940. The place was Winnipeg. Canadian representatives of seven Lutheran bodies met with Ralph Long, the executive director of the National Lutheran Council. The previous September Canada had followed the leading of Britain and the other Commonwealth nations and had declared war on Germany. The issue before the Lutheran representatives in April 1940 was: What should they do to respond to the special challenges for ministry brought about by Canada's involvement in the war? Should they attempt to set up a Canadian commission which would facilitate the churches in meeting their obligations to Lutherans serving in the armed forces or should they work through appropriate structures in their North American parent bodies? Should they attempt to serve Lutheran service personnel unilaterally or should they do it within the structure of the Canadian Chaplaincy Service?

The unanimous decision of the representatives of Canadian Lutheranism at the above-mentioned meeting was that a commission, consisting of Canadian citizens, be organized to direct the war-time services of the Lutheran church in Canada. The Lutheran bodies which were members of the National Lutheran Council had experience with a similar commission from the

days of World War I, and when the matter of a Canadian
Lutheran Commission for War Service was referred to them,
they approved it without any difficulty. The Missouri Synod
had taken an independent approach to this matter in World
War I and was not part of the National Lutheran Council at
the time of the Winnipeg meeting in 1940. Somewhat pre-
dictably, the Synod was not prepared to approve participa-
tion in the Canadian Commission even though two Missouri
Synod pastors had attended the Winnipeg meeting. An at-
tempt was first made by the Synod to direct this work in
Canada through its own commission. Then it appointed a
Canadian chaplaincy committee to oversee the work. Finally,
when these two approaches proved unsatisfactory, the Synod
set up a Canadian office which effectively did the work in
Canada which the Synod's own commission carried out in the
United States. Through this office, though the Missouri Synod
was never formally part of the Canadian Lutheran Commission
for War Service, the Missouri Synod did, in fact, participate
in the Canadian Commission along with the other Lutheran
bodies in Canada.

As the Canadian Lutheran Commission for War Service
launched its work, there was really no way in which it could
function independently of other Christian denominations in
Canada. The Canadian government did not provide this op-
tion, even if the Lutheran bodies had wanted to follow it.
Almost immediately after Canada entered the war, the De-
partment of National Defence called together the heads of
the churches which had British roots—the Anglican, United,
Presbyterian, and Baptist churches—and consulted with them
about the appointment of a principal chaplain whose function
it would be to organize and administer the Protestant chap-
lain services. (The Roman Catholic Church had requested and
been granted permission to control its chaplains as a separate
service.) Not only was the Lutheran Commission not given
the option of functioning separately, it had to gain recognition
for Lutherans so that it could participate in the Inter-Church
Chaplaincy Committee which functioned for the churches on
behalf of the chaplain service. Before Lutheran clergy were
allowed to become chaplains in the Canadian forces, the Com-
mission had to demonstrate that there was a sufficient number
of Lutherans serving in the forces to warrant a separate clas-

sification; initially, Lutherans serving in the Canadian forces were simply lumped under the category of *Other*.

Once they were accepted as chaplains in the armed forces, the approach of Lutheran clergy to their work was, of necessity, ecumenical in nature. Not only was there no differentiation made among Lutherans but there was little distinction made among Protestants in general. While the theory followed by the Canadian Chaplaincy Service was that "men and women of the army in Canada should be adequately ministered to in moral and spiritual matters within the service by ministers selected from the churches with which the soldiers themselves were connected"[10] this was not interpreted to mean that Lutherans would be served by Lutheran clergy, Anglicans would be served by Anglican clergy, and so on.

It was impossible, of course, from a practical standpoint, to have a chaplain of every Christian denomination in every location. Thus, the congregation of a Lutheran chaplain was the entire Protestant population where he was based. His responsibility was to minister to all non-Roman Catholics. The order of service which he used to conduct worship services was the order approved by the Canadian Chaplaincy Service for all Canadian Protestant chaplains. Occasionally, protocol involved chaplains of different denominations to participate in a service of worship together. Only in the communion services following the regular service was each denominational chaplain permitted to follow the rite of his church. However, communion participation was open to all who wished to come, regardless of religious affiliation.

Following World War II, another special challenge for ministry confronted the Lutheran churches in the form of the vast numbers of refugees described by a contemporary observer as "a Tolstoyan pageant of human pathos, encompassing all the states of man from premature birth to overdue death".[11] Many of these refugees were in a position where they could be assisted through the agency of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Agency, the post-war international relief agency in which Canada played a substantial role. But there were many— ethnic Germans who had been expelled from Eastern European countries following the war—who lacked any agency through which they could receive help. It was especially to address the problem of providing physical relief for the latter group of

refugees that a meeting was held on 9 February 1946 in Winnipeg. Present at the meeting were 25 representatives of the Roman Catholic, Baptist, Mennonite, and Lutheran churches. Included among the Lutherans were the chairman of the Canadian Lutheran Commission for War Service and the director of the Missouri Synod's Canadian office.

Informed about the results of the Winnipeg meeting, the Canadian Department of War Service invited the Canadian Lutheran Commission to undertake relief work in Europe, particularly on behalf of the refugees. As a result, Canadian Lutheran World Relief was born on 14 March 1946. Since the Missouri Synod and the representatives of the National Lutheran Council bodies had reached an agreement in September 1944 which provided for cooperation in externals, there was no difficulty in Canadian Lutheran World Relief being approved by all Lutheran bodies.

The post-war situation again dictated that the challenge for ministry, if it was to be met, would have an ecumenical dimension to it. This took two forms. One was a distinctively Canadian form and involved relationships with the Canadian government. As already mentioned, one of the problems which confronted Lutherans in Canada was the fact that many of the refugees—ethnic Germans who had been expelled from Eastern European countries—did not qualify under the definition of refugees given by the United Nations. The Canadian government agreed to admit these ethnic Germans into Canada under the provisions of a close relatives sponsorship plan, but it did not have an overseas agency through which to process them. To address this problem, the Canadian Christian Council for Resettlement of Refugees was organized. The treasurer of Canadian Lutheran World Relief, an executive with the Canadian Pacific Railway, became the temporary chairman for the entire life of the Canadian Christian Council, and persons working for Canadian Lutheran World Relief were co-opted to serve in Germany for the Council. The purpose of the Council was to enable any Christian body which had a German component to it—Roman Catholics, Baptists and Mennonites, as well as Lutherans—to bring their destitute Eastern European relatives and, later, also other refugees, to Canada. The Council, therefore, saw Canadian Lutherans taking part on the domestic level, in a response, ecumenical in scope, to the post-war challenge for service.

The second form of response, which was also ecumenical in thrust, had to do with the actual carrying out of relief and reconstruction work in Europe. The agreement for Lutheran cooperation in the area of relief work referred to above was formally between the Missouri Synod and the American Section of the Lutheran World Convention (which involved all of the churches of the National Lutheran Council). The agreement called for the program of relief and reconstruction to be administered under the name of the American Section but with the involvement on a proportionate basis of the Missouri Synod. It was this relief and reconstruction program into which Canadian Lutheran World Relief became tied, a program which became a department of the Lutheran World Federation when the latter came into being in Lund in 1947.

Right from the beginning, however, the relief and reconstruction work of Lutherans was coordinated with the efforts of the broader Christian community. The American three-man fact-finding committee which went to Europe in March 1945 already saw as one of its tasks to make contact with other Christian leaders, especially the World Council of Churches' Reconstruction Committee in Geneva, to coordinate and integrate the work of the Lutheran church with that of other churches.[12] Subsequently in a meeting of the Americans with their counterparts in Sweden (the Missouri Synod representative not participating, at this point) the principle of close cooperation with the World Council of Churches was accepted.[13] Indeed, when the latter formally came into being in 1948, the Swedes and a number of other Lutheran bodies were prominently represented among the membership of that organization as well.

One cannot give here the entire picture of a growing ecumenical openness among the churches in Canada and throughout the world during the twentieth century. However, in Canada the twentieth century has seen the formation of a number of ecumenical agencies, including the Canadian Council of Churches and various inter-church coalitions. This ecumenical openness among Christian churches in general has been the backdrop for the ecumenical context within which Lutherans gave their response to the challenges for ministry during World War II and the post-war period. That Lutheran ecumenical response during those critical times determined Lutheran attitudes toward working with other Christians in Canada and the

world since that time can hardly be challenged. Regrettably
for inter-Lutheran unity, this is one pivotal point at which Missouri Synod Lutherans in Canada have officially gone down one
fork in the road and all of the other Lutherans have gone down
the other fork. In spite of this it has been a pivotal point for
Lutherans in the sense that it has confronted all of us with
the question and perhaps has reminded us that there may not
only be a Canadian answer but that there may be a Canadian version to the question. If it has divided us, let us hope
that it has caused us to struggle enough to increase our feeling
of Canadian identity and to grow to the measure of maturity
where we are not satisfied simply to accept imported answers.
Thus, as we face pivotal points in Canadian Lutheran history
in the time to come, we will have the structures within which
we can better do our analysis, understand the implications of
our forks in the road, and pursue confidently the challenges for
mission and ministry which the future holds for us.

Notes

1 Donald Creighton, *The Forked Road* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart
   Limited, 1976) Preface.

2 H.H. Walsh, *The Christian Church in Canada* (Toronto: The Ryerson
   Press, 1956) 90.

3 G.J.R. Cienciala, "From Many Nations, a History of Lutheranism in
   the United Kingdom", *The Lutheran Council of Great Britain* (London:
   The Lutheran Council of Great Britain Limited [1975]) 12–14.

4 J.M. Bumsted, "Church and State in Maritime Canada, 1749–1807",
   Canadian History before Confederation (Georgetown, Ontario: Irwin-Dorsey Limited, 1972) 177–95.

5 Ibid.

6 *Minutes*, Canada Synod (1865) 3, quoted in Carl Cronmiller, *A History
   of the Lutheran Church in Canada*, Vol. 1 (The Evangelical Lutheran
   Synod of Canada, 1961) 149. Emphases added.

7 Frank Malinsky, *Grace and Blessing* (1954) 22.

8 Proceedings of the Canada District, Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod,
   1879, p. 5 (author's translation).

9 John S. Moir, *The Church in the British Era* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill
   Ryerson, 1972) 190.

10 Walter T. Steven, *In this Sign* (Toronto: The Ryerson Press, 1948) 154.

11 Words of Stewart Herman quoted in Richard W. Solberg, *As Between
   Brothers* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1957) 33.

12 E. Clifford Nelson, *The Rise of World Lutheranism* (Philadelphia:
   Fortress Press, 1982) 353.

13 Ibid. 356.