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Lutheranism in India*

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LUTHERANS in India have become a considerable factor among Christians. The first Protestant missionaries, Ziegenbalg and Pluetschau, were Lutherans. Lutheran missionaries had a strong influence in the early work of some of the non-Lutheran missions in South India. They can be found in the southern tip near Nagercoil, north and east of Calcutta near the Burma border, in central India, and even in Pakistan. There are Lutherans who speak Hindi, Telugu, Tamil, Malayalam, Santali, Briya, and several other languages and dialects. There are missions with only a little over two hundred members, and missions which have been replaced almost completely by churches numbering over one hundred thousand. Two churches alone, the Gossner Evangelical Lutheran Church, a church which grew out of a German mission society's work and is now completely autonomous, and the Andhra Evangelical Lutheran Church, where the United Lutheran Church Mission has done its work, account for over 400,000 Lutherans between them.

All the Lutheran bodies of India except the Missouri Evangelical Lutheran India Mission (MELIM) are members of the Federation of Evangelical Lutheran Churches of India (FELC). When an All India Lutheran Conference met in Guntur in 1908, it laid plans to form a federation. These plans were held up by the First World War. The Federation was finally formed in 1928 and its constitution adopted in 1932.

Many members of the FELC have been deeply interested in forming a united Evangelical Lutheran Church of India. These efforts have been going on for a great number of years, but have been particularly intensified since the Second World War ended. Among the impelling causes for this interest have been the experiences of those missions or churches which were connected with countries on the wrong side in the wars, particularly Germany.

* Cp. H. Earl Miller "Doctrinal Statement of Lutherans in India," *CONCORDIA THEOL. MONTHLY*, 1950, 761 ff.

Although the Lutheran World Federation did much to keep these missions going—and still does this in progressively decreasing degree—many members of the FELC feel that a united national Church would be a far better solution to this problem of an unsettled world. The strength of the ecumenical movement and the formation of the Church of South India among the non-Lutheran Protestants of South India have also been considerable motives in this movement.

A theological committee of the FELC has been working on a Doctrinal Statement which could be used as the confessional basis for such an ELCI.* The FELC was not satisfied with a loose union without any confessional basis, such as exists in the Church of South India, and felt that a confessional basis was essential to the formation of any satisfactory united Lutheran Church in India. Work on this Doctrinal Statement began in 1948 and was completed in 1951. Representatives of the various bodies met at different centers and held retreats of several days in which a joint study of Scripture resulted in the formation of a Statement of Scriptural doctrine against the background of Indian thought.

To date, a number of factors have held up the formation of the ELCI. The ties that exist between the various missions and their home churches will probably be replaced in part by the tie to the ELCI, and many fear the implications of this situation. Some have questioned whether any really united Church can exist when its members speak so many different languages and live at such great distances from one another. Here one must remember that while a Malayalee may get along in adjacent Tamil country and a Tamilian in adjacent Telugu country, Hindi, Santali, and Oriya will be completely unintelligible to them. Furthermore, sending a representative several hundred miles to meetings and conventions is a far greater financial burden to the India churches than it is to wealthier American churches. Behind this argument often lies the provincial spirit that is common in modern India. A Tamil State for Tamilians, United Kerala for Malayalees, and Andhra Desa for Telugus are three projects which are politically live issues; they are bound to have their effect upon the provincial

* This doctrinal statement was published in *Lutheran World Review*, April, 1950, pp. 252—258.

spirit in such a union movement. Perhaps even more important is the reluctance of the individual churches to give up their own autonomy to such a united Church. Varying church polity, particularly between churches of American and European background, has raised the difficult question of authority in the ELCI. Will the Church be episcopal in form? If so, what chance will the congregational system have? If not, can the constituent synods maintain a bishop if they so please? The problems of such a proposed integral union have proved tremendous and do not seem to decrease much with discussion.

In the past few years representatives of the FELC and of MELIM have been discussing MELIM membership in the FELC. MELIM has sent visitors to all the important meetings of the FELC and connected committees. Representatives of the MELIM have sat in on the deliberations of the theological committee which wrote the Doctrinal Statement. As the Statement was in the process of being written, the committee requested remarks to it from all the constituent bodies and from MELIM. The committee accepted and adopted many of these remarks and criticisms; in fact, since MELIM criticisms and suggestions were most complete, the Statement in its present form shows much of its influence.

The FELC has recently decided to open a B.D. College in Madras for the training of men with the B.A. degree for the ministry. It invited MELIM into this venture as a charter member. Since, however, MELIM's chief interest, the further training of theologically trained men, is only a secondary interest to the college as such, MELIM did not enter the venture. MELIM has also co-operated in many features of the work of the FELC without having membership in it. A recent publication, *The Lutheran Enterprise in India*, put out by the FELC, devotes a chapter to the work of the MELIM and refers to it as "co-operating in many features of the work of the Federation."

The opening approaches between the FELC and MELIM were mostly in the nature of mutual inquiry. MELIM was particularly interested in knowing whether the FELC was only a federation or whether it constituted a Church, at least in many of its activities. Since the FELC was a very loose organization, these questions

were at first very difficult to answer. As the FELC examined itself more closely, it was able to answer these questions quite adequately. They gave assurance that relations to Home Boards were not affected by membership in the FELC, that fellowship between member bodies did not follow from membership in the FELC, and that no body should be held responsible, by reason of its membership, for the actions of another member body. In this way the FELC stated emphatically that membership did not imply pulpit and altar fellowship or the compromising of any Biblical principles.

Another line of approach was the Doctrinal Statement. This work was primarily directed at the possible formation of the ELCI among the constituent members of the FELC. Therefore it was written in the form of a confession. But its origin also had some relationship to the conversations with the MELIM. When MELIM brought up the matter of doctrinal position, the FELC asked them for a suggestion of approach. Here MELIM brought forth the *Brief Statement*. When the members of the FELC saw this, they recognized its value, but also felt that a doctrinal statement in India should be made against the background of the non-Christian religions here and also be of an apologetic nature. For such a purpose they believed that a doctrinal statement prepared under the auspices of the FELC would be a fitting document for Lutheranism in India. In this way the Doctrinal Statement was directed both at forming a foundation for the ELCI and of explaining the doctrinal stand of the FELC to MELIM.

After a number of extensive and hard-working sessions, the theological committee completed the Doctrinal Statement in its present form. The committee presented the Statement to the triennial session of the FELC meeting in Guntur in January of 1951, with its recommendation to adopt it. The FELC adopted it as an adequate statement of the Lutheran faith. But as it adopted this statement, it was also very careful to state that this adoption did not make a confession out of it. The adoption comprised a recommendation to the constituent churches to accept it as their Confession — for “it would become an official confession if adopted by the Church” (Doctrinal Statement, 1951, p.5) — but it did not attempt to offer a *fait accompli* in any manner. This Doc-

trinal Statement is now being discussed by the constituent members of the FELC as well as by the MELIM.

The question arises whether the adoption of the Doctrinal Statement by the FELC places membership in it in an entirely different light. If the Statement is to be treated as a confession, then only subscription to it and complete agreement with it in all points would be sufficient for membership. But the purpose behind the Statement in its relationship to the FELC was not that. It was rather that through the Statement, MELIM and FELC — since they co-operated in the writing of the Statement — should recognize one another as bodies of truly Lutheran character. If that Lutheran character were evident and agreed to, then membership in the same federation would be a logical and meaningful thing. The committee of the MELIM which did most of the dealing with the FELC in this matter of the Doctrinal Statement was convinced that such an affinity of Lutheran character existed to a point where membership in the FELC was the correct and God-pleasing thing.

In January, 1952, when the biennial general conference of MELIM met in Trivandrum, the committee memorialized the conference to the effect that MELIM should apply for membership in the FELC. This memorial came up against a number of objections. A strong opinion arose that if the FELC had put out a Statement, it meant either complete agreement with it or no membership in the FELC. But, generally speaking, the objection centered in a lack of information. The Board in America was evidently not clear on all the implications of this move; many of the missionaries had not followed matters closely enough to know the ramifications involved and to understand the relationship within the Federation; the Indian pastors and other workers knew very little of the matter; the Indian Church knew practically nothing.

This constitutes a very difficult problem, the type of problem that is bound to arise when a church is departmentalized in the manner that a mission church is bound to be. The usual channels of information had been kept open and flowing. Regular reports appeared in minutes which reached all the missionaries and the Board in America. A certain amount of personal correspondence traveled around in these matters. But too much depended on these ordinary channels. These minutes did not guarantee careful and

critical reading by all concerned. And even if that took place, it did not guarantee discussion with the Indian workers and pastors in the vernacular (though the two editions of the Statement had appeared in both Tamil and Malayalam). And even if those discussions took place, that could not guarantee discussions with individual congregation members on these matters which far exceeded their geographical and linguistic horizons, not to mention their theological grasp. All these discussions were vitally important, but also difficult for a church in its earlier stages.

With these considerations in mind, the general conference of MELIM finally decided that the matter should be exhaustively discussed with the Board in America to determine what obstacles still lay in the path of entering the FELC. Furthermore, the next biennium should be used to bring this matter more fully to the attention of the India Church, especially of its pastors and workers. The conference also expressed its appreciation for the continual improvement of the relations between the FELC and MELIM.

Since the session of the general conference of MELIM the Committee on Lutheran Relations has pursued two main lines. First, it is presenting anew the question of the implication of membership in the FELC, *scil.* fellowship or not? Secondly, it is urging that the various conferences within MELIM study the revised draft of the Doctrinal Statement in the light of Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions, with regard to both content and the evidence of adherence to the formal principle of Lutheranism. It is hoped that these questions may be cleared up for more definite action in the 1954 meeting of MELIM general conference.

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