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Theological Observer

Needed: A Paradigm Shift in Missouri's Mission Outlook

In January 1992, as a fairly junior Navy chaplain, I attended a Lutheran Chaplains Conference in San Diego, California. Such conferences are conducted annually as a joint endeavor between the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. Sponsorship of these conferences alternates between the two church bodies. That year the Missouri Synod hosted the West Coast Lutheran Chaplains Conference. The guest speaker was the Rev. Dr. Eugene Bunkowske, Professor of Missiology at Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Indiana who spoke on "The Chaplain as Missionary." One of Dr. Bunkowske's major emphases in his presentation was a discussion on paradigm shifts, which he saw as extremely important for effective mission work. This was the first time I was introduced to such a concept, and I freely admit that I did not embrace the viewpoint wholeheartedly. I saw in it a possible way of rationalizing proposed changes in our church body's doctrinal position and long-standing practices. However, I see more clearly now how some things can change, and how the concept can be useful. The Missouri Synod must indeed consider a paradigm shift in its mission outlook, and we need to act now.

A shift in Missouri Synod mission outlook took place in 1962. At the Cleveland Synodical Convention, the Synod faced the cessation of fellowship by the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS). The Evangelical Lutheran Synod (ELS) had done so several years before. Mission work that had been carried on jointly through the Synodical Conference was quickly coming to an end or being assumed by the Missouri Synod alone. Thus, the 1962 LCMS synodical convention voted to work toward a new inter-Lutheran agency. The result was the Lutheran Council in the United States of America (LCUSA), which included joint work between the American Lutheran Church (ALC), the Lutheran Church in America (LCA), and the Missouri Synod in various areas. Over the course of time, mission work became an area of joint endeavor. Joint international Lutheran congregations supported by all participants in LCUSA were established in Germany, Korea, Guam, and Japan. These congregations were neither identified as LCA, ALC, nor LCMS. They were simply "Lutheran," yet supported by all three church bodies, and pastors from all three would rotate in serving these "special" mission congregations. In Korea, only one Lutheran church body exists, and it received varying degrees of support by all the members of LCUSA.

The military chaplaincy was another area where joint work was carried out. Lutheran military chaplains were to serve all Lutherans, regardless of their synodical affiliation. Cooperation in base-wide "Lutheran" worship services was also encouraged. Furthermore, as noted above, yearly Lutheran chaplain conferences were held as a combined effort among all members of LCUSA. Services of Holy Communion were conducted together at these conferences, even though fellowship between the members of LCUSA had not been established. This continued, even during the tumultuous years of the exodus from Concordia Seminary, Saint Louis and the formation of the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches (AELC). Separate ELCA and LCMS services of Holy Communion were not established at Lutheran chaplain conferences until the late 1980s, and then many of the older chaplains complained because a distinction in doctrine and practice had been made.

Since the formation of the ELCA in 1988, several things have happened which necessitate a paradigm shift in the mission outlook of the Missouri Synod. In 1997, the ELCA declared itself in full fellowship with the United Church of Christ, the Reformed Church in America and the Presbyterian Church in the USA. That same year, the ELCA also declared that there is no longer any substantial disagreement between the Lutheran and Roman Catholic understandings of the doctrine of justification. Finally, during its church-wide assembly in August 1999, the ELCA voted to adopt full communion with the Episcopal Church and the Moravian Church in America. The LCMS does not agree with the ELCA with regard to any of these decisions. In each case, Missouri Synod leaders have expressed deep regret over the actions of the ELCA. However, the Missouri Synod continues to operate through the Board for Mission Services as if the old LCUSA model was in place, fully operational, and effective. The truth can no longer be ignored: LCUSA is no longer in effect; a change has taken place; and Missouri Synod Mission leadership needs to shift their perspective. The LCMS cannot continue to operate under the old paradigm!

Even before the ELCA declared itself in full fellowship with various Reformed bodies and the Episcopal Church, questions of Lutheran identity and confessional commitment were ignored in various mission areas. The LCMS does not believe, teach, and confess the same as the ELCA with respect to the nature of the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture, confessional subscription, the ordination of women, church fellowship, the sanctity of human life, and membership in certain

ecumenical organizations. With the recent ecumenical declarations of the ELCA, the real presence of Christ's body and blood in the Lord's Supper, the doctrine of justification, and the doctrine of the ministry are called into question as well. Furthermore, the ELCA has permitted on its clergy roster pastors and theological professors who deny or question the following: the virgin birth and bodily resurrection of Christ, whether the New Testament teaches that the death of Christ was an atonement for sin, whether Jesus Himself actually claimed to be God, whether Jesus did, in fact, speak the words of institution, and whether the miracles recorded in Holy Scripture are real or merely myths. Thus, "Lutheran" is not "Lutheran" is not "Lutheran." The LCMS Board for Mission Services cannot carry on outside the United States of America as if differences between the LCMS and ELCA do not exist.

Yet, carry on under the LCUSA model is precisely what the Missouri Synod Board for Mission Services continues to do. There is only one Lutheran church body in the Republic of Korea. Although its seminary acknowledges it was founded by the Missouri Synod, there is no distinction made in its affiliation. The reason given: "this [more than one Lutheran church body] would be considered too much of an offense in Korea." Training and study for the pastoral office at Concordia Seminary in Hong Kong are all but defunct. The only LCMS professor called to the LCMS affiliated seminary in Hong Kong teaches predominantly at the Lutheran School of Theology, which is associated with the Lutheran World Federation. The only full-time student for the pastoral office from the LCMS affiliated Lutheran Church – Hong Kong Synod takes classes at the Lutheran School of Theology as well. The only active program at Concordia Seminary, Hong Kong involves preparation for a newly established "Evangelist Program." Successful candidates who complete the four-year, part-time program (two nights per week) will be entrusted with a "Word and Sacrament ministry in one of the smaller, vacant congregations" of the Hong Kong Synod. The International Lutheran Church in Tokyo, although served by an LCMS pastor, still declares itself a joint congregation of the ELCA and LCMS. No distinction between denominational affiliation is made by the International Lutheran Church on Guam either. This is not second-hand information. As Command Chaplain aboard the USS BLUE RIDGE and Fleet Chaplain for COMMANDER, SEVENTH FLEET, I have visited each and every place referred to above within the past year.

The Ministry to the Armed Forces of the LCMS, which falls under the

Board for Mission Services, continues to cling to the LCUSA model as well. LCMS chaplains are expected to provide word and sacrament ministry to all Lutherans. They are also expected to work with ELCA chaplains in providing a Lutheran worship service at military installations when stationed together. In addition, combined Lutheran chaplain conferences continue to be conducted. Meanwhile, the ELCA is clearly heading in a direction very different from even the LCUSA model—toward a “general, main-line Protestantism” not dissimilar from the “American Lutheranism” proposed by Samuel Schmucker, Samuel Sprecher, and Benjamin Kurtz in the Definite Synodical Platform of 1855. Although a new, updated edition of the LCMS Chaplain Guidelines was published this year, these new Guidelines do not specifically address how Missouri Synod chaplains should deal with ELCA chaplains in view of the current ELCA direction, nor has any other specific guidance been forthcoming from the Ministry to the Armed Forces of the Board for Mission Services to assist in this regard.

On November 19, 1997, an agreement was signed by the Rev. Dr. Lowell Almen, Secretary for the ELCA, and the Rev. Dr. Walter Rosin, Secretary for LCMS. The key section (in bold in the agreement) states:

The ELCA and the LCMS shall continue the present agreement related to federal chaplaincies in which Lutheran services are conducted by Lutheran chaplains. . . . Only in special circumstances under policy to be developed by the respective churches would a clergy person of one participating body be available for service in another participating church body. Mutual recognition of the validity of ordained ministry in another church body does not imply free, unordered exchange. . . . Clearly under the Formula of Agreement, Lutheran pastors remain Lutheran pastors. They continue to be responsible for Lutheran witness; therefore, they are to teach, preach, and confess the faith of the Church for which the Lutheran confessional writings serve as true witnesses.

A new agreement was reached between the ELCA Committee on Federal Chaplaincies and the LCMS Ministry to the Armed Forces Committee on October 14, 1999. A letter sent to all LCMS chaplains in November 1999, discussing the agreement stated:

Both committees remain strongly committed to the continuation of our cooperative Lutheran ministry in the military. As you know, chaplains of both church bodies agree to provide pastoral care to all Lutherans in their units or installations.

In light of the above, our committees concurred that the ecumenical agreements of the ELCA should not be understood as being applicable to the voluntary gathering of Lutheran worship communities in the military. Rather, in respect for the variety of Lutherans gathered, these services should remain distinctly Lutheran.

A previous agreement emphasized that Lutheran services on military installations would always be conducted by Lutheran chaplains. This new agreement additionally affirms that those who commune at military Lutheran services should have a clear understanding and acceptance of the Lutheran doctrine of the Lord's Supper.

The current agreement between the ELCA and the LCMS dealing with cooperative Lutheran ministry in the military is silent with respect to profound differences that exist between the two church bodies. It therefore gives the appearance of a unity of doctrine that unfortunately does not exist and implies that the differences between the ELCA and the LCMS are insignificant.

Furthermore, despite these agreements, an ELCA chaplain stationed in Yokosuka, Japan several years ago combined the Lutheran and Episcopal congregations at the base chapel under the title "Lutheran-Episcopal Sunday Communion Service." This was done before the agreement of full communion was reached in 1999 between the ELCA and the Episcopal Church, and it was done with the full complicity of both the ELCA and Episcopal military Endorsing Agents. Services are co-celebrated by both an ELCA pastor and an Episcopal priest. Recently, a visiting female United Church of Christ Naval Reserve chaplain was invited to participate in this service as well. Since the formation of this joint "Lutheran-Episcopal" service, LCMS chaplains stationed in the Yokosuka, Japan area have found it difficult, if not impossible, to support this joint or "union" worshiping community without violating their confessional commitment and their membership in the Missouri Synod (see Article VI 2 b of the "Constitution of The Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod"). Because this service is already in place, it is extremely difficult to start a separate Lutheran service at the base chapel; also, this would be viewed as divisive by military authorities. If this kind of situation is proliferated at other military installations by ELCA chaplains, particularly now that the ELCA has established fellowship agreements with the Episcopal and other Reformed church bodies, the opportunities for LCMS military chaplains to provide a confessional Lutheran ministry of word

and sacrament at their duty stations will be further undercut. In addition, LCMS lay people serving in the military in isolated duty stations will be without a purely Lutheran worship opportunity.

The situation between the LCMS and the ELCA has clearly changed. Therefore, a paradigm shift in Missouri Synod mission outlook is necessary. As the ELCA continues in its current ecumenical direction, the LCMS must set its own confessional course, and that must include the policies and programs of the LCMS Board for Mission Services. To date, it remains unclear which way the LCMS wants to go in its mission outlook: in the ecumenical, "main-line Protestant" direction of the ELCA or toward the orthodox, confessional position that is our Lutheran heritage. If the LCMS Board for Mission Services continues on its current path, following the LCUSA model, either the mission work of the Missouri Synod will be pulled further and further away from its confessional foundation or the Synod will find itself standing alone, facing depleted mission resources with no plan or direction. Neither prospect is acceptable. Hopefully, a plan for confessional Lutheran mission work independent of the ELCA will be forthcoming.

John C. Wohlrabe Jr.
Commander, Chaplain Corps
United States Navy

A Missed Opportunity

Church historians generally look forward to church anniversaries because these are the few times that people generally seem prepared to seek them out and listen to the stories they have to tell. Yet, for a church body that claims to be so intimately aware of the story of its founding, it is strange that the Synod's sesquicentennial came and went without the production of an authoritative history — unless one sees the video series fulfilling that purpose. The failure to produce an up-to-date, critical narrative of the Synod's history has left Walter Baepler's *A Century of Grace* (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1947) at the top of the heap of Missouri histories.

Several authors have jumped into the breach after the fact. Recently, Leland Stevens published a volume that adds to our understanding of the Synod and is helpful, as far as it goes. However, *A History of the Missouri Synod as Told by the Lutheran Witness* is too narrow in scope. It focuses on one periodical that was founded thirty-five years after the Synod, and thus is ultimately incapable of telling Missouri's story fully. Still, it does have a provocative thesis: "The *Lutheran Witness* through

its editors has influenced the Synod more than the other way around" (page 204). Certainly the *Witness* has significantly impacted the Synod, at least in the sense that it reflects the Synod's experience. Yet the image in the mirror is not a comforting one. One thing that a careful perusal of the *Witness* over the years does clearly show is the manner in which substantive theological issues have been displaced by shallow treatments with lots of slick graphics. What little Stevens has to say about this shift is approving. For the Missouri Synod as a whole, it betrays a significant accommodation to emerging media sensibilities. The *Witness* has always dealt with issues facing the contemporary church. However, where the Graebner and Sommer team had hard-hitting articles that stated the unequivocal position of the Synod on these issues (a position the editors were convinced rested on the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions), the modern *Witness* seems to find it difficult to say exactly what the Lutheran position is. A case in point—an issue on Promise Keepers in November 1995 featured a pro and con argument, but, ultimately, found it impossible to speak clearly to the issue. The result—the sovereign individual reader is left to make his or her own decision. Is it too much to expect the *official* organ of the Missouri Synod to speak clearly in regard to the point? After all, Promise Keepers' Arminian doctrine of the will and resultant synergistic conception of salvation, along with its flawed ecclesiology and unionistic practices, should not be so difficult to understand. Yet in the end the *Witness* simply allowed the *sic et non* stand side by side. Abeland lives!

Mary Todd's recently published book *Authority Vested: A Story of Identity and Change in the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod* also claims to tell Missouri's story, though this time in the hope that it will lead the Synod to realize its evangelical and confessional identity and finally embrace the ordination of women—or at least to think seriously about the issue. At issue is Missouri's claim to doctrinal and historical consistency. Thus, Todd notes that "...a hallmark of Missouri Synod identity politics is evocation of a seamless past" (1). Her purpose is to show that historical and doctrinal continuity, both with the Lutheran Confessions and within its own setting, is a myth. At the heart of her thesis is the argument that at its founding and over the course of its history, Missouri has failed to define adequately the doctrine of the ministry. However, her position shows a lack of familiarity with Walther. She fails to appreciate the fine distinction that Walther makes between the one Office of the Holy Ministry and the various "auxiliary" offices that the church, in human freedom, may develop. Thus, when she then equates the Missouri's demonstrable shift on

certain nonessential expressions of service as “ministry” with the one Office of the Holy Ministry, Todd, at the very least, obscures Walther’s clearly articulated position—one that the Synod happened to accept in thesis form in 1851.

In fact, she is guilty of being anachronistic—reading back into the nineteenth century the fact of change that only entered Missouri, as John C. Wohlrabe Jr. has so ably shown, in 1962. In other words, her interpretive model, which depends heavily on secondary sources, does not demonstrate a clear grasp of Walther’s primary sources. Further, the character of her sources is, to say the least, unambiguously biased. She writes, for example: “Since C. F. W. Walther wrote the first issue of *Der Lutheraner* in 1844, the synod has proclaimed itself the voice of confessional Lutheranism in America. To be truly confessional one could argue that the Missouri Synod must acknowledge the ordination of women to be an *adiaphoron*, a matter of evangelical freedom” (254). What result should we expect? “Hope anticipates a church transformed by actualization of the Gospel message, a church that practices what it preaches” (267). What are her sources? the ELCA’s John Reumann, radical feminists Letty Russell and Rosemary Radford Ruether, and ELIM’s *Missouri in Perspective*! With such sources, the results, as it were, are guaranteed. By basing her narrative largely on twentieth century sources, and, in the latter section of the book, simply ignoring a significant amount of material that directly speaks to the issues she raises, a delicious irony results. Where L. DeAne Lagerquist’s recently published *The Lutherans* (Praeger, 1999) gives voice to those that older histories have marginalized (namely, African-Americans, women, and the laity in general), while simultaneously allowing more “traditional” sources their rightful place, Mary Todd’s *Authority Vested* dispatches confessional sources to the margin. Hence the guaranteed results—the one voice speaking is the voice of change. In this Stevens and Todd seem to be agreed, though their applications differ. In distinct contrast is the following statement of President John Behnken on a critical purpose of the Synod: “to promote, and insist on, unity in doctrine; . . . to provide Christ-centered publications and practices among the congregations” (*Lutheran Witness* [February 3, 1953]).

Missouri has rarely missed the opportunity to tell its own story clearly at critical points in its history. Our recently passed sesquicentennial, however, was a missed opportunity.

Lawrence R. Rast Jr.