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Ethnic Identity and Mission in a Canadian Lutheran Context

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. . . The Church is called to be the family of God transcending every barrier of race, status, sex and nationality . . . (from the J.C.I.L.R. Theses on the Mission of the Church, November, 1974).

ETHNIC IDENTITY

AND MISSION

IN A

CANADIAN

LUTHERAN CONTEXT

The emerging Lutheran Church in Canada is in process of defining a theology of mission. It is not too early to engage a creative reflection on mission priorities and strategy.

The purpose of this essay is to focus upon the phenomenon of ethnic identity as a starting point for mission planning. At this historic moment in our development as a Canadian denomination, Lutherans have the opportunity to take a studied look at their past and their future. Perhaps, for the first time, we can mutually and constructively probe the role of ethnic identity as a viable carrier of both Gospel message and church tradition.

Ethnic Identity and Canada

Ethnic identity means being recognized as part of a tribe, a people or a nation that is culturally distinct. Inextricably bound to an individual's sense of personhood is an individual's sense of identity through group membership.

We live at a time when many are searching for meaning, community and roots. Ethnic identity is a natural starting-point for self-understanding and belonging. Canada is a nation where ethnic identity is generally cherished and respected. Most Canadians can still trace their heritage to at least one foreign cultural tradition, reaching back in time and spanning the seas.

Some of the most intriguing narratives of modern history are those telling of how persons from almost every major culture grouping on earth have emigrated and established themselves in Canada. As Canadians we are the beneficiaries of a rich pluralism - migrant and native. We are a colorful mosaic of ethnic legacy. These varied traditions are co-existing and growing together into a new Canadian ethnicity. Yet our traditional identities are not belittled. Nor are they discarded. On the contrary, they are being celebrated and shared. Government multi-culturalist policies and the mushrooming of local folk festivals are clear evidences of the Canadian climate.

To speak more specifically the Lutherans in Canada are representative and reflective of various ethnic legacies and identities. We are, for the most part, heirs of cultures and religious traditions which developed in northern and eastern Europe (German, Scandinavian, Icelandic, Baltic, etc.). Many Lutheran families have been in Canada for generations, yet compared to Canadian Christians of other denominations, we still bear the marks and distinguishing characteristics of the lands and the churches of our European ancestors.

Our church in Canada can capitalize on the positive aspects of this varied inheritance. In a quest for contemporary relevance or in the heat of anti-traditionalist emotion it would be most foolhardy to further subvert our legacy or to rationalize it away. Ethnic identity can undergird our church as it attempts to convey deep meaning and reflect responsible values within the context of Canadian society.

The Mosaic as Canadian Option

Unquestionably, the historic Canadian experiment in nation-building frequently parallels that of the United States. How could it be otherwise? England was a

common antecedent. Canadian and American ancestry have migrated from the same sources. We share a border and a continent. Canadians and Americans are therefore similar peoples. But we are not the same people. The fact has been all too glibly dealt with in the past.

It would appear that two primary factors have set our nations on separate and distinct courses. The republican experiment which America adopted in 1776 propelled the United States into a radical quest for a novel rather than an inherited identity.

The French fact in Canada (indeed, the French were the first permanent migrants - and that fact can never be abrogated) has been crucial to our nation's development. It has continued to force our political leaders to respect and fight for the preservation of cultural pluralism.

America required a melting-pot concept in order to develop as a republic. Canada followed the model of a cultural mosaic to achieve and maintain nationhood.

Canada could never truly accept the American melting-pot motif, attractive as it might have been. We are a conglomerate of peoples bound together by a common, maturing experience on Canadian soil. Ours is a unique process of social ordering and governing principles - inherited from Britain and France, influenced by America and hammered out in the realities of our geography and history.

Because of this, Canada represents a continental option to the United States. We can rejoice in our Canadian uniqueness.

Ethnic Identity and Mission: Developing a Lutheran Self-Understanding

Given the special conditions of Canada, what are some of the resulting implications for the Lutheran Church in this country?

We are challenged to remain loyal to our 'Canadian tradition' and open to 'the Canadian option' for the future. We must take special recognition of ethnic identity in our mission strategy.

In one sense, such recognition will facilitate a new twist to our traditional home mission policies. The dominance of American mission theory and our Canadian openness to it caused a rather passive acceptance of the melting-pot mentality. American missions - meant Canadian missions - meant English-speaking missions. Out of respect for past American mission board intentions we must

acknowledge that the tensions inherent in the canadianization of our church made the melting-pot mystique very appealing. We often succumbed. We tried to anglicize as rapidly as possible those ethnic congregations supported by mission funds. Often, this had the effect of polarization and needless frustration.

The melting-pot mentality must not dominate the mission policy of our Lutheran Church in Canada. Lutherans in this nation should be among the first to affirm the value of a mentality of the mosaic.

Our church is coming to be grafted to the roots of Canadian society. We have been allowed to evolve our place and to find our level. We have been able to maintain folk churches representative of our various traditions. We were not forced into a cheap assimilation. No government pressure ever forced us to give up what we considered to be our worship heritage.

It may come as a surprise that many of our classic ethnic churches possessed a strong sense of mission. One of the primary mission objectives was to exist as a focus of ethnic identity and fellowship in the larger community. Subsequently, likes were attracted. Unlikes were either rebuffed or refused to assimilate. What was often viewed by outsiders as narrow exclusivism was something more complex than that. While there was, all too frequently, an introverted intention for mere survival, there was also vital outreach and meaningful Christian fellowship. At its best, the ethnic factor served our church with a valid rationale for mission and evangelism.

In spite of tensions, schisms and well documented un-Christlike behavior, the evolution and maturing of our denominational heritage has provided us with identity and purpose as a church.

Our regard for the centrality of the scriptures continues to dominate discussions leading to unity. Our respect for confessionalism has been retained even when the language and thought-forms for interpreting the confessions are no longer exclusively European. Our social and political conservatism remains even though many Lutherans have left the agricultural life or the inner city 'ghetto' to engage in the commerce and suburban life-styles of our larger centres.

As much as many Canadian Lutherans may resent certain cultural trappings of their ethnic traditions - this heritage continues, consciously and unconsciously, to color the profile of personal and community identity. This heritage remains as a priceless treasure.

Building a Responsible Mission Theory

There is nothing anti-Christian or un-Canadian about developing our mission thrusts along natural ethnic lines of communication and people-contact. Some may sneer at congregations whose mission strategy it is to 'seek out the

Germans' or 'look up the Lutherans' in our growingly secular and cosmopolitan centres.

Those who believe that these church extension methods are *passee* do not understand the Canadian social ethos.

We have not exhausted the potential of mission outreach in the traditional sense. As long as there are many more persons identifying themselves as Lutherans in the Canadian census than exist on official church roles, we have work to do.

Another aspect of traditional Lutheran mission work should not be forgotten. It is the matter of receiving the new Canadian. Every year, Lutherans from the 'old countries' continue to establish themselves in Canada (though in apparently declining numbers at this point in time). Can we expect Lutheran arrivals to readily identify with the average congregation? Could we not foster satellite communities of in-coming Lutherans as special ministry projects of established churches? Might it not in some cases be advantageous to support the development of new ethnic congregations? Special staff may have to be secured. New congregational structures may have to be devised. Basic changes in attitude may be required on the part of some church-people. What we need are modern variations of a positive, folk church philosophy.

Thus far we have been concerned with ministry among ethnic groups of European Lutheran background. What of potential Lutheran migrations from new sources?

All Lutheran emigrants from Europe did not land in North America. They went to South America, Africa and Austral-Asia. It is not inconceivable that at a future time some of their descendants might migrate in turn to Canada. The recent Chilean refugees admitted to Canada are a case in point. Are we prepared for similar sporadic entries?

The modern world mission outreach of our European and North American churches has resulted in sizeable native Lutheran populations in many parts of Africa and Asia. Since Canada is becoming one of the globe's most attractive targets of third world migration, who would deny that our nation might eventually become home to thousands of new citizens from developing nations? Will we be prepared, psychologically and functionally, to meet such migrants? Some of them will likely be Lutherans.

In times past our churches were frequently ill-prepared to welcome new Canadian brothers and sisters in the faith. We lost many potential members because of it. That should not happen in the future.

We must acknowledge that in the past Canadian Lutheran numerical growth has often been due to immigration rather than to intentional evangelization. This leads to the most difficult mission problem of all. It is the one which, traditionally,

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1. The 1971 Federal Census enumerated 715,740 proclaimed Lutherans. Church rolls enumerate 302,148.
 2. Cf. 1971 Census of Canada, *Population, Characteristics of Persons Born Outside of Canada*. Ottawa: Information Canada, 1974.

we have been very reluctant to face. It is the matter of outreach among the 'non-Lutheran' ethnic groupings in this country.

A few special initiatives have been taken - among the French in Montreal, the Italians in Toronto, the native Canadians in Kenora and northern Canada and the Chinese in Vancouver. Up to now, however, such efforts reflect the commitment of a minority. Our work among ethnic communities which are traditionally non-Lutheran represents little more than tokenism.

Traditionally, the Roman Catholics, Anglican, Methodists and Presbyterians of Canada extended themselves to new ethnic enclaves (the native peoples, Asians, Europeans of differing cultures to their own, etc.). The day of this kind of outreach ministry in Canada is not past. German, French and native Canadian pentecostalism flourishes. The Chinese ministries of the United Church of Canada and the Christian and Missionary Alliance are inspiring examples.

Churches engaging in cross-cultural evangelism frequently discover that greater success is realized when the Gospel and supportive structures relative to it are allowed to surface from within the context of the 'receiving culture'. This always forces the drawing of distinctions between the essentials and the non-essentials of the 'sending culture' and its religious tradition. In the years ahead, Canadian Lutherans should be thinking and planning more seriously about cross-cultural evangelism.

A realistic Canadian mission philosophy will require a dual thrust - consolidation of traditional Lutheran communities and expansion into new social groups.

In conclusion we might ask if it is realistic to declare that it is our church's mission 'to be the family of God transcending every barrier of race, status, sex and nationality.'

The Canadian Lutheran Church has reason for some optimism. We are not naive to the barriers of race, status, sex and nationality. As a uniting plurality of ethnic churches we can still recall our European antecedents. Our experience in North America has shaped and sharpened us in the rediscovery of the truly valid elements of our heritage. We are becoming established in Canada as a new, identifiable reality.

Let us be astute enough, at this crucial point in our history, to know who we are because we realize from where we have come and where we are heading.

Can we build a church that seeks unity, respects diversity, and celebrates ethnic identity? Can we develop our mission priorities and strategy along lines naturally conducive to the unique cultural evolution that is Canada today?

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