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A North American Perspective

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Thirty years ago, historian Winthrop Hudson called Lutheranism the last, best hope of Protestantism in the United States. Insularity, Hudson said in his widely read study *American Protestantism*, had protected Lutherans from the theological disintegration and lack of connection to historical tradition he thought characteristic of most other American Protestants. As Hudson saw it, a history of more or less intentional parochialism had given Lutherans specific advantages that could put them in the vanguard of a Protestant renewal in the United States: the effect of impending mergers, rising membership, a confessional tradition, liturgical practice, and a sense of community based in part on sociological factors.[1]

A generation later, however, it appears that Hudson missed his guess. In the last three decades, questions regarding merger and membership, theology and worship, and the contours of community have troubled and sometimes divided American Lutherans. That these things matter to some Lutherans is, of course, evidence that Winthrop Hudson's optimistic assessment of Lutheranism in the United States was not entirely without basis. Yet few knowledgeable Lutherans in 1991 would be prepared to claim that their churches have taken the leading role in a renewal of Protestantism in North America or that they are now in a position to do so. American Lutheranism is now more difficult to assess than even so distinguished an historian of American religion as Winthrop Hudson was able to predict thirty years ago. Given the complexity of global realities, the rapidly changing structure of North American society, and the surprising course of recent American Lutheran history, appraisals of Lutheranism in North America are hazardous and predictions of its future are little more than educated guesses.

[1]Winthrop S. Hudson, *American Protestantism* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1961) 177.

I. MERGER AND MEMBERSHIP

Mergers just completed and still impending stood high on Hudson's list of Lutheran assets in 1961. In the thirty years since then, American Lutherans in North America have completed four major mergers, the most recent in a series dating back to the nineteenth century. The Lutheran Church in America, composed largely of Danish, Finnish, German, and Swedish antecedent bodies, appeared on the denominational landscape in 1962. The American Lutheran Church achieved its final form in 1963 when the Lutheran Free Church entered a merger already composed of Danish, Norwegian, and German bodies. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada (ELCIC) resulted from the merger of several predecessor churches in 1985, and, in the United States, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) brought together in 1988 the American Lutheran Church, the Lutheran Church in America, and a small splinter of the

Missouri Synod, the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches.

Although the tide has run strongly toward merger since 1961, there has been an undertow as well. The Synodical Conference, a federation constituted in 1872, broke up in 1967 as a result of a rift between the Missouri and Wisconsin Synods. The Missouri Synod, as mentioned above, suffered a schism in the 1970s that eventually took a small fraction of its membership into the ranks of the ELCA. The formation of the ELCA in 1988 signalled the end of the Lutheran Council in the USA, an organization which had provided a forum for discussion and an agency for cooperation among a number of Lutheran bodies including the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. Like the merger producing the American Lutheran Church in 1960-1963 before it, the formation of the ELCA in 1988 also resulted in the organization of a small church composed of congregations opposed to merger. A 1989 directory lists twenty-three Lutheran bodies in the United States and Canada.[2] The large majority of Lutherans in the United States, however, belong to the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod or to the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

After more than a century of movement toward federation and merger, it is unlikely that more large-scale mergers will occur in the near future. The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod and the ELCA will probably go their separate ways for some time to come, if not permanently. If that is the case, the close of the twentieth century will mark the end of a long American Lutheran preoccupation with merger and the beginning of an historical assessment of that process. In any event, Lutherans and their observers will now need to pause to evaluate the assumption that merger contributes to Lutheran vitality. With that in mind, the following comments will focus primarily on the ELCA as a case study.

The Lutheran theological tradition, of course, makes theological claims for institutional unity difficult. Like Augustine before them, the Lutheran reformers were reluctant to identify visible ecclesiastical structures and constituencies with the church of God. This meant that as Lutheranism took institutional shape it was confronted with the task of legitimating its institutions in a way consistent with its theology. One result of this was the modest and stringently economical ecclesiology articulated in the Lutheran Confessions. A second result has been the general

[2]E. Theodore Bachmann and Mercia Brenne Bachmann, *Lutheran Churches in the World: A Handbook* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1989).

although not consistent unwillingness of Lutheran theologians to make more than instrumental, historical claims for the structures of Lutheran churches. A third result has been the malleability of territorial Lutheranism in Europe to the requirements of various political arrangements. Yet another consequence has been that Lutheranism in the United States has manifested the general Protestant tendency toward instability and fission.[3] With neither precedent nor the legal structures of establishment to contain them, Lutherans in the United States have been inveterate denominationalists, evolving variants of the tradition to suit all comers.

The formation of the ELCA represents the culmination of decades of effort to reverse this history and to gather the Lutherans of the United States into one fold. The theological rationale for this effort has, however, been vague. Systematic theologians have generally been little interested in providing a theological rationale for denominational unity, and exegetes have often

been embarrassed by the eccentric use of texts from the New Testament (e.g. John 17) in such discussions. It has often fallen to American church historians to make the case for denominational unity, and historians have tended to come to the task informed by certain presuppositions. In a broad-ranging study, Nathan Hatch of the University of Notre Dame has isolated these presuppositions and traced their origins to the period of the Second Awakening. Historians, Hatch proposes, have often written on the assumption that movement toward Protestant institutional solidarity is invariably to the good of the churches. The sources of the historians' commitments in this matter are to be found in the intellectual's fear of disorder and the loss of social control, the sanitization of the history of the churches in order to link them with the values of high Anglo-American culture, and in what Hatch calls the "modern embrace of intellectual, liturgical, and ecumenical respectability." Historians find it most difficult "to admit that God's ultimate plans could entail the splintering of the churches."[4]

American Lutheran historians clearly illustrate the pattern sketched by Hatch, although they have also added explicitly Lutheran arguments. Abdel Ross Wentz and E. Clifford Nelson, among others, paved the way toward merger through their telling of the Lutheran story in North America. Standard texts by both authors have shaped the thinking of several generations of pastors who have in turn influenced the thinking of their people about the question of Lutheran unity.[5] Lay members of the church, however, have usually had other factors in mind—e.g., economy and efficiency of scale in the practical work of the church—as they have voted for Lutheran unity or opposed it in congregational meetings and larger conventions. Probably more important, the majority of the Lutheran rank and file has been persuaded that Lutheran unity would result in greater effectiveness in mission. In light of this, the question of whether Lutherans gathered into the ELCA will pursue

[3]A classical commentary on this theme is Ernst Troeltsch, *Protestantism and Progress: The Significance of Protestantism for the Rise of the Modern World* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986). For the views of a contemporary sociologist of religion, see Steve Bruce, *A House Divided: Protestantism, Schism, and Secularization* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

[4]Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University, 1989) 223-224.

[5]See Abdel Ross Wentz, *A Basic History of Lutheranism in America*, revised ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1955) and E. Clifford Nelson, ed., *The Lutherans in North America*, revised ed. (Phildelphia: Fortress, 1980).

the mission of the church more effectively than they did in its predecessor bodies is probably the most significant practical question before this new church and certainly the most crucial test of the credibility of the ELCA among its members.

One measure of effectiveness in mission will be the ability of the new church to reverse consistent losses in membership. Both of the large churches forming the ELCA had been slowly losing numbers before the merger, and the ELCA has continued the same slow drift downward. This, taken together with statistics indicating that American Lutherans are on the average somewhat older than the members of other Protestant churches, suggests that decline will continue unless reversed by extraordinary measures. One analyst, for example, has suggested that the ELCA would have to establish three hundred new congregations each year for the next several years in order to maintain itself at its present membership level.[6] From nearly any perspective, this decline in membership is probably the most salient aspect of American Lutheran

history during the last two decades. What it portends for the future is unclear, but immediate prospects are troubling. It remains a formidable challenge before this new church.

II. THEOLOGY AND WORSHIP

If successful evangelism is one measure of effectiveness in mission, fidelity to the truth of the gospel is another. When Winthrop Hudson evaluated American Lutheranism in 1961, the larger Lutheran churches of North America were moving toward a thorough appropriation of historical-critical methodology in all the classical theological disciplines. The Missouri Synod eventually chose to distance itself on an official basis from this development, while the churches that would in time become the ELCA completed a dramatic theological metamorphosis. One consequence of this development has been the engagement of Lutheran scholars with the professional theological guilds on both national and international levels and another has been emergence of a theological pluralism in Lutheran ranks like that of other denominations.[7] An aspect of that pluralism, ironically, is the recent emergence of doubt that historical critical methods are in and of themselves effective in sustaining theology in its work of making interpretation of the Scripture and preaching possible.

Observers have often attempted to impose order on contemporary American Lutheran theological pluralism by means of one or another typological scheme. A widely accepted typology, put forward by Yale theologian George Lindbeck, suggests that American Lutherans are currently divided into two wings. The one consists of a coalition of theologians primarily motivated by commitments to certain social causes or to evangelism; the other is composed of fractious confessionalists, themselves divided into one group descended from the pietist-confessionalist

[6]Lyle Schaller made this assessment during informal remarks to the faculty of Luther Northwestern Theological Seminary on April 24, 1991.

[7]A sampler of American Lutheran exegesis written at a comparatively popular level is the Augsburg Commentary on the New Testament. For examples of American Lutheran scholarship in the field of systematic theology, see Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson, eds., *Christian Dogmatics*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984). An example of historical writing by several American Lutheran authors is E. Clifford Nelson, ed., *The Lutherans in North America*.

conservatism of the nineteenth century, and another calling itself the "evangelical catholic" faction, also with proximate rootage in the nineteenth century.[8]

Lindbeck suggests the labels "neo-progressive" and "neo-evangelical" for two groups who stand together on one side of the divide he detects among American Lutherans. The "neo-progressives," as he calls them, "specialize in prophetic protest against whatever they conceive to be the evil establishment or status quo of the day....They emphasize emancipatory and ecological causes and are programmatically committed in the life of the church to inclusiveness and multi-cultural pluralism."[9] Alongside these Lutherans are the "neo-evangelicals," subdivided into a coalescence of Lutherans resembling Robert Schuller of Crystal Cathedral fame and into another faction which embraces a Christianity of the sort emanating from Fuller Seminary in California. Standing against these "neo-progressives" and "neo-evangelicals," Lindbeck sees a phalanx of confessional Lutherans. Confessionalists of the first category Lindbeck calls "denominational" and describes them primarily in terms of their

opposition to the so-called "evangelical catholics." This latter party is said to be interested in "new forms of Lutheranism's original self-understanding and vocation as an evangelical-catholic reform movement within the church universal."[10]

While of considerable heuristic value, this typology probably better reflects divisions in the ELCA over polity, policy, ecumenism, and ministry than it does justice to the breadth and internal diversity of American Lutheran theology. It does not, for example, make room for older and emerging liberalisms, which are ethically engaged but not primarily driven by the causes Lindbeck associates with those he calls "neo-progressives." Nor does it comprehend a variety of confessionally more conservative thinkers who disagree in theological principle as well as in ecumenical strategy with evangelical catholic theologians. Indeed, it may not even do justice to evangelical catholic theologians whose interest in "reform" and "movement" may yet lead them in directions they themselves do not anticipate. Finally, this typology does not accurately predict the way American Lutherans fall out on a variety of social and ethical issues that now vex them. In the short term, however, Lindbeck's scheme may well explain a prevailing tendency to account for tensions in the ELCA in bi-polar terms, however adequate or inadequate such analysis may prove to be in time.

While professional theologians have wrestled with the implications of historical critical methods and differed over a variety of controversial questions, preaching and teaching in the congregations has gone on apace. A little more than a decade after Hudson's remarks noted above, another historian of American religion, Sidney Mead, startled by what he found among Lutherans, told a Lutheran audience that he had stopped giving a lecture called "Lutheranism—Protestantism's Secret Weapon in the United States." Lutherans, Mead discovered, had come to look and sound very much like most other American Protestants. What Winthrop Hudson had called "theological erosion" among other American Protestants, Mead also

[8]See George A. Lindbeck, "Lutheranism as Church and Movement: Trends in America Since 1980," *Lutheran Theological Seminary Bulletin* 71 (Winter 1991) 43-60, and "Ecumenical Directions and Confessional Construals," *dialog* 30 (Spring 1991) 118-123.

[9]Lindbeck, "Lutheranism as Church and Movement," 49-50.

[10]Ibid., 51, 46.

found in the Lutheran constituency, if not among its theologians.[11] A more recent survey confirms a weakening of Lutheran adherence to traditional standards of belief and finds Lutherans less able than most other American Protestants to integrate faith with daily life. If traditional standards are used, this study indicates that Lutherans have not been immune to the theological erosion Hudson detected among other Protestants in 1961.[12]

While North American Lutherans seem diverse in their theology at the academic level and nebulous at the popular level, they remain generally traditional in their worship. Here, if anywhere, Hudson's guesses of 1961 have proven right. That is not to suggest that the mildly Anglicized liturgical ethos of the *Service Book and Hymnal* has prevailed, but rather to say that Lutherans have generally continued to maintain that the fundamental elements of worship include the preaching of the Word of God from the Bible, the administration of Baptism and the Lord's Supper according to scriptural warrant, and the prayers of the congregation. An increasing variety in ritual practice—ranging from the reintroduction of medieval exaggerations now little seen

among Roman Catholics, to the techniques of "entertainment evangelism," or to rites borrowed from new age religions—may put this general consensus under strain and break it, but so far that has not happened. Whether the *Lutheran Book of Worship* of 1978, a late flower of the liturgical movement of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, can continue to contain and sustain American Lutheran worship as effectively as the several books that preceded it is at this juncture a critical question. Comparatively narrow in its appropriation of the Lutheran and broader Christian traditions, it may signal the end of the old American Lutheran dream of one book for one church.

At any rate, the liturgical future of American Lutheranism cannot be predicted. Significant differences over worship may divide American Lutherans in the future, given the fact that there remain among them historically rooted distinctions in liturgical sensibility, and tastes and convictions often clash. Hymn-singing and chant often compete, and on occasion controversy over worship reveals significant theological differences as well as aesthetic preferences. Some Lutherans, for example, now argue about whether Baptism in particular and worship as a whole may take place in the name of "the creator, the redeemer, and the sanctifier" rather than in the name of "the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit."[13] Although ELCA bishops have recently affirmed that use of the name "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" is the only "doctrinally correct" baptismal formula, it is not likely that their pronouncement will eliminate diversity in practice or disagreement among theologians. Such debate is, of course, emblematic of conflicting opinions over a number of controverted questions regarding the ritual practice of Lutherans which will slowly but inevitably surface. Another example touching upon worship has to do with whether it is doctrinally permissible for Lutherans to consider the Lord's Supper a "eucharist" and to embed the words of institution in eucharistic prayers.

[11]See Sidney Mead, "An Address to Lutherans," *The Springfielder* 37 (1973) 8-9. Mead referred in his remarks to Merton P. Strommen, et al., *A Study of Generations* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1972).

[12]See *Effective Christian Education: A National Study of Protestant Congregations—A Summary Report on Faith, Loyalty, and Congregational Life* (Minneapolis: Search Institute, 1990).

[13]For an example of this debate, see Barbara K. Lundblad and Norene Smith, "Face to Face: Baptizing in the Name...," *Word & World* 9 (Fall 1989) 382-385.

While this matter was hotly debated before the introduction of the *Lutheran Book of Worship*, it does not appear likely to create conflict in the near future. However, the studied theological differences that persist with respect to this question do reflect a cleavage among Lutheran theologians deeper and more visible than when Winthrop Hudson studied Lutherans at worship in 1961. In the opinion of parties to the conversation, the resolution of this matter involves crucial decisions about what it means to be a Lutheran.[14]

III. THE CONTOURS OF COMMUNITY

Although thirty years ago Winthrop Hudson discerned a strong sociological sense of community among American Lutherans, an historian equally friendly to Lutherans recently called them "remarkably unremarkable."[15] Sociologically, Lutherans reflect the profile of the white middle and upper-middle class from which an overwhelming proportion of their membership comes. Largely descendants of emigrants from northern Europe, Lutherans appear by the end of

twentieth century to have settled comfortably into life in America, despite the vestiges of ethnic identity that occasionally cling to their churches. On the surface ethnic identity is often little more than a nostalgia about a poorly remembered past, but in more hidden ways the ethnic past still exercises stubborn power in Lutheran discourse and behavior. This seems particularly true among Lutheran intellectuals, who often display deep if sometimes unrecognized intellectual and aesthetic affinities with European culture.

While Lutherans generally reflect the American culture of which they have become a part, certain anomalies point to important characteristics of their churches. For example, Lutherans in the United States are considerably older than the general population. As analysts Gallup and Castelli suggest, "This pattern could reflect differences in birth rates, but it also suggests that Lutherans are having a problem keeping young people involved in their church."[16] The lament over "the youth" frequently heard among American Lutheran pastors and lay leaders appears to be justified. Demography also suggests that Lutheranism in the United States has developed a strongly regional character. Of United States Lutherans, 56% live in the Midwest, 21% in the West, 13% in the South, and 11% in the East.[17] Like other members of large churches, Lutherans are also very typically Republican in political affiliation, with Lutherans who regularly attend church more likely to vote Republican than not. At the same time, a prevalent political liberalism is evident

[14]For an extended defense of the inherited Lutheran position on this matter, see Oliver K. Olson, "Contemporary Trends in Liturgy viewed from the Perspective of Classical Lutheran Theology," *The Lutheran Quarterly* 26 (May 1974), 110-157. For a proposal that Lutherans revert to an understanding of the Lord's Supper as primarily a eucharist, see Eugene L. Brand, "Luther's Liturgical Surgery: Twentieth Century Diagnosis of the Patient," in *Interpreting Luther's Legacy: Essays in Honor of Edward Fendt*, ed. by Fred W. Meuser and Stanley D. Schneider (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1969) 108-119. For an example of the percolating polemic on this topic, see Robert W. Jenson, "The Lord's Supper," *Lutheran Forum* 25 (Easter\Pentecost 1991) 41-44.

[15]Mark A. Noll, "Ethnic, American, or Lutheran? Dilemmas for a Historic Confession in the New World," *The Lutheran Theological Seminary Bulletin* 71 (Winter 1991) 18. See also his essay in this issue of *Word & World*.

[16]George Gallup, Jr. and Jim Castelli, *The People's Religion: American Faith in the 90's* (New York: Macmillan, 1989) 108.

[17]Ibid.

among Lutheran leaders and in the pronouncements of many Lutheran assemblies. The reasons for this evident distance between American Lutheran leaders and their constituency are not clear, but it may be that the residual ethnic cast and a distinct theological tradition have combined to produce in the Lutheran constituency a moderate political conservatism. On the other hand, the moderate political liberalism among the leaders and in the pronouncements of legislative assemblies of the ELCA may stem from the effects on the generation now leading the church of the traumatic upheavals of the 1960s and the political results of the Viet Nam War.[18] Another noteworthy anomaly is that Lutherans are less likely than most other American Protestants to attend worship weekly and read the Bible daily. Of America's Protestants, 41% say they have attended church in the last seven days, while only 36% of Lutherans make the same claim. Seventeen percent of all American Protestants, but only 6% of all Lutherans, study the Bible every day.[19] If it ever was, at least today the image of Lutherans devout in worship and daily in their reading of Scripture seems no longer an accurate one for the United States.

The "sense of community" that Winthrop Hudson detected among Lutherans in 1961 is certainly less definite now. North American Lutherans have more than ever faded into the sociological landscape. Immigrants from the Lutheran lands of Europe stopped arriving in the United States many years ago; their descendants generally know little of the rock from which they were hewn; and the transition from northern European languages to English, virtually over when Hudson wrote, is now entirely finished (although a new transition to a multilingual ministry and congregational life may be underway). With no reason to predict that Lutherans will experience a birthrate higher than the sociological average, the rising median age of Lutherans in the United States suggests that Lutheranism, insofar as it has reflected a tradition oriented to nurture rather than conversion, is faltering.

That Lutherans in the United States are now talking more aggressively about mission than they have for three decades may in part be due to the realization that immigration, birthrate, methods of nurture, and sociological marks of community no longer support the future of Lutheranism as they once did. From this perspective, the commitment to "inclusivism" made in the ELCA's charter documents and expressed in its practice through devices such as legislative quotas and policies regarding the use of language may then spring not only from a commitment to evangelism but from a sense that the future of Lutheranism in the United States is by no means secure. In the rough and tumble of American denominationalism, competition is unavoidable, and what historian Leonard Bacon said of an incident in colonial history has ever after been true of all the American churches, including the Lutheran: "The fear that the work of the Gospel might not be done seemed a less effective incitement to activity than the fear that it might be done by others."[20]

It is precisely social insecurity rather than insularity which may, in fact, account for salient characteristics of American Lutheranism in 1991. To borrow a phrase from H. Richard Niebuhr's classic work, such social insecurity may have produced new

[18]For comments on American Lutheran political behavior, see Noll, "Ethnic, American, or Lutheran," 19.
[19]Gallup and Castelli, *The People's Religion*, 106-109.
[20]Leonard W. Bacon, *A History of American Christianity* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1900) 194.

sources of denominationalism among American Lutherans. Falling numbers, a diminished sense of sociological coherence, and the pressure of denominational competition inevitably account in part for both the internal strain and the arrogance and insecurity over against other American denominations often found among American Lutheran ministers and intellectuals. What appear to be and in fact are quarrels over the confessional standards of the Lutheran tradition, the ordering and ethics of the ministry, and the pursuit of Christian ecumenism—to name three topics now widely debated among American Lutherans—are also in part functions of the reflexes of a threatened and declining church in a secularized society and a competitive denominational arena.

IV. CHALLENGES

Whither American Lutheranism in 1991? Only a fool or a charlatan would dare to predict. All that can be said with confidence is that the future of Lutheranism in North America will

depend on how the churches respond to formidable challenges before them. Their response and the providence of God will decide whether American Lutheran churches will enter the twenty-first century as vibrant agents of God's mission in the world or drift into decline, having finished their work among the immigrants and their descendants once entrusted to their care.

Merger and declining membership present both opportunities and obstacles to the work of the Lutheran churches of Canada and the United States. Leaders in both countries need urgently to consider how to foster loyalty and participation in diverse constituencies in order to bring them together in common work. Among other things, this will require imagination and creativity as these churches reform themselves for the future and search for forms of polity and order better suited both to the North American context and the task of Christian mission in the twenty-first century.

Many observers of the ELCA, for example, have suggested that at the national and regional levels the church was anachronistic in conception. Such critics argue that corporate denominationalism of the kind that emerged in the United States after World War I no longer serves the purposes of the churches; that leaner, more economical, and more flexible structures will be needed for the future. Others have proposed that Lutherans in North America would be better served by a more explicitly episcopal polity. The task of finding appropriate forms for the Lutheran churches of North America will require leaders with imagination, vision, skill, stamina, and faith. Identifying, training, and sustaining such leaders is not the least of the challenges in front of American Lutherans in 1991.

Theology and worship offer other challenges to American Lutherans. Among professional theologians the most pressing task is to attend with devoted, historically responsible care to the teaching of Scripture and the confessional witness of the Lutheran church. On the far side of the revolution created by the introduction of historical critical methods in theology, the theologians have the task of putting Humpty Dumpty together again for the sake of a constituency desperately in need of the bread of life and a world hungry for it. The challenge before American Lutheran theologians is to support the preaching of the gospel and to inform the worship of the community gathered around that preaching. Their task, in other words, is to help the pastors and people of the Lutheran churches to face life and

death in light of what God has done for them and to empower them to bear witness to this reality among others.

If the Lutheran churches of North America can be sustained in confession and apology by their theologians and enlivened by the faith of their people, anxiety about the survival and shape of these churches is likely to diminish and missionary energy is likely to increase. This will require the Lutherans of the ELCA, in particular, to achieve precision about the nature of their mission and to give definite theological meaning to their commitments to "inclusivity." Active in mission, the churches will be required to be clear about the theological rationale which impels them to mission among nominally Roman Catholic Hispanics or among Muslims, both groups identified as objects of special concern in the ELCA. The pursuit of mission, in other words, will force the Lutheran churches of North America toward a new reckoning with the truth of the gospel and their confession of that truth. This will also inevitably affect the way they conceive of their participation in the ecumenical movement. The terms of the church's engagement with

questions of social and ethical import will also likely change under these circumstances, perhaps in the direction of the Reformation understanding of politics as an affair at once divinely ordered and humanly rational, and of ethics as a function of the first use of the law rather than of ecclesiastical prescription. This, however, is highly speculative.

The fundamental challenge in front of Lutherans in the United States is to conceive of their congregations and churches as centers of mission. "It is exceedingly difficult," Henry Melchior Muhlenberg wrote in 1765, after many years of experience in the American colonies, "for the theologues who come from Europe to get a practical understanding of the distinction between the *ecclesia plantata* and the *ecclesia plantanda* or *colligenda*."[21] More than two hundred years later, American Lutherans have yet fully to understand and act on Muhlenberg's important distinction between an established church and a church defined and nourished by its mission. The need to do so is the most significant challenge before Lutherans in North America as they enter the twenty-first century.

[21]Henry Melchior Muhlenberg, *The Journals of Henry Melchior Muhlenberg in Three Volumes*, Vol. 3, trans. Theodore G. Tappert and John W. Doberstein (Philadelphia: The Evangelical Lutheran Ministerium of Philadelphia and Muhlenberg Press, 1945) 295.