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S. T. Jacobson

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PRESIDENT, PASTORS, PARISHES

S.T. Jacobson

This article is to deal with the question of how the polity of the church works itself out in relationships between the church at large and the local congregation, from the perspective of the rationale behind the polity of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Canada.

BASIC ORGANIZATIONAL PRINCIPLES

Purpose

The purpose of the congregation shall be to proclaim and propagate the Christian faith through the Means of Grace, and to cooperate in the program approved by the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Canada. ¹

The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Canada is a union of congregations to serve God more effectively by focusing and coordinating the purposes and resources of the congregations of the church; to express, preserve and extend the unity of the faith of the church; to proclaim in word and deed the Gospel of forgiveness and eternal life in Jesus Christ our Lord, so that the Triune God may be more fully known; witnessing to, proclaiming and propagating the Christian faith in its fullness and purity; seeking the quickening and sanctification of the members of its congregations. Prominent in the statements of purpose are the Means of Grace in word and sacrament, a faithful ministry of them, and the use of them by members of the congregations. ²

Membership

Article VII of the ELCC constitution states: "the membership of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Canada shall consist of congregations." The article continues by describing the relationship of individual persons to the church: "Individuals, clergy and lay, belong to The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Canada by virtue of their membership in one of its constituent congregations." ³ These two brief sentences identify a very basic element in polity, which has already been referred to in describing the purpose of the ELCC. Similarly, in the model constitution for congregations, the same view of membership is expressed: "For the better attainment of its purpose, the congregation shall be a member of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Canada or its successor...The congregation claims for itself all the rights and

1. *Model Constitution and Bylaws for Congregations of The ELCC, 1977.* Published by and available from the Office of the President, The ELCC. Hereafter referred to as "Model Constitution."
2. *Articles of Incorporation, Constitution and Bylaws of The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Canada, 1977 edition,* pp. 10-11. Published by and available from the Office of the President, The ELCC. Hereafter referred to as "Constitution ELCC."
3. *Ibid.*, p. 13.

privileges and accepts all the duties and obligations connected with such membership.”⁴ In the constitution of the church there is a sentence which discloses the view of membership in the congregation which has an importance for questions of status of individuals vis a vis the church at large: “The pastor and laity constitute the membership of the congregation, the pastor’s status differing as to office and function.”⁵

Powers

Both the ELCC constitution and the model for congregations devote several paragraphs to questions relating to the powers which each has. For the congregation, these powers are described in these terms: (a) all its authority has its source in the Word of God, to which all individuals, groups, activities, organizations and the life of the congregation shall submit; (b) the powers of the congregation shall be those necessary to fulfill its declared purpose; (c) the powers of the congregation are vested in the congregational meeting; (d) the congregation has clearly defined powers respecting the acquiring, holding and disposing of property.⁶

The church’s powers are viewed not only from the perspective of their authority and their significance for the church itself, but particularly with respect to the relationship of the church to the congregations. The local congregation has the right and duty to call its pastor, own its property and conduct its program. Its members are free to work in God’s kingdom through agencies and institutions outside of the ELCC. These may be established and maintained for strengthening people in their faith, doing works of mercy or for carrying on missionary activity. Examples of these would be societies or institutions for Christian nurture and training, institutions for the aged or infirm, organizations for carrying on missionary work in Canada or abroad. With respect to these, however, the church does have the responsibility to evaluate them and recommend for support only those that have been approved by the appropriate division boards and by the Church Council. On the other hand, the congregation has its responsibilities toward the church, namely, to honor and respect the recommendation of the church, to adhere faithfully to the doctrines of the church, and to cooperate whole heartedly with the program which the church as a fellowship of congregations, has approved.

The church’s constitution defines what are called “basic principles of organization and operation.” These are:

- (1) The representative character of legislative assemblies shall be preserved.
- (2) Effective checks and balances between and within the agencies of the church shall be maintained.
- (3) The functions of the officers, conferences, councils, boards, commissions, and standing committees shall be clearly defined by the Constitution and Bylaws, which shall also guarantee that responsibility and authority are commensurate.
- (4) There shall at all times be clear and direct channels for all officers,

4. *Model Constitution*, p. 3.

5. *Constitution ELCC.*, p.14.

6. *Model Constitution*, p. 2.

conferences, councils, boards, commissions, and standing committees of the Church to bring recommendations before the legislative assemblies.

- (5) The legislative authority shall rest in the conventions of the Church, and between conventions in the Church Council. Supervision of administration, including the determination of policy in the execution of approved legislation, shall rest in the councils, boards, commissions, and standing committees of the Church. The administration of these policies shall be carried out by the officers and the executives, elected by the councils, boards, commissions, and standing committees. The authority for final adjudication shall rest with the Board of Appeals and Adjudication. ⁷

Most of the above quoted “basic principles” deal with the interaction and interrelationships of the different parts of the organization of the church in its ongoing operation. The point at which the congregations enter into this structure is in the first principle: “The representative character of legislative assemblies shall be preserved.” This asserts that the legislative assemblies or conventions of the church will be comprised of representatives from the congregations. This is more clearly defined elsewhere in the constitution, specifically Article IX The General Convention, Section 4, (2):

The voting membership of the Genral Convention shall consist of pastors serving congregations of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Canada and delegates who represent congregations of the Church. Each congregation shall be entitled to at least one lay delegate. Congregations of more than three hundred confirmed members shall be entitled to one lay delegate for each three hundred confirmed members or remaining major fraction thereof. ⁸

PRESIDENT

While it would be of interest to trace the roles, duties and responsibilities, freedoms and limitations of congregations, pastors, boards and committees, executive staff, and conferences, the specific subject matter for this paper requires that attention be given to what is said about the president’s duties.

In Article X, Section 1 (2) under the sub-heading, “Duties and Responsibilities of the President,” one finds these two brief but broad assignments:

- (a) He shall serve as spiritual leader of the Church and shall seek to preserve peace and order.
- (b) He shall serve as president of the corporation and shall convene and preside over the conventions of the Church. ⁹

As one goes through the ELCC constitution and bylaws, and the model constitution for congregations, watching particularly for duties of the general president that have to do with pastors and congregations, one finds a

7. *Constitution ELCC*, p. 13.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 16.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 17.

considerable involvement. For instance, with respect to congregations, the president receives the application of the congregation for membership and refers this to the Church Council for action and recommendation to the next convention. The president assists congregations to call a pastor and to obtain interim pastoral service. He also has supervision of the congregations which is to include visitation, assistance in realignments, and mediation in times of disputes within or between congregations. If the congregation should wish to withdraw from the church, the president is involved in negotiations aimed at removing the cause for withdrawal. In the event that the withdrawal is effected, the president receives the official communication of the congregation to that effect. Also, in the event that a congregation is to be disciplined, it is the president with the Church Council that is to administer it. The president's role then is to take note of alleged inappropriate activities, investigate them, give counsel to the congregation and seek to remove the causes for complaint. If these fail, he is to request the Church Council to suspend the congregation.

PASTORS

According to the ELCC constitution¹⁰ the pastors or clergy of the church are those who have been ordained on the authority of a call from the congregation or the church, who are committed to the faith confessed by the church and committed also to the constitution. To them is committed the public administration of the Means of Grace. All the clergy of the church are listed on the clergy roster and come under the discipline of the church. The church has authority to admit the pastors to its roster and to suspend or dismiss them. Continuation on the roster is possible as long as the pastor serves a parish or in a ministry approved by the church, or is retired.

The relationship of the pastor to the congregation is one of leader and co-worker. Toward the church, he comes under the supervision of the president and is subject to the church's discipline when necessary. This discipline is administered by the president and the Church Council, and the only grounds mentioned are: "alleged deviation in doctrine" or "conduct unbecoming a clergyman."¹¹ The pastor also is assured the counsel, support and protection of the church.

ORGANIZATIONAL CHARACTER

In taking note of the relationships between parishes, pastors and president, two points are to be noted and emphasized. One is the character of the church as a *fellowship*. The ELCC constitution, Article VI speaks of the church as a "functioning fellowship," which is similar to the way in which the preamble

10. ¹ Ibid., pp. 14f.

11. Ibid., p. 33.

speaks of “this fellowship.”¹² This emphasis on fellowship conveys the picture of the church as consisting of all persons--regardless of function or office--being together on common ground, with common spiritual status, and for a common purpose. Relationships of supervision and accountability are recognized but are secondary to the primary concept of fellowship.

The other characteristic of the church structure is its *voluntary aspect*. Congregations participate on a voluntary basis. Pastors serve congregations not only because they are called but because they choose to accept the call. The leadership of the president is accepted voluntarily; he has no authority to impose it. If a congregation or a pastor comes to the conviction that they can no longer continue within the church, they are free to leave. The only stipulation is that they give adequate consideration to their decision, and not make it hastily on the impulse of the moment. When discipline becomes necessary either toward the congregation or pastor, the grounds thereon are few and simple, and the exercise of this discipline follows minimal procedures, with emphasis upon the good judgment of the president and the Church Council. In every instance, there is first of all to be consultation and every effort made to remove the alleged grounds for disciplinary action.

RATIONALE

At this point, attention may be shifted from principles of organization and their expression, to the rationale behind them. This rationale is complex, an intertwining of factors theological and historical, cultural and political, and personal.

Of the theological factor, it may be said that primary attention is given in this polity to the Means of Grace in the congregation, reminding one of Article VII of the Augsburg Confession:

It is also taught among us that one holy Christian church will be and remain forever. This is the assembly of all believers among whom the gospel is preached in its purity and the holy sacraments are administered according to the gospel.¹³

This seems to have a subsequent importance in the polity which regards the congregation as the basic unit of organization.

Another aspect of the theological factor in the rationale is the concept of the priesthood of all believers. This has reference not only to the privilege of access to God through Jesus Christ by his grace through faith, but also to the responsibility for sharing in the priestly functions of witnessing to the faith and being actively involved in the “quickening and sanctification of the members of the congregations through the use of the Means of Grace.”¹⁴ One might

12. *Ibid.*, pp. 11 & 9.

13. Theodore G. Tappert, ed., *Book of Concord* (Philadelphia: Muhlenburg Press, 1959), p.22.

14. *Constitution ELCC*, p. 10.

describe this element of the theological factor in the rationale as comprising a concept of "responsive Christianity."

It would be a stimulating exercise to look at the historical aspect of this rationale, taking into note the seeds from the Reformation, the long memories among settlers in this country of clergy abuses and dominant churches, the effects of movements with characteristics of low church emphasis and evangelistic perspectives, the interplay of reactions and counter-reactions between various groups both in Europe and in North America.

Similarly, one could find it fascinating to consider the cultural and political forces that have helped to shape this rationale, such as those found in the United States and in Canada. Similarly, the educational opportunities, the political processes, new frontier mentality, the influences from other churches and from sects and movements, and the prominent philosophies of the day which have helped shape the views of people.

Finally, one could give recognition to the influence upon a church's rationale for organization which has been wielded by those who have held positions of leadership. For the ELCC many names come to mind, from the antecedent bodies, American Lutheran Church, Evangelical Lutheran Church, Lutheran Free Church, and United Evangelical Lutheran Church.

LIVING UNDER THESE PRINCIPLES AND WITH THIS RATIONALE

In the life of the church as in other organizations, circumstances and personalities influence the actual way in which principles are followed and a rationale is expressed. Sometimes the church is reacting to situations in its world which are influenced or controlled by forces and persons outside of its own spheres. Further, the particular personal perspectives of the leadership of the church, not only its officers but the members of its boards and the executives on its staff, will result in emphasis being placed upon some aspects that have to do with the church's organization. Further, there are times when what is deemed "practical" has its own influence in the way in which principles are applied.

DR. S. T. JACOBSON is President of The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Canada.