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Karen Kuhnert

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Remembering Canadian Lutheran World Relief—Relationships: Coastal Compassion, A Propositional History

WEBINAR II

Karen Kuhnert*

On Page 3 of *Adventuring for Christ*, George Evenson tells the story of the Scandinavians who arrived on the Pacific Coast of lower mainland British Columbia at the time of the Pacific Gold Rush, some people around Lower mainland British Columbia (around Vancouver), and others all the way up to Bella Coola.¹

Around the 1850s, the Gold Rush had prompted people to migrate to the Pacific Coast from all across the continent and, in some cases, all around the world. The Gold Rush clustered highly diverse groups of people from across the North American continent and around the world—right at the moment in history that Gordon spoke of at the last webinar—right when Lutheranism was about to experience continental realignments.²

At that moment in history some of these Lutherans were incredibly well-resourced and others, men, women and children, were exceedingly poor, vulnerable, living often hand to mouth.³

When the Nidaros and Mount Zion congregational Centennial History was published in 1991, included in the excellent resource was a focus on eight women standing in front of a quilt holding up a variety of pieces of sewing. And the caption read, “Ladies Quilting.” The text read,

The ladies continue to make many beautiful quilts, layettes and baby clothes which are sent to CLWR together with Kiddy Kits which sometimes have been assembled by the Sunday school. In addition, used clothing has been gathered in aid of the native people of BC and the Salvadorian refugees.⁴

In their congregation’s history publication, called “The First 100 Years,” their centennial story is presented in chapters that help readers make the connection between their congregational history, Canadian Lutheran history, and Canadian and world history. That *CLWR* is featured in their history publication is notable! They write,

The ELW continues many of the projects begun in previous years. Gifts of Christmas baking are made for some of the members of the congregation. Christmas gifts are collected for the Canadian Mental Health Association. And money gifts are forwarded to CLWR, the Lutheran Association of Missionaries and Pilots (LAMP), Saskatoon Lutheran Seminary, Lutheran Bible Translators, Canadian Bible Society and Vancouver Seamen’s Mission.⁵

And yet, the *roots of compassion* for these “Ladies Quilting” go back to long before 1991!

* See the Foreword of this issue of *Consensus* for biographical information.

The compassion of these coastal peoples goes back to their very foundations; as they pointed out themselves in their history book, they understood their rootedness as being in the “Genesis 1:1—Beginning...”⁶ And just *part* of their foundation was their landing on the Lower mainland of British Columbia between the Gold Rush and the early 1880s.

So their history goes back:

- to before the women formed the ELW,⁷ the Evangelical Lutheran Women, in 1986,⁸ and back
- to before they formed the Women’s Missionary Federation in 1944,⁹ and back
- to before they formed the New Westminster Norwegian Ladies Auxiliary in 1904.¹⁰

It goes back to even before. It goes back to *before* the founding of the Vancouver congregation in 1890, when leaders from the Swedish, Norwegian, and Danish communities gathered at Runge Mortenson’s home on Park Lane near the Great Northern Depot to create a congregation whose purpose was to “Proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ to all Scandinavians living in Vancouver.”¹¹ Soon thereafter a congregation was founded, and almost immediately after that in 1891 a women’s organization came to be.¹²

But, indeed, it goes back to even *before*, to before the congregation launched, because it began when the women started to arrive with their families and looked around and asked themselves, “How can we provide support to our family, to our congregation, and to our community?” To put this era into perspective:

- It was before 1889, when Pastor Tollefson was coming North from Seattle to serve the Scandinavians of Lower Mainland BC,¹³ concurrent with missionary Heinrich Schmieder moving to Manitoba, and beginning his service from Manitoba into the Assiniboia Valley.¹⁴
- It was before 1890 when First Scandinavian Vancouver was started, as when Pastor Schmieder was moving the mission field out of Edenwald.¹⁵

And not only were the Scandinavians of Lower mainland British Columbia being served by Pastor Tollefson of the Norwegian tradition, it is written in another of the congregational histories that around 1890 Pastor Svante Udden had come from Manitoba by train. According to one telling, Pastor Udden was baptizing children along the route in the railcars on the railroad.¹⁶ And finally, the Lower mainland Scandinavian Lutherans were also receiving support from missionary Daniel Nelson who was delayed in Vancouver on his way to mission in China.¹⁷ He was delayed by six months—while he was awaiting his papers. With his help, the congregation was able to find a location for a worshipping community—in a Chinese mission church. The history reads that the church “stood on piles on the riverfront near the foot of what is now 10th St in New Westminster.”¹⁸

Eventually this congregation Called Pastor Tollefson, and then Pastor Saugstad, and thereafter Pastor C. J. Olsen.¹⁹ In C. J. Olsen’s time, a church and a parsonage were built. And here is another great aspect of the story. One of the congregational histories reads thus:

When Pastor Olsen decided to return to the United States in 1896 the congregation had no funds with which to repay him the \$500 owed on both properties. Three women Mrs. Sven Hofford, Mrs. Jacob Olsen and Miss Anna Risen (later Vance) came to the rescue. These three women purchased both properties from Pastor Olsen and

kept ownership of them until 1905, when the congregation had sufficient funds to buy them back.²⁰

It may have been due to these three women's ownership of the congregation's facilities, or maybe male chauvinism just passed away quietly on the evening of the 5th of July 1900. But at a congregational meeting on that date, the men of First Scandinavian Lutheran Church voted to give all women of the congregation the vote and all the privileges of membership. This was a radical decision in the context of this society in which they lived. It was a decision that was far ahead of its time, since the Suffragette Movement for the enfranchisement of women was only at its inception.²¹

The story continues that in 1909, Mrs. Nielsen was elected to church Council and served as a Deacon.²² And notably, the following was also part of this people's legacy. As provided by Pastor Yuk Klong Chong, for the "Lutheran Landmarks" series, published in the *Canada Lutheran*, he writes,

Many years ago, war and natural disaster forced a northern China people to move. Some came to Malaysia, where the Basel Switzerland Mission Society brought them the gospel. They were strangers in the land, so they adopted the name "Hakka" (guests). Some of these emigrated to Sabah, then called North Borneo. World War II left churches and schools in Sabah devastated. The Lutheran World Federation assisted in rebuilding. Some Hakka moved to Canada. They settled in Vancouver and began meeting for worship in private homes, bound together by their common but rare dialect. In 1982, First Lutheran Church took them in. Basel Hakka Lutheran Church organized in 1983 and sent a call to Pastor Yuk Klong Chong in Sabah. He arrived in 1984. The present building was purchased at a court order sale. By amazing coincidence, the building turned out to be the original home of First Lutheran, the congregation that had supported their missions.²³

Amazing! It moved me, particularly, to also read this conclusion to the story, by an unknown writer remembering the story of their congregation. The congregational historian writes,

First Lutheran Church has over the years stressed the *use of one's gifts* within the life of the congregation *rather than one's sex and sex role*. As a result of this, women have played an active part in the whole life of the congregation. This has become increasingly evident with their participation in the worship services as lectors assisting ministers who assist in the singing of the liturgy and communion assistance.

History came full circle on Friday evening, July 1, 1983, when Riva Nelson was ordained in First Lutheran Church. Not only is Pastor Riva Nelson the first woman to be ordained in the Lutheran Church in British Columbia. She is also the great-granddaughter of Pastor Daniel Nelson, who in 1890, while passing through Vancouver on his way to China, ministered to and encouraged the Scandinavian Lutherans to organize themselves into First Scandinavian Lutheran Church of Vancouver."²⁴

All of this combined provides a perspective that we rarely hear in Lutheran Church history, in North America, or in Canada.²⁵ In 1890, the Lutheran women were taking a significant amount of leadership in their congregation. By 1905, they had vote and voice in their congregation.²⁶ And they had been proud to celebrate that they were a congregation who had supported one of the first ordained women in the Lutheran Church in Canada.²⁷

And so, thanks to the congregational histories that were written down by the Lutheran lay-leaders around about 1991, we can better understand the connection between the “Ladies Quilting” and their predecessor men and women of Danish, Swedish, Norwegian, and Chinese heritage; people that impacted their coastal compassion—the reason why in 1991 they are still connected to CLWR and offering support not just to their own—their own families and their own interests—but compassion to their community and their congregation and people far and wide whom they don’t know—through CLWR (Canadian Lutheran World Relief).

Endnotes

¹ George Evenson, *Adventuring for Christ* (Calgary: Foothills Lutheran Press, 1974), and see also Valdimar J. Eylands, *Lutherans in Canada* (The Icelandic Evangelical Lutheran Synod in North America, Winnipeg: The Icelandic Evangelical Lutheran Synod in North America, 1945). Interestingly, the story of the Lower Mainland BC Scandinavians and the Bella Coola Norwegian Lutheran Colony is also taken up in “A Decolonial Vision of God: Relationships Between Indigenous Peoples and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada” by Danika Jorgensen-Skakum in this issue of *Consensus*.

² See “Confessional Lutheran Identities in the Canadian Context: An Overview of Free Conferences by Rev. Dr. Gordon Jensen, with Introduction by Rev. Dr. Stephen Larson, Webinar I” in this Issue.

³ This mid-Century story is from the mid-1800s immigration “rush.” The story connects to another Canadian Lutheran World Relief *Propositional History* in the same time period called “Mid-Century Concord and Discord.” It also relates to the “Transcript for Webinar III Canadian Lutheran World Relief and the Lutheran Immigration Board of Canada, May 15, 2023.” and relates to the theme of early Canadian Lutheran settlement. This story also relates to two writings by Karen Kuhnert on Women in Canadian Lutheran History (see Karen Kuhnert “2SLGBTQIA+—Sexuality in Changing Lutheran Contexts and Identities,” *Consensus*, 43, no. 2 (2022), Article 7, <https://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol43/iss2/7>, and “Only If: Lutheran Identity in Canada,” *Consensus*, 34, no. 1, Article 3, <https://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol34/iss1/3>).

⁴ “The First 100 Years Nidaros and Mount Zion Lutheran Church: 1891–1991,” (Nidaros and Mount Zion Lutheran Church Centennial Committee, 1991). “Ladies Quilting” is in the section “Evangelical Lutheran Women—A Brief History” [ELW], 55.

⁵ The First 100 Years Nidaros and Mount Zion, 52.

⁶ The First 100 Years Nidaros and Mount Zion, 5.

⁷ The First 100 Years Nidaros and Mount Zion, 52.

⁸ The First 100 Years Nidaros and Mount Zion, 51.

⁹ The First 100 Years Nidaros and Mount Zion, 51.

¹⁰ The First 100 Years Nidaros and Mount Zion, 47.

¹¹ The story of gathering “First Scandinavian Lutheran Church” in 1889 is told in the “History of First Lutheran Church of Vancouver,” Part 1 and Part 2, no date, no publisher.

¹² “History of First Lutheran Church of Vancouver,” Part 1, “As the congregation grew a need was felt for various forms of ministry within the congregation. A year after its organization, 1981 [sic, 1891] a women’s group was formed in the home of Mrs. Alfred Andersen...”

¹³ “History of First Lutheran Church of Vancouver,” Part 1, date for Tollefsen at Matsqui and Aldergrove in 1889. The story of these Scandinavians is also taken up in this Issue by PhD candidate Danika Jorgensen-Skakum who points out most helpfully that these lands may be the homelands of the Stó:lo Peoples (Endnote 27 in “A Decolonial Vision of God: Relationships Between Indigenous Peoples and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada” in this Issue, citation: “a Government of British Columbia, Stó:lo Nation,” accessed August 14, 2020, <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/environment/natural-resource-stewardship/consulting-with-first-nations/first-nations-negotiations/first-nations-a-z-listing/st-lo-nation1>. Chief Bill Williams might have a different perspective as cited in the “Acknowledgement of Indigenous Neighbours and Territories by Karen Kuhnert: Taking A Google Earth Perspective, Webinar II” in this issue of *Consensus*.

¹⁴ Eylands, 233.

¹⁵ Eylands, 235.

¹⁶ “The History of the First Lutheran Church of Vancouver, B. C. According to Notes by Mrs. Adolph Lundgren,” 1. This source indicates that Rev. Udden travelled on the CP Rail baptizing from the train on the route. In Marcus Busch’s presentation on the Lutheran Immigration Board of Canada (established in 1925), Busch addresses Lutheran immigration by railway at length (see “Transcript for Webinar 3,” in this issue). Another perspective is offered by Jorgensen-Skakum in “A Decolonial Vision of God.”

¹⁷ “History of First Lutheran Church of Vancouver,” Part 1. Evenson, *Adventuring For Christ*, 4. It is noteworthy that Daniel Nelson’s story was not discovered and included in the “Remembering Canadians in Global Missions and World Service” in this Issue (though this writer worked on that project!).

¹⁸ From “The Early Years,” in “The First 100 Years of the Trinity Lutheran Congregation, Delta B. C.,” compiled and written by Sheila Jecks, New Leaf Computer Publishing and Printing, 1991. In this section Jecks indicates that prior to Pr. Tollefson’s 1891 knocking on the door of the home of N. J. Larsen to formally organize the congregation—the Lutherans met in “people’s homes, the Cannery House and a Scow House.... They managed to rent an unused Chinese mission church, built on piles on the river front near the foot of what is now Tenth Street in New Westminster.”

¹⁹ Jecks, “The First 100 Years of the Trinity Lutheran Congregation, Delta B. C.” from “Pastors Who Have Served Trinity Lutheran Congregation.”

²⁰ Part 2, “History of First Lutheran Church of Vancouver,” no date, no publisher. Evenson in *Adventuring for Christ* notes much more briefly the story of the three women, 4. Evenson cites Harold Engen, “A History of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Canada” BD thesis, Saskatoon, 1955, 11.

²¹ Part 2, “History of First Lutheran Church of Vancouver.” For more on pre-War Enfranchisement see Kuhnert 2SLGBTQIA+.

²² Part 2, “History of First Lutheran Church of Vancouver.” Regarding “Mrs. Nielsen,” see Kuhnert, 2SLGBTQIA+ on historians remembering women by the names of their husbands. Regarding Mrs. Nielsen becoming the first female elected Deacon, see “Remembering Our Legacy in Diaconal Ministry: A Deacon Dialogue,” in this Issue. As Mrs. Nielsen was elected, the meaning is that she was elected to congregational leadership rather than elected to professional ministry as a Deaconess.

²³ In the Archivist Copy of the Norm Antler Collection (shown in the photo), Norman Antler put the story of the Basel Hakka Lutheran Church on page 3 of the incredibly large book, presumably so the story would not get lost in the many pages of more standard congregational histories. The date of the entry by Pastor Yuk Klong Chong is not identified.

²⁴ Part 2, “History of First Lutheran Church of Vancouver.”

²⁵ For more on the missing voices in Canadian Lutheran history, see the Foreword and “Canadian Lutheran History Sources and Resources” and Danika Jorgenson-Skakum’s “A Decolonial Vision of God” in this Issue. See also, Karen Kuhnert, “2SLGBTQIA+—Sexuality in Changing Canadian Contexts and Identities.”

²⁶ Part 2, “History of First Lutheran Church of Vancouver.”

²⁷ Part 2, “History of First Lutheran Church of Vancouver.” For more on the Ordination of Lutheran Women in Canada to the Clergy Roster see Dianne K. Kieren, *With Many Voices: Twenty-Five Years of Ordained Women in Ministry, 1976–2001* (Winnipeg: Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, 2002).