

A.L. BARRY: A Letter for Lutheran Forum

John T.Pless, Assistant Professor of Pastoral Ministry & Missions
Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, IN

Defeating Ralph Bohlmann in 1992, A.L. Barry's election to the presidency of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod was a reaction against perceived heavy-handedness on the part of the incumbent in his attempts to control Concordia Theological Seminary in Fort Wayne. Had Bohlmann not attacked seminary president Robert Preus, it is doubtful that Barry would have ever been elected. It is equally doubtful that the seminary would have survived another term of a Bohlmann presidency. Any assessment of the Barry years must note the influence he had in restoring peace to the embattled seminary and providing space for it to continue with integrity and vitality.

Barry will be remembered for steadfastly calling the Synod to recover and strengthen its commitment to confessional Lutheranism while engaging in evangelistic outreach at all levels. "Keep the message straight, Missouri! Get the message out, Missouri!" became his rally cry. In one of his last published articles, "Doctrine and Evangelism" (Concordia Theological Quarterly January 2001), Barry wrote "Doctrine and evangelism definitely go together in Acts. I hope and pray that they do for us too, and that together they continue to shape both our Synod's perceptions and its priorities. For ultimately, the only good news we have to tell is the good news about Jesus." (13). His "Tell the Good News About Jesus" emphasis was not another "evangelism program" but a concerted effort to assist congregations in proclaiming Christ to the unchurched. Evangelism, for Barry, was not given to the enthusiasms of the age. For Barry, evangelism presupposed doctrinal clarity. He appointed a "church growth study committee" that produced a stellar report, For the Sake of Christ's Commission, in the form of thesis/antithesis on the impact of the Church Growth Movement.

One of the most refreshing characteristics of the Barry presidency was his emphasis on catechesis. He understood his office of doctrinal oversight to be a teaching office. He authored three monographs on liturgy, catechesis, and prayer for distribution to all the congregations of Synod. His popular What About... pamphlets covered issues ranging from women's ordination and closed communion to Mormonism and abortion. These tracts made their way in Bible classes and parish newsletters as a means for clarifying and teaching the doctrinal position of the LCMS.

No one would ever accuse Barry of being "high church" but his commitment to sound Lutheran liturgical practices, led him to go to bat for the Commission on Worship when attempts were being made to dismantle it as a self-standing commission. With Barry's support the Commission's activity multiplied as the Real Life Worship Conferences were held at dozens of locations, educational materials produced, Hymnal Supplement '98 published, and plans launched for a new hymnal due out in 2007.

In a time of ecumenical pluralism, Barry guided the Synod in responding to The Formula of Agreement, The Porvoo Statement and Declaration, and The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification in a series of documents prepared by the seminary faculties. His full-page ad in USA Today on Missouri's rejection of The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification was a bold move that brought him both praise and harsh criticism. He was a leader in bringing support and encouragement to churches throughout the world and especially in the former Soviet Union who wanted to be Lutheran in doctrine and practice.

A.L. Barry was a heart-land Missourian. His personal piety was genuine. His warmth and kindness made him accessible and kept him in touch with ordinary pastors and lay people. During the years of his

presidency, he endured the death of his wife, Jean, to cancer and he battled leukemia in his own body. He was blasted by some on the far right for not doing enough to preserve Missouri's heritage. He was the object of scorn, ridicule, and downright rudeness from those on the left who saw his commitment to Scripture and Confession as regressive. Jesus First and DayStar had mounted a campaign to defeat him at the next convention. He is now beyond their grasp.

The question remains open as to what will become of the Barry legacy. One of his most vociferous critics, the president of the Texas district, seems eager to become synodical president and will be on the ballot at the Synod's convention in July with the political backing of Jesus First and DayStar.. The election of any candidate supported by Jesus First or DayStar would represent a sharp veering away from the course that Barry had set and might even result in schism. Barry's death leaves a vacuum in the life of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. The enduring power of his legacy will be put to the test this summer as Synod meets in convention to elect a new president and struggle with abiding issues of identity and mission.

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