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Lutheran Union Negotiations: a Moment of Reflection

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SPECIAL REPORT

LUTHERAN UNION NEGOTIATIONS

— A Moment of Reflection —

It is useful at times to step back from the things that are happening and reflect on them with the hope of putting them into historical perspective. This is what is intended by this report. It is hoped that the merger negotiations can be put into their historical context and thereby each of us can come to some fresh perspectives and insights into our church in Canada.

A Culmination of the Past

In 1972 the ELCC issued an invitation to the Missouri Synod in Canada (LC-C) and the Lutheran Church in America - Canada Section to negotiate to bring about a consolidation of Lutherans in Canada. For some people who had not been involved, either vicariously through reading or directly through contact with other Lutherans in their area, this move may have seemed almost reckless. Inter-Lutheran relationships in Canada had improved from what they once were but surely Lutherans were not ready to enter into a union. It was totally premature. And yet, was it?

If we can get to the point of seeing that Canadian Lutheranism has a history of its own, we will see that a reoccurring theme in this country has been a desire for one Lutheran Church in Canada. This is particularly true in Western Canada where the Synodical divisions based on doctrinal differences were not indigenous to most Lutheranism and were, in a very real way, imported. As far as most of the people in the congregations were concerned, they often used the Synodical divisions consciously and unconsciously to justify divisions among themselves which were totally non-theological in nature. Also the presence of several Lutheran bodies often was useful for getting pastoral services. Thus when local squabbles had cooled or when congregations found themselves struggling financially to remain solvent, it was not uncommon for people to look at themselves and other Lutherans and ask, "Why are we divided?" And when people moved out of the more static rural communities into urban centres, it was not uncommon for them to go to the closest Lutheran church without much

thought about its Synodical affiliation. The one thing that still sometimes kept people within their original Synodical body was familiarity with a particular hymnal or a particular pastor in the new locality.

But the question, "Why are we divided?" was not only asked by the laity. It was also asked by the clergy. And, in many instances it was even asked by church leaders after the heat of competition for new fields in the latter part of the nineteenth century and the early part of this century had cooled. Thus in 1931, when the Canadian representatives of the constituent bodies of the American Lutheran Conference met for the first time, the suggestion surfaced that a Canadian Lutheran Church be established with autonomous Synods. Taking into account the fact that the five Lutheran bodies reflected four different language traditions, it is amazing that such a suggestion could be made. Yet even with the language barriers, a need was felt for a united Lutheran Church structure in Canada.

The vision, limited to the constituent members of the American Lutheran Conference in 1931, was broadened to include all Lutherans in Canada two decades later. After a meeting of American Lutheran Conference representatives in May, 1951 a free conference took place in December that year which included also the other two Lutheran bodies active in Canada the U.L.C.A. (now part of the L.C.A.) and the Missouri Synod. The major topics discussed at that meeting were "What are our common grounds toward closer unity or a merger of the Canadian Lutheran Churches?", "What things constitute real or imaginary barriers to such a closer union or merger?" and "What steps can be taken to cement closer ties and overcome present obstacles to closer unity or a merger of the Canadian Lutheran Churches?"

Three years later at a "Today-Tomorrow Conference" under the direction of the Canadian Lutheran Council the picture of Canadian Lutheranism was probed and the vision of a Canadian Lutheran Church and how it might be achieved was thoroughly examined. Then in 1955 the western representatives of the Canadian Lutheran Council discussed the possibility of forming a Western Canada Lutheran Church. The following year the vision was again expanded to be nation-wide and to include the Missouri Synod. Church leaders met annually after that (except for 1967) in what is now known as the Joint Commission on Inter-Lutheran Relationships.

Thus when the ELCC extended the invitation to the other two-thirds of Lutheranism in Canada in 1972, it was echoing the desire of Canadian Lutherans of many decades. And when the JCILR met in November, 1973 it was confronted basically with the same questions which were discussed formally 22 years before - what do we need to achieve Lutheran union? How do we achieve the goal? The only difference was that a formal invitation to negotiate such a united Lutheran Church had been issued and accepted. A lot of talking had also been done in the meantime and church leaders had worked together effectively in various ways so the time was perhaps more ripe for concrete action in 1973. Yet it must have been similar to seeing an old movie again for some of the participants of the 1973

meeting. The same and yet different, for now it appeared that the dream might become a reality.

For some, especially in the Missouri Synod, it may still feel that we are rushing into something for which we are insufficiently prepared psychologically, emotionally and perhaps theologically. But as one views the steam of history which is Canadian Lutheranism, it is realistic to say, "Let's be serious about our negotiations. Let's not drag our feet. Let's work at seeing whether in fact a Canadian Lutheran Church, comprising most of Canadian Lutheranism, can be achieved." The present negotiations to consolidate Canadian Lutheranism is in reality a culmination of the past.

Just one further note on this matter. The laymen, who have often tolerated the Synodical divisions more out of love and respect for their pastors than out of personal conviction that they are necessary, were represented at the 1973 meeting of the JCILR. It was the laymen in the group who especially pressed for a concrete plan of action for Lutheran union. And most laymen with whom I have been in contact have the attitude, "We're ready when the pastors are." In other words laymen, who are informed on the activities in progress, generally favour the formation of an inclusive Canadian Lutheran Church, at least on the national and regional level. For most of them it would be a culmination of what they have felt should have occurred a long time ago.

A Reflection of Canadian Identity

It is significant that the ELCC was the church body which issued the invitation to negotiate a consolidation of Lutheranism in Canada. For the ELCC is the only one of the three major Lutheran bodies in Canada which is completely autonomous.

In the history of Canadian Lutheranism, the times when Lutheranism in this country was faced with the reality of its Canadian identity were the times when a strong need was felt for Lutherans to move closer together. The other side of the coin is that the times when the connection of Canadian Lutheranism with U.S. Lutheranism was strongly felt were also the times when Canadians tended to move into stances of greater isolation from one another.

It is a fact of history that organized Lutheranism in Canada, particularly in the west, has its roots in the U.S. Although many of the people in the churches have not come from the U.S., the support in manpower and money came from there. Also in all cases, the structures of the Canadian churches were integral parts of the churches which had their headquarters and the bulk of their membership in the U.S. To all intents and purposes Canada might as well have been a part of the United States as far as the churches were concerned. While this arrangement had advantages, it also had some inherent disadvantages. For it tended to make Canadian Lutheranism more foreign to the Canadian scene than it already was by virtue of being largely an ethnic church.

But a number of Canadian events served to confront Lutheranism with its Canadian identity. And in virtually every instance there was a corresponding

movement of Lutherans toward each other. Although this movement closer together was not a movement toward a consolidation of the churches, it represented a consolidation of resources and energies which provided impetus for the former. It was, very natural for people to reflect, "If we can work together harmoniously and effectively from within our different Lutheran church bodies, could we not work together even better within a united Lutheran body in Canada?"

What were some of these Canadian events which brought Canadian Lutheranism closer together? There may be earlier events which could be cited but the first Canadian challenge, after all of Canadian Lutheranism had at least some sort of distinct Canadian organizational identity, was the influx of immigrants in the 1920's. Since most of them were German, this challenge confronted particularly the three "German" Lutheran bodies. The challenge met co-operatively through an organization called, the Lutheran Immigration Board. (LIB).

It might be said that the churches themselves did not act co-operatively through this Board. It was never endorsed or supported by the churches nor did it report to church conventions. Strictly speaking it was an organization made up of individual pastors.

But taking note of who these pastors on the LIB were, how the organization functioned and what its purposes were, one sees that it fallacious argument to say that the churches were not actually working together in this enterprise. With few exceptions the members of the LIB were the presidents and mission directors of the Canadian Districts of the Missouri and Ohio Synods and of the Canadian Synods of the ULCA. The organization worked with local committees set up in congregations of the churches where German immigrants could find farm employment. The goal was to channel German Lutheran immigrants into areas where the churches had existing congregations or in a couple of instances, where a new congregation was envisioned. Thus, though not formally part of the operation of the churches, it is readily apparent that the LIB was in fact an arm of home missions for the "German" Lutheran churches in Canada.

Given the integral way in which the Canadian parts of the churches were bound in with the U.S. portions, it is significant that the LIB operated totally in the Canadian context. The extent to which it was Canadian in origin and scope is demonstrated by a letter which the National Lutheran Council in the U.S. wrote to the Canadian government, a year after the LIB was organized, requesting information about it. The U.S. officials of the churches apparently knew nothing about it.

It was also a project in which the "German" Lutheran bodies in Canada co-operated fully. Only the traditional rivalry between the CPR and the CNR, resulting in the creation of the Canadian Lutheran Immigration Aid Society (CLIAS) in 1928, caused a breakdown in this co-operative Lutheran venture.

Another Canadian event which could be cited is the Second World War. War time has had a way of making the churches aware of their Canadian identity. The

problems connected with the flow of money and manpower across the U.S.-Canadian border during the First World War were largely responsible for the establishment of the two Western Districts of the Missouri Synod in 1921 and 1922.

The Second World War brought in the dimension of serving the Lutherans in the armed forces. Remembering the fact that Canada was involved in the war two years before the U.S., we note that Canadian representatives of the seven Lutheran bodies serving in this country met in April, 1940 and organized a Canadian Lutheran Commission for War Services. When the matter was referred to the various churches for ratification, the Missouri Synod did not participate. However two Missouri Synod clergymen were present at the meeting at which the Commission was organized and one of them was a member of the three-man drafting committee which gave shape to the organization. Furthermore when the Missouri Synod set up its own Canadian organization which paralleled the Commissions activities, the man who helped shape the Commission became the executive secretary of the Missouri Synod's counter part and a very close working relationship with the commission was maintained.

Immediately after the war the matter of relief work and refugee settlement brought Canadians together under the umbrella of Canadian Lutheran World Relief. Although, all of these activities reflected "co-operation in externals", they were responses to the challenges which Canadian situations called forth and in each instance there seemed to be a natural tendency for Lutherans to act co-operatively. At least one Canadian Lutheran church leader assessed the effects of this type of activity as facilitating the discovery of a genuine unity of faith and spirit and the establishment of a bond of fellowship which would produce far greater things in the years to come.

If we want to point to more contemporary examples of Canadian challenges to which the churches have taken a co-operative approach we could point to many of the things which are done through the Lutheran Council in Canada - chaplaincy service in penal institutions and hospitals and on university campuses, etc. We could also point to the Lutheran Theological Seminary in Saskatoon where the establishment of a chair of theology by the Missouri Synod was largely as a response of the Canadian church in solving a Canadian problem, i.e. the difficulties which Canadian theological students and their wives had getting permission to work in the U.S.

The point in all of this is that there seems to be a direct relationship - it's difficult to define it as a coincidence in each of these instances - between the surfacing of a Canadian identity on the part of the churches and their moving closer together. So also now, this invitation to consolidate Canadian Lutheranism comes, not so much motivated by nationalism as the recognition by the churches that they have a mission to carry out in the context of Canada. In other words, the churches are reflecting a consciousness of their Canadian identity. And this consciousness of Canadian identity is accompanied by the recognition that

Lutherans would be able to carry out their mission most effectively in the context of a united Lutheran church.

Facing up to Reality

The ELCC invitation, I think, has a way of asking the Lutheran Churches in Canada to face up to reality. In the past there has often been a tendency for Lutherans to paint one another with very broad strokes of the brush.

There has been the tendency to lay all of the sins the entire church body (real or imagined) at the door of the local church and pastor without bothering to find out what the local situation actually was. There may be a way in which we share in the faults of our entire church body. Yet the merger invitation of the ELCC confronted us with the need of facing up to the reality of what the real situation is among Lutherans in Canada. If we are considering the possibility of setting up a Lutheran Church in Canada, it doesn't do to pull in problems from all over the North American continent. We have to face up to the reality of what the Canadian situation is. In addition, coming at it from another direction, we should no longer expect someone else to tell us whether our discussions reveal sufficient unity. The onus should be on us.

There is another aspect to this. In 1969 when the Missouri Synod affirmed itself to be in altar and pulpit fellowship with the American Lutheran Church and, in Canada, with the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Canada, it was on the basis of doctrinal discussions. In the case of fellowship with the ELCC, the discussions took place in the context of the Joint Commission on Inter-Lutheran Relationships. The fact that the Missouri Synod did not also include the hand of fellowship to the LCA-Canada Section, whose representatives shared in the same discussions, caused considerable consternation for the LCA in Canada. In doing so the LCA in Canada had taken a stance different from the LCA in the U.S. which refused to have discussions with the Missouri Synod. But somehow this didn't seem to make any difference.

The merger invitation has focused on this situation and presents a challenge for us to find a way, constitutionally and otherwise, to close the triangle of Lutheran fellowship relationships. It is a challenge for us to face up to the reality of where we as Lutherans are in this country and to see whether we have sufficient unity among us to be able to form a single Lutheran Church in Canada.