

4-1-1975

In Search of Our Own Reality

Vincent E. Eriksson

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

Recommended Citation

Eriksson, Vincent E. (1975) "In Search of Our Own Reality," *Consensus*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 2 , Article 4.
Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol1/iss2/4>

This Article 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.

IN SEARCH OF

OUR OWN REALITY

The prospects of the Lutheran Church in Canada must be seen in the context of the general problems of Canada. Both are affected by our geography, our history, and our will to do something about the challenges before us. And the effects of these three factors, usually intertwined, are complicated by our habitual historical response of heavy uncritical borrowing from abroad and of an accompanying sense of inferiority about anything Canadian. Yet in the above, I feel that there is more hope for the Lutheran Church in Canada than there is for Canada as a nation.

Geography

A chief factor of our geography is climate. Here our heavy borrowing and our national inferiority produce amusing - though exasperating - results. We imitate California architecture and California landscaping for large buildings on the Canadian Prairies, while local shelter problems, seasons, and vegetation are ignored and bulldozers dispose of any vestige of native vegetation or natural contours. If we have to borrow from abroad, there are more appropriate examples in Sweden and Finland that we might use!

We knew for years that the Inuit peoples of the Arctic - the people with the most experience of this climate - used the parka. But it took the presence of American soldiers in Canada during the Second World War to make the parka generally acceptable working apparel.

We lead the world in the use of the telephone; our competition is Iceland, another northern country. How do we deal with this fact? Usually with embarrassment, as if it shows long-windedness! Yet, for our climate and our distances, it is often more practical to phone than to go somewhere. Has the Church adapted to this fact? I know pastors who have used the telephone to advantage, but I have yet to see suggested congregational programs which

recognize its place or advantage. Our geography affects our lives in other ways. We are at present the most urbanized country in the world; 80% of our people live in urban areas. (Our people are also more mobile than those in the United States.) Our more metropolitan-dominated society goes back to fur trade days, and is due to the fact that less than 30% of our land is arable (in the U.S. the figure is nearly 70%). The “Canadian Shield” occupies some half of our country and separates the arable land of southern Ontario from that of Manitoba by some 1,300 miles. We are thus faced with vast distances. The result is largely a nation of a few pockets of highly concentrated population and industry, being otherwise effectually a thin line stretching for thousands of miles.

Our urban-dominated character brought about the “national policy” of 1878 which made the West and Maritime commercial colonies of the St. Lawrence. This colonial status has been fostered by the protective tariff and differential railway freight rates; also the creation in 1870 and 1905 of provinces which, unlike the older ones, did not have control of their public lands or natural resources.¹ The distribution of arable land and communication routes and government based on representation by population has made this condition of heart-land and colonies self-perpetuating: economic structures ensure concentration of population along the St. Lawrence, and concentration of population ensures further economic regulations of the same sort.

The above presents a great strain on our national life but it is not the same sort of problem for the Lutheran Church. Granted any further shifts of population, especially as they involve depopulation of certain areas, place a strain on the Church in terms of “lean” parishes and eventually of abandoned capital investment - both of the organizational Church and of its members.² But at present our Lutheran Churches do not have the same strains in this respect that affect Canada generally. A glance at our statistics shows that we have a better balance of membership between different areas of Canada (except for the Maritimes and Newfoundland) than is true of Canada as a whole. Thus, though Canadian governments might be able to build majorities on Quebec and Ontario and virtually “write off” the rest of Canada, a Canadian Lutheran Church is not likely to do this.

Yet we must not only be concerned about giving proper attention to Lutherans throughout Canada. If we take seriously our mission to the nation, we will also face some of the general problems of protecting the human rights of minorities. For instance, can we do something about the question of our North? Specifically, can we protect the inhabitants from the “development” (another name for exploitation, for rape of property, culture, and even of persons) and at the same time do something for service to people? It is only recently that we have made any penetration into this area (a few congregations, Wings to the North, and Lutheran Association of Missionaries and Pilots).

1. This was not altered till 1930, and the federal-provincial quarrel is about the same matter.

2. One may compare the terrific blows to the Presbyterian Church in Canada when during the early 1920s many of its parishes were hit by the depression in agriculture and coal mining.

History

In relation to our history, we have always been a nation whose economy depended on the sale abroad of “staples”, with consequent vulnerability to outside conditions. (This fact is related to our great mobility of population.) In addition, the twentieth century has involved Canada in much closer ties with the United States with resulting economic and cultural colonialism. For a while this was true of our Church as well

One way in which such colonial-type dependence comes about is connected with settlement where immigrants do not give up their apron strings. Another and more insidious cause of dependence is that which results from seeking help from outside to wield more clout against opposition within one’s own country.

Examples of the latter go back to Old Testament times where King Ahaz of Judah invoked the King of Assyria when troubled by Israel and Syria (Is. 7; II Kings 16). Our Canadian labour history is full of instances of invocation of outside unions, from the 1890s down to Hal Banks. Sometimes it was done by local labour unions, quite often by business firms wishing to kill a local union, and sometimes (as in the 1920s and 1940s) by governments. In 1974 we saw at least two examples of the invocation of outside forces in Canadian affairs, i.e. the American Indian Movement in the Canadian racial scene and a massive loan, plus direction of publicity, by the National Wildlife Federation of the United States to the Canadian Wildlife Federation.³

Both in the case of immigrants refusing to give up their apron strings and of organizations seeking a stronger force against their competitors, the consequence is that we eventually become only minute parts of bigger causes.

Though our Canadian Lutheran heritage is nearly smothered with incidents of immigrant carryovers, it is relatively free in recent years of invoking outside forces as a “solution” to local quarrels. Here, too, we are better off than Canada as a whole: we are no longer seeking colonialist ties.

Long connections with Church jurisdictions in the United States have resulted in a great deal of our programming being derived from there. In the past when one urged Canadianizing of the Church, one was often accused of doing so out of purely “nationalistic” reasons, i.e. reasons deriving from pride. There may be some of this, exacerbated by the fact that much of what purported to be “international” was falsely so called. But the chief reason for seeking freedom from American programs and content is that these are, in so many cases, *inappropriate*.

For example, U.S.-raised directors of mission are apt to become irritating to those they are supposed to serve and highly frustrated themselves because they

3. See *The Independencer*, Volume III, No. 6, December 1974.

are dealing with a Church in a minority situation. Imported college staff often become bewildered by the fact that on the one hand “state” universities in Canada have always had a strong liberal arts program, and on the other hand Canadian Lutherans do not give strong support to their colleges. U.S.-raised pastors are prone to be disappointed that our problems are not quite like those to the south. Since the latest church remedies don’t fit, we have to hurry up and *cultivate the problems* (They would say, “You’ll soon have it here.”) so that we can apply their remedies!

Relying on U.S. programming can have the effect of ignoring the Canadian situation. Thus, even Canadians who ought to know better often readily accept the latest U.S. statistics and do not bother to write or phone to find out what the Canadian facts might be.

There are some very important differences in our history that affect our structure, and so affect the appropriateness of Church programs. There is first of all the matter of the formative influence in communities and regions. By and large, the *earliest large group* of settlers sets the pattern of social practices and traditions for an area; *later comers* usually adapt to that which is already established. In Canada generally Scots, Irish, French, and in some areas, groups of Americans set the patterns. In very few areas of Canada were Lutherans the formative influence, Kitchener-Waterloo, some small localities in Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba, and the Lunenburg area of Nova Scotia being the exceptions. In the Prairie provinces most of the areas are so widely separated as to have little collective influence on the social character of their provinces. In most cases Lutheran people, coming after the time of the formative settlement and in smaller numbers, had to adapt to a pattern already set. This contrasts with areas of Lutheran concentration in the United States, where Lutheran settlers were often the early large group and thus the formative influence in the social patterns of the area.

Being late comers to the Canadian scene, meant that in many respects we felt inferior. Lutherans, numerically very large in some communities, were absorbed piecemeal into existing English-speaking churches. Where this process was resisted by homogeneous congregations, the foreign language was used as a defence-mechanism. But, because we used the foreign language as a defence and because of pressure from across the border, we have been almost ashamed in recent years to make an all-out effort to serve immigrants. In contrast to our tradition of defensive use, the predecessor churches of the United Church of Canada began using foreign languages in outreach before 1914 and a few years ago the United Church of Canada advertised that it was working in twenty-two languages in this country.

Some of the inappropriateness of U.S.-originated programs for our congregations relates to density of settlement, either absolutely, or relative to Lutherans. Contrast the supposedly “rural” churches in northern Illinois, located in villages four miles apart with continuous ribbon settlement in between, to south-western Saskatchewan, where towns of even modest size are 25-35 miles apart. To take programs from the first type of rural development and apply them

to the second is rather ludicrous. Yet we attempted it! The distances and other conditions of the Lutheran Church in the interior of Australia are more appropriate to the Canadian Prairies. Yet we have almost no international contacts with Lutherans there. The minority situation of the Church in Tanzania, as an underdeveloped country, also has lessons for us.

Another of the differences in our history and structure that makes U.S.-originated programs inappropriate for us is in the area of social problems. We are not beset with the problem of mass violence which is forecast to make one in five Americans this year the victim of some crime. Toronto is likely to have about 30 murders this year, whereas a U.S. city of comparable size may have 900. The glorification of violence is not usually part of our practice when dealing with our own history, except perhaps through ignorance or imitation of American movies.

But if we do not have the same problem of violence (Montreal excepted?) we do have others more serious for us. Factors of the size of market, climate, difficulties of transportation, geographical divisions, and foreign influences, make our economic lives more subject to monopoly domination than is the case in the U.S.⁴ We have problems also with burgeoning alcoholism, signalling massive frustrations, and growing divorce rates, indicating a lack of respect or communication at the basic personal level. (The Extension Department of the University of Saskatchewan this winter is offering its non-credit courses almost exclusively in the field of human communications.) The social and economic condition of most of our Indian people is far worse than the comparative condition of blacks in the U.S., and their social structures and goals for identity are quite different. Our small Indian population provides a majority of inmates in correctional institutions in some provinces, and even in federal penitentiaries, which are longer term, the level was reported recently as 35%. Indian girls become prostitutes in some of our cities at the age of thirteen.⁵ I wonder whether part of the popularity of *Sesame Street* among us, in spite of its American accents, is that through showing blacks in situations of integration it gives us a vicarious, unearned feeling of toleration?

Some years ago Robert Fulford said in an editorial in *Saturday Night* magazine that we were "Cut off from our own reality" as a result of our obsession with the U.S. He cited the readiness of Canadian students to demonstrate about Viet Nam or Kent State, while apparently oblivious to the implications of the War Measures Act. His editorial was inspired by overhearing an encounter on a bus between two blacks, one from the West Indies, the other from the U.S. The latter argued vociferously for "Black power", saying that "whitey" could not be trusted, the West Indian quietly for integration and cooperation. After the American left the bus, the West Indian remarked, "Americans! Whatever color they are, they're all imperialists!" Fulford remarked that the attempt to impose one's ideas on others is a characteristic of people who feel that what is done in their country is

4. Farley Mowat in *The Boat Who Wouldn't Float* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1969) page 21, asserted that St. John's, Newfoundland, had more millionaires per capita than Dallas, Texas.

5. The age was cited in a CBC commentary in November by a professor at the University of Regina.

important; acceptance of the causes of others a characteristic of those who lack a sense of the importance of their own affairs.

Our Will to Face Challenges

Our long dependence on programs made in the U.S. has, I believe, left us to a great degree psychologically unready to see or meet our own problems. A case in point is the project of the Lutheran Association of Missionaries and Pilots, already mentioned. Its staff is three young pastors originating from the U.S. (recently much of its monetary support has come from there as well). Why did it not originate with Canadians? After all, veterans of the 1914-18 war began flying in our North in the early 1920s. Some of our Lutheran pastors in Western Canada are also pilots. And I recall it being mentioned a few years ago that ministers of other denominations told us that we were neglecting thousands of Lutheran immigrants in our North.

Can we blame our tardiness all on the effect of the depression of the 30s, followed by the War, on our Churches? Or are the young men from the U.S. just ignorant of the dangers? Or was it that we were so conditioned to respond to programs formulated abroad, that we were prevented from recognizing and finding funds for any project that was not part of the usual package handed down from higher offices?

If indeed the fault lay there, it would have been no more than a common Canadian failing. We rarely trust Canadian inventions or ideas until they are sanctified by being adopted elsewhere.

Credit unions, for example, were introduced to North America in 1900 by Alphonse Desjardins at Levis, Quebec. But, in spite of being patronized by a governor-general, Earl Grey (1904-1911), the idea was not adopted by English-Canadians till the 1930s. It first had to go to the United States (1909),

The teaching of French in Canadian schools is another example. The French that is taught is foreign (Parisian), complete with maps of France and stories of 17th to 19th century France. Quebec, Acadia, and the Western Metis are ignored! Yet there is a wealth of song, drama and other literature native to Quebec. There is no problem with Canadian content on French-language television! But as a result of ignorance, many English-Canadians look on Quebec as a French-Canadian reservation, while professing opposition to its separation.

Canadians, and more especially Canadian Lutherans, are cut off from their own reality by ties to the U.S. Yet, here again I believe there is more hope for the Lutheran Church than for Canada in general. Congregations are in a more advantageous position than local units of companies, which may be sold or their able leaders transferred out. Further, pastors and lay leaders are more likely to insist on the needs of their area than are local people in other concerns, whether business or government.

I think we as a Church are less cut off from our reality than we used to be. Many lay persons, sometimes without being aware of the implications of what

they were saying, used to speak about “the Church” as distant from them, unconcerned with them, and somehow exploiting them. But now the concern that comes through, particularly in urban congregations, is rather, “Are we the type of Church we should be to serve the needs of those around us?” The change reflects more autonomous thinking on the part of able pastors who are willing, if necessary, to ignore blue-prints from above as they seek to strengthen a congregation for service to local and world needs.

Yet, I believe that a great deal of the support which our people give to off-beat religious broadcasts is due to the fact that our Church is still too much removed from our own reality. The radio broadcasts, often critical or condemnatory of the larger organized Churches, would have little appeal if our people really felt that their Church was for them - in both the passive sense, as we say that Christ is “for us”, and in the active sense of “for us to do” something.

Finding Our Reality

How shall we find our own reality? This is related more than anything else to our willingness to question habitual responses and to face up to our own needs and our own solutions.

In some respects we have been fortunate to have been backward in our physical development. We thus perhaps avoid a cumbersome superstructure. After independence, Papua-New Guinea will face real problems both in general and in the church. Government offices, schools and business establishments have been built on either an Australian or an American scale, quite inappropriate for the needs and economy of the new country. This has been done to the extent that to maintaining them at that level would likely bankrupt the country or else subject it more completely to foreign business domination. Many institutions may have to be scrapped before a superstructure appropriate to the country is developed.⁶

Our Lutheran Church in Canada does not have much of either a bureaucracy or a large investment in offices. We are probably fortunate. Yet, a situation similar to that of New Guinea confronts us in regard to foreign mission work. We will most likely expand our involvement. Will we do it as the U.S. has traditionally done it or will we do it differently? Perhaps our experience with Canadian Lutheran World Relief - maximum benefits with minimum costs - should be our model for mission work.

I am encouraged by the way in which our Church leaders have addressed themselves to problems of Canadian involvement in the misery of people abroad, and their success in getting a great deal of general commitment for aid. The deficiency of the rest of the world is often connected with *our* waste, at least with transportation resources. Even our pollution is very often merely incompletely-used, or improvidently-discarded, resources. Christians profess to have a different lifestyle than others - to be worshipping not mammon, but God;

6. Henry Mayer, “Papua-New Guinea: Caught in a Trap”, *Lutheran World* (Volume 21, 1974, No. 2), 141-152.

to be finding the substance of our lives not in what we possess, but in the love we have experienced and then express.

Without forgetting overseas work, can we arouse the same sort of concern for those who are hurting in our own country? If we can (and can get lay involvement) we shall be one of the most "alive" Churches in the world.

In the matter of involving people, can we do so without involving more professionals? Our Church has traditionally been oriented towards *direction* by pastors: not only towards *service* by them. This tendency has been exacerbated by the influence of North American business practices. One of our new directions may be to involve more lay persons and volunteer groups, not only because of our minimum of finances, but also because of their ability and because we are all the Church. The pioneer work with the adult discussion group carried out in the 1930s by Moses M. Coady was partly due to the lack of finances for more expensive programs of the Extension Department of St. Francis Xavier University.⁸

In relation to foreign connections, there are different patterns than the colonialist ones discussed earlier. First of all, if we must borrow - and there is much for us to learn in the experience of Churches in the rest of the world - we can choose to *borrow* from several sources, consciously seeking that which appears most relevant, or seeking cross-fertilization of ideas. Or, secondly, if our own cause is important enough, it will attract others to it, but as *our* cause, to a new response for them. I believe this has already taken place in our Church with many of the able leaders who have become naturalized Canadians. On the national scene, it is probably the case with the residence in Toronto of Jane Jacobs, the writer on cities. As a country, we are being recognized abroad as having something worthwhile. For instance, *Harper's* magazine in its December 1974 issue ran an article on Toronto, in which it described the general characteristic of Canada as *order* (in the sense of orderliness).

To find our own reality we will have to develop the capacity not to be ashamed to express ourselves *as ourselves*, not in someone else's mould. Yes, we shall sometimes make mistakes. Yes, we shall sometimes feel foolish afterwards. But we shall also sometimes discover afterwards how much we did, without realizing its consequences at the time we were doing it. We shall sometimes discover afterwards that what we did was unique. In doing so, it is better that we do *something*, even if we feel that it means to "sin boldly", rather than commit the sin of the servant who buried his talent in the ground.

Vincent Eriksson
Camrose, Alberta

7. See Jacques Ellul, *The Theological Foundation of Law*, (New York: Seabury Press, 1969), especially pp. 82-84, 117-118, where he argues that the Bible does not represent God as Lord of some theoretical framework of law, but rather as the one who fights for the oppressed.

8. Alex F. Laidlaw, editor, *The Man From Margaree: Writings and speeches by M. M. Coady*, (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1971), page 89.