

# Theological Observer

## How Did We Come to This?

During last week's biennial Church Wide Assembly of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), the church affirmed major policy recommendations to allow for the blessing of same-sex unions (which practice will soon inflate to same-sex marriage) and the rostering of gay and lesbian pastors in partnered relationships. Earlier in the week it also passed by one vote—out of over a thousand total votes cast—a Social Statement on Sexuality that admitted there was no consensus on the moral evaluation of homosexual conduct, and offered no compelling biblical or theological reasons to support the policies it later in fact adopted. The Statement was firm and bold on issues that everyone agreed upon—the moral condemnation of promiscuity, pornography, sexual exploitation, etc.—but indecisive and vague about contested issues—co-habitation, premarital sex, the importance of the nuclear family, and, of course, homosexual conduct. Right before the vote on the Social Statement a totally unexpected tornado hit the Minneapolis Conference Center where we were meeting as well as the huge Central Lutheran Church next door, knocking the cross off one of its towers. Orthodox voting members saw the work of God in the tornado's cross-toppling effects and in the vote that passed with a .666 majority. Revisionists noted that the sun came out after the vote. In response the orthodox quipped that the sun comes out almost every day but rogue tornados are pretty rare!

Those in the orthodox camp warned the assembly not to vote on binding church doctrine, especially if it had no convincing biblical or theological arguments to overturn the moral consensus of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church held throughout the ages and by 99% of the world's Christians. Such action would identify the ELCA with a rapidly declining liberal Protestantism while departing from orthodox teaching and practice. Strong arguments against the Social Statement and policy recommendations were made by pastors and laypersons—bishops were for the most part silent—to no avail. The church left the Great Tradition of moral teaching to identify with the United Church of Christ and the Episcopalians.

How did this come to be? On the one hand, the fact that the largest American Lutheran church body had become the first confessional church to accept homosexual conduct was a traumatic shock to many. There was much anger and anguish. On the other hand, the decision was not at all unexpected by those of us who have fought against the underlying currents operating in the church from its very inception. The fight has been long yet predictable. Liberal Protestantism was the ELCA's destination. Indeed, its presiding Bishop, Mark Hanson, is fast becoming the charismatic leader of liberal Protestantism.

"There is nothing but the Social Gospel," shouted a voting member at the assembly. But that is certainly not Lutheran doctrine. The various programs of social change taken to heart by the church are human works in God's left-hand reign, having to do with the Law, not the Gospel. Rather, the real Gospel is clear: the grace of God in Jesus Christ is offered to repentant sinners condemned by the Law and then called to amendment of life by the Spirit. Liberating efforts in the realm of social and political change are possibly effects of the Gospel, but certainly not the Gospel itself.

But the ELCA has accepted the Social Gospel as its working theology even though its constitution has a marvelous statement of the classic Gospel. The liberating movements fueled by militant feminism, multiculturalism, anti-racism, anti-heterosexism, anti-imperialism, and now ecologism have been moved to the center while the classic Gospel and its missional imperatives have been pushed to the periphery. The policies issuing from these liberationist themes are non-negotiable in the ELCA, which is compelling evidence that they are at the center. No one can dislodge the ELCA's commitment to purge all masculine language about God from its speech and worship, to demur on the biblically normative status of the nuclear family, to refuse to put limits on abortion in its internal policies or to advocate publicly for pro-life policies, to press for left-wing public domestic and foreign policy, to replace evangelism abroad with dialog, to commit to "full inclusion" of gays and lesbians at the expense of church unity, and to buy in fully to the movement against global warming. Though it is dogmatic on these issues it is confused about something as important as the assessment of homosexual conduct. Yet, it acts anyway because of the pressure exerted by those who want to liberate church and society from heterosexism.

But how did the liberal Protestant agenda replace the Christian core? There are many reasons, a goodly number that evangelicals share with Lutherans: a culture moving quickly toward permissive morality; the self-esteem movement leading to cheap grace; lay individualism combined with apathy toward Christian teaching; an obliviousness to church tradition and to the voice of the world church; and, above all, the loss of an authentic principle of authority in the church. This last item I will address in more detail later.

The ELCA has a particular history that has compounded these problems. The mid-80s planning stage of the ELCA was dramatically affected by a group of radicals who pressed liberationist (feminist, black, multiculturalist, gay) legislative initiatives right into the center of the ELCA structures. Among them was a quota system that skews every committee, council, task force, synod assembly, and national assembly toward the "progressive" side. (There are quotas for representing specific groups in all the organized activity of the church. 60% must be lay, 50% must be women, 10% must be people of color or whose language is other than English. The losers, of course, are white male pastors; our Virginia delegation to the assembly, for example, had only one

male pastor among its eight elected members.) Further, the prescribed structure distanced the 65 Bishops from the decision-making of the church. The Bishops have only influence, not power. (Aware of their divisiveness, the Bishops voted 44-14 to require a two thirds majority for the enactment of the Sexuality Task Force's policy recommendations, but were ignored by both the Church Council and the Assembly.) Theologians were given no formal, ongoing, corporate role in setting the direction of the ELCA. They, too, were kept at a distance and actually viewed as one more competing interest group.

The radicals so decisive in the defining moments of the ELCA intended to smash the authority of the influential white male theologians and bishops who had informally kept both the American Lutheran Church and the Lutheran Church in America on course. The radicals wanted many voices and perspectives, especially those of the "marginalized," put forward in the ongoing deliberations of the ELCA. They were so successful that now after twenty years there is no authoritative biblical or theological guidance in the church. There are only many voices. The 2009 Assembly legitimated those many voices by adapting a "bound-conscience" principle in which anyone claiming a sincerely-held conviction on about any doctrine must be respected. The truth of the Word of God has been reduced to sincerely-held opinion.

What was truly chilling about the Assembly's debates was that the revisionists seemed to quote Jesus and the Bible as knowledgeably and persuasively as the orthodox. Passages reinforcing their respective agendas were selected and then brilliantly woven into their arguments. Both sides seemed to have the Bible on their side. The revisionists "contextualized" and relativized the relevant texts. The orthodox claimed a plain sense reading of Scripture. The Lutheran Confessions were utilized effectively by both sides. There was no authoritative interpretation conveyed by any agent or agency in the church. The church was and is rudderless.

*Sola Scriptura*, a Lutheran principle adopted by evangelicals, did not seem to be sufficient in such circumstances. An authoritative tradition of interpretation of the Bible seemed to be essential. More was needed than the Word alone. Protestants seem to lack such an authoritative tradition so they fight and split. In this situation the option of swimming the Tiber seems all the more tempting

The fall-out of these historic moves by the ELCA is hard to predict, mainly because the Lutheran orthodox have no group of dissenting Bishops around whom to rally. There will be a profusion of different responses by congregations and individuals. Many congregations and individuals will leave the ELCA. Others will bide their time to see what Lutheran CORE (Lutheran Coalition for Renewal) will become as it strives to articulate and then embody the best of Lutheranism. Many will withdraw from involvement in the ELCA and its Synods and live at the local level. Many others will try to live on as if nothing happened. Others will approve of the new direction. But a

tectonic shift has taken place, and it wasn't primarily about sex. The ELCA has formally left the Great Tradition for liberal Protestantism.

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*[Robert Benne was a voting member of the Virginia Synod at the 2009 Church Wide Assembly of the ELCA in Minneapolis on August 17-23. This response was written shortly after that assembly and has circulated online. It is reprinted here with the permission of the author. The Editors]*

### **The Lithuanian Lutheran Church Today**

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Lithuania is a small and vibrant church which traces its origins back to the mission efforts of German merchants and travelers who brought the gospel of the saving work of Christ to this region in the early days of the Reformation. The establishment of a Lutheran university at Königsberg in East Prussia in 1544 provided a staunch and bold confessional Lutheranism which continued to flourish even with opposition from the Roman Catholic majority and representatives of other Protestant churches. Even the inroads of German Pietism from Halle which quickly spread throughout this region could not completely stifle the deep Lutheran spirit. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century when the Prussian Emperor forced the church into a union with the Reformed, Minor Lithuanians continued to identify themselves as Lutheran and to catechize their children with Luther's Small Catechism. In the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when other European Lutheran Churches were falling victim to liberal German theologies, the Lithuanian clergy and people held firmly to sound theology.

Until the end of WWI, there were two Lithuanias, Major and Minor, divided between Russia and Prussia. They were reunited in 1923 and enjoyed less than two decades of freedom before WWII. During and after WWII, the Lutheran population was literally decimated. There were at least 212,000 Lutherans in Lithuania in 1940, and most—except a mere 20,000 were forced to flee during the war years. After the war, persecution and exile afflicted the church. All church properties were confiscated and most church buildings were desecrated and put to secular uses as barns, granaries, factories, sports arenas, and cinemas. Only 27 of the 86 parishes still existed when independence from the USSR came in 1990. Of 71 priests, only eight were left. In the face of constant harassment from the state, insults from Communist officials, and the loss of all church property, the pastors and people kept the faith.

The Lithuanian experience was not unique. What made the difference in Lithuania was the continued strength of the Roman Catholic Church. This provided the Lutherans with a certain degree of protection in that the state was preoccupied with the Roman Catholic Church and its dissident movements,

and therefore gave less attention to the Lutherans. The strength of the Roman Catholic Church in the nation also made it possible for Lutherans to maintain a clearer identity and avoid some of the corrosive influences of secularism.

### **Church and State**

Since 1990 there has been a good working relationship between the Lutherans and the Lithuanian state. Even though the Lutheran church has no official concordat with the state, as does the Roman Catholic Church, it is officially recognized as a traditional faith. This allows Lutherans to teach the faith in the public schools and also provides it with a small measure of financial support from the state.

Although the Lutheran church represents only one percent of the population of Lithuania, it enjoys a measure of influence that is far out of proportion to its size. The president of the republic meets annually with the bishops of the Roman Catholic, Russian Orthodox, and Lutheran churches to discuss national issues and receive their input. Because they understand the separation between the Two Kingdoms, the Lutheran church does not expect the state to act as an arm of the church, nor does the church permit itself to be made a department of the state.

The government of our church is episcopal and synodical. The synod meets tri-annually. Between sessions, its policies are carried out by the church's consistory which is headed by the bishop and includes both clergy and lay members. The church is governed by statutes enacted in 1955. In order to adjust to its new situation, the statutes about church property and related issues were modified in 1990.

### **The Church's Struggle to Keep the Faith**

After independence efforts were made by some foreign church officials to introduce theological and ecclesiastical novelties. These were related to new views of the Bible and human rights issues such the ordination of women to the ministry. The church has successfully resisted these efforts. It has always been theologically conservative and is now moving toward a more self-consciously confessional stance.

Through the able efforts of the late Bishop Jonas Kalvanas Sr. and the Consistory, the seed of the gospel was again sown and confessional Lutheran self-consciousness has grown. Contacts with confessionally sound Lutheran churches in other lands further increased through the efforts of late Bishop Jonas Kalvanas Jr. who spoke out strongly against higher criticism and instituted a program to better educate the clergy and parishes in the confessional teachings of the Book of Concord. The church is now in fellowship with the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod and co-operates in the sponsorship of annual theological conferences for Eastern European church leaders. This work is now being continued under Bishop Mindaugas Sabutis.

At present, the church faces difficulties in preparing pastors for the work of the ministry. In 1992 a joint department of evangelical theology was established at Klaipėda University. Course work was provided for those who wished to study theology. Although the agreement was signed between the church and the university, the department has grown independent of the church and espouses liberal positions which are unscriptural and unacceptable to the church. The church now has no voice in its program and advice is no longer sought in faculty appointments. Now the church must face the question of how to provide sound training for those who wish to serve in the ministry. It is aware that it will have to depend upon sister churches to assist her in this important work.

The Roman Catholic Church in Lithuania is also facing a crisis in theological education. It has only three seminaries and only the Samogitian seminary in Telšiai began the new academic year with a full class of seven students. The Kaunas seminary has only six new enrollees and Vilnius has only three new students. A fourth seminary in Vilkaviškis closed because of low enrollment. Now there is talk that it may be necessary to look outside the country to find clergy to serve the church.

### **Present Challenges**

Lithuania has experienced great political, economic, and social upheaval, but these have not affected the church's doctrine and practice. To Lithuanians a "modern church" is one with heating, indoor plumbing, microphones and loudspeakers. The synod of 2008 amended its statutes to say that the church's doctrinal position cannot be changed regardless of societal changes.

The greatest challenge facing the church is implementation of a program of evangelism. Other challenges include the further education of the clergy, lay leaders, teachers of the Lutheran faith in the public schools, and congregational leaders. On the practical level, attempts go on to regain and repair devastated property, as well as provide some measure of financial support for the clergy.

The population of Lithuania stands at 3.5 million. Of these, almost three million are ethnic Lithuanians, six percent are Russian, another six percent are Polish, and smaller percentages of Belorussians and Ukrainians. In the most recent elections, the conservative Christian Democratic Party gained the most support—around 21 percent, because of Russian incursions partially into Georgia and fears concerning what Russia may have in mind for the Baltic States. In the recent presidential election the winning candidate, Dalia Grybauskaitė received 68 percent of the vote. Such is often the case in states where elections are closely controlled, but foreign and domestic observers alike declared that this was an open and free election. The new president is considered conservative in her political views. In fact, when she announced

her candidacy the conservatives declared that they would not nominate a candidate to stand against her.

84 percent of the Lithuanian population publicly declare themselves to be adherents of religious faiths. 10 percent state that they have no church to which they adhere and 8 percent declined to answer. In rural areas 90 percent of the population declare themselves to be religious as compared to 80 percent in the cities. Although it is small, the Lutheran church is the fourth largest religious group in the country. Over 2,700,000 identify themselves as Roman Catholics. Second and third place are taken by Russian Orthodox and Russian Old Believers whose churches grew rapidly with Russian immigration during the Communist years. They number about 170,000.

Statistics only imperfectly describe the religious situation. The younger generation, although baptized and confirmed, is not closely tied to the churches, and many are adopting a secularist world view. Few would say that they are anti-church, but the church does not affect their thinking and behavior.

The divorce rate in the country is a little less than 50 percent—an improvement over past years. Unfortunately the abortion rate is high, almost 48 percent in 2006 according to the government. The Roman Catholic Church claims that these statistics are too low.

Virtually all funerals in Lithuania are conducted by clergy. To be buried by a public speaker as in secular states is simply out of the question. The suicide rate, formerly the highest in the world, is now beginning to decrease, but it is still the highest in Europe.

### **European Membership**

Lithuania, together with its Baltic neighbors and Poland, are now full members of the European Union. At first some Lithuanians were afraid that this would bring a rapid increase in the costs of goods. This fear has proved to be largely unfounded. The vast majority of Lithuanians are self-consciously Lithuanian but happy to be more closely associated with larger western European and Scandinavian neighbors. There has been no mass exodus of laborers to the West, but university graduates regularly move to more prosperous nations.

The European Union has brought the country financial benefits, including money to update roads and public utilities, and related infrastructure items which deteriorated during the Soviet years.

Lithuanian society is now largely secularized but this was not the result of internal factors or problems within the churches. Many Lithuanians do not know the Gospel. The churches are generally thought to be simply part of the landscape. During the Soviet years the children of devout and faithful parents were subject to many pressures to embrace secularism. They need to be re-won

and the large numbers of people who simply have no church background at all need to hear the Gospel message and its invitation and be integrated into the life of the church through baptism and catechesis.

### **The Effects of Recession**

The devastating economic collapse in the 1990s had little effect on the church. The people were used to having little. At that time, baptisms and other pastoral acts skyrocketed. This dramatic reaction was not expected during this recession, because formerly the return to the churches was a sign of the repudiation of Communism. The Lithuanian Lutheran church has never had much money. It has no structures that need to be financed; the bishop and consistory share a single secretary, who is the church's only employee. The bishop receives a small stipend. There is no talk of cutting staff or services because there is no fat to cut. There is no concern to cut off the heat in the churches for most of them have only a wood stove that is stoked only on Sunday morning, if at all. When meeting with Western Europeans, Bishop Mindaugas Sabutis points out that the unheated churches are the Lithuanian contribution to the war against global warming. People continue to support their pastors as in the past, mostly by giving gifts at baptisms, funerals, weddings, and memorials. This will remain unchanged. If the national currency should have to be devalued, the pastors will face the same difficulties as their parishioners and the general population. This situation, however, is one that all had to face after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The church faces major challenges in evangelism and education. God's law and gospel must be brought to the secularized and some times alienated people and programs must be developed both for parish education in general and those who are preparing for ordination.

### **Statistics of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Lithuania**

Total number of Lutherans: 19,637

Parishes: 54

Total number of communicants: 10,000

Mean parish membership: 50-200

Average Sunday attendance: 25/30 %

Bishop: 1

Pastors: 20

Deacons: 1

Average pastoral allowance per month: 100-200 Euros (about \$150-300)

Church buildings: 44

Prayer houses: 7

Public schools offering courses in Lutheran Christianity: 22

Number of teachers: 27

Sunday schools: 18

Deaconal centers: 6



Orphan homes: 1  
 Kindergartens: 1  
 Rented facilities for worship: 4  
 Organists: 34  
 Choir masters: 24  
 Parish choirs: 30

Darius Petkunas  
 Klaipeda, Lithuania

### 365 Days with Calvin

*365 days with Calvin*, edited by Joel R. Bleeke (Leominster, UK: Day One Publications, 2008), appeared without request at the seminary bookstore. It was probably produced to commemorate the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his birth in 2009. Any assumption that Luther and Calvin were joined at the Reformation hip and differed only in inconsequential sacramental details that would concern only theologians and not pew sitting church goers is immediately dissipated by any of the 365 devotions. Since the devotions follow no liturgical or theological order, I randomly went to 21 June, "Praying for Pardon in Disease," based on Jesus' forgiving the sins of the paralytic man and healing him. Consider its second sentence. "Since Christ intends to bestow health of body, he begins by removing the man's sin, the cause of his disease, reminding the paralytic of the origin of his disease and of the way he ought to pray." Wow! For starters the account contains no mention of the man's praying or that his sin caused his disease. Like the blind man in John, he may have been born with paralysis and had no chance to commit an honest to goodness sin for which he would have been, as Calvin puts it, chastised.

This devotion's last sentence says it all: "So when afflictions remind us of our sins, let us first be careful to pray for pardon, so when God is reconciled to us, he may withdraw from punishing us." Wow! Does he mean that God was not reconciled before we sinned? Editor Bleeke adds a "For Meditation" at the bottom of the page claiming that "geo-political, medical and natural crises that [are] crying out for justice and healing. All are merely symptomatic of the unforgiven sin." Those suffering "from cancer, heart disease or Type 1 diabetes" are encouraged to ask God for forgiveness. (Perhaps even those of us with less than perfect 120/80 blood pressure also should.) This list of diseases covers the waterfront of how death will finally get hold of each of us. Senior citizens have multiple evidences of "unforgiven sin." We all knew that Calvin did not include unbelievers (the un-predestinated) in the atonement, but he goes further in seeing believers' misfortunes as evidence of God's wrath. Calvin's doctrine of "God's chastisements" is downright wrong. Since Genesis 3, misfortunes—the general and universal misery or whatever you want to call it—simply belong to the human condition. Misery of every kind comes with the turf of being human. Out of pity for us God sentenced the

world to the same kind of corruption we face, so that our bodies destined to the corruption of the grave would not have to live in a pristine, perfect world.

Maladies, what Calvin calls chastisements, are not distributed in proportion to a person's sins, contra Calvin. One of the problems in the Psalms is that God's righteous saints begrudge the good fortune of evil persons. For Calvin and perhaps sadly for some Lutherans, physical health and acquisition of property and wealth are signs of God's favor. This does not square with the words of Jesus "Blessed are the poor in spirit" or Luke's briefer "Blessed are the poor." Calvin's chastisement doctrine is also silly, because all of us, believer and unbeliever, begin to experience physical deterioration as soon as we are born—or is it before we are born? Besides nothing that we own including our bodies is immune from rust and moth or theft or, in terms of recent events, lost jobs, and lower stock market prices. Eventually moth and rust have the last word. The worst thing in Calvin's chastisement theology is that it leaves those Christians whose lives are a string of one tragedy after another faced with sins, maybe sins unknown to them, which they may falsely believe that God has not forgiven. This is a really bad situation that can lead to despair and unbelief. The Old Testament book of Job wrestles with the theodicy question of why God permits evil in our lives. It takes us no further than that God is in charge and in practical terms leaves questions about our particular misfortunes unanswered. In providing a reason for our misery, Luther went no further than the *deus absconditus*. We can look at what he does, but we are not shown the divine blueprints.

Paging through the 365 devotions, words such as "Christ" and "Jesus" appear in no more than half of them. This estimate might be overly generous. For example in the one for April 18, "Our Caring Shepherd," Jesus is not mentioned. I would rather be in the arms of Luther's Jesus than Calvin's non-christological God. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that Calvin's God is different than Luther's. I'll stick with Luther's devotions in *Day by Day We Magnify Thee*, (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1950).

David P. Scaer

### Errata

The author of the Research Note entitled "A Response to Jeffrey Kloha's Study of the Trans-Congregational Church" in CTQ 73:3 (July 2009): 270-275 is John G. Nordling. His name was inadvertently omitted from the middle of page 275. The Editors