



Where to from Here?

I still have vivid memories of that hot summer day, Sunday, August 25, 1957. As an impressionable fourteen-year-old, along with my parents I joined more than 115,000 persons at the closing festival service of the Third Assembly of the Lutheran World Federation held on the grounds of the Minnesota State Capitol in St. Paul. With appropriate awe we watched the official delegates and visitors from around the world march in procession in their varied native garbs, sang hymns led by a choir of three thousand, and heard addresses calling the church to freedom, unity, reform, service, and hope, interpreting the overall theme “Christ Frees and Unites.” Although reared in a traditional Lutheran family, with the obligatory Bible memory verses, and Sunday school classes and openings with their hymns and reminders of “mission fields” and the need to “tell the story,” that service was for me the first real exposure to the flesh and blood realities of the church—in particular the Lutheran church—as, indeed, a global phenomenon. I am thankful for that day and for the “wisdom” of my parents in making the effort to be there and for seeing that I was with them.

That experience was a window opening on a gradually broadening sense of the church beyond my more usual Lutheran surroundings, which, typical of North American Lutheranism of that day, had much of the immigrant ghetto about them. My grandparents were of German descent, their parents having immigrated to this country early in the twentieth century. I was born and raised in central Iowa, the “German” sector, south of what I sometimes call the “Mason-Dixon line” between Iowa German and Scandinavian settlements. I have often joked, not without some kernel of truth, that I am not conscious of having ever seen a Norwegian first hand, or even having registered the possibility that there might be some cultural differences among Lutherans until I went off to Luther College, a college of the Scandinavian tradition. To be sure, early on I took note of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod congregation across the street from the American Lutheran congregation of my baptism, but then that was the church of my aunt and uncle, and most there, too, were German.

But that exposure to worldwide Lutheranism that day on the capitol grounds was a harbinger of changes to come—changes not just the result of normal maturation. In that, my experience typifies that of a whole generation of Lutherans in North America. In large part due to a series of Lutheran mergers, in the three decades since 1957, I have been a member of four different Lutheran synods. Having grown up and been confirmed in the American Lutheran Church of 1930, I started off the merger of 1960 forming the American Lutheran Church (ALC) by abandoning my parents’ German tradition—my father was a graduate of both Wartburg College and Seminary—and instead attending Luther College. From there the route naturally led to Luther Seminary, where Germans, though heard of were quietly ignored. When graduate study ensued in North Carolina, the ALC being rather sparsely represented in those parts, my wife and I became active in a Lutheran Church of America congregation, and there our first daughter was baptized. With the merger in 1988 forming the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

various traditions and roots have come together.

I trace this history assuming that numerous others, Lutherans all their lives, have also seen this profound change from a childhood ethnic Lutheran identity to a time when we now stand on the doorstep of a new future, many of those ethnic associations no longer applicable.

Lutheranism today is a vastly different global phenomenon than it was thirty-five years ago, to judge from the 1990 Eighth Assembly of the LWF at Curitiba, Brazil, with its theme “I Have Heard the Cry of My People.” In some ways the concerns are not so different. The pressing questions from 1957 sound quite up-to-date: “In what other period of history...has the average man and woman been so plagued with anxieties and problems verging upon the unendurable?”*

Yet in many ways this is a new day for Lutherans, a theme sounded from many voices in different sectors of the world. On this continent, the fledgling yet monstrous ELCA struggles with institutional and financial constrictions as it seeks to define its mission for the twenty-first century. The ethnic identities of its predecessor bodies no longer serve to define or uphold the loyalties of its membership as before. On the world scene, Lutheran global expansion in the two-thirds world has surfaced a whole new range of perspectives for Lutherans to consider. At the very least these include issues of global economics, ecology, and justice. But they include, too, ecumenical concerns for future relations of Lutherans to Christians of other traditions, as well as of Lutheran mission to non-Christian faiths. Whereas the 1957 LWF theme, “Christ Frees and Unites,” seemed to express a new-found sense of Lutheran unity, that theme of unity now has much broader implications in the struggle over the theologically appropriate shapes that unity with other Christians will take in the future. In the face of such realities and questions, the issue of the nature of Lutheran identity and confessional subscription has become pressingly real. What does it mean to be a confessional Lutheran in a day of ecumenical awareness and commitment?

Such are the experiences, issues, and concerns that underlie and focus the theme of this issue: *Whither Lutheranism?* As just noted, we stand at a time when the center seems no longer to hold for ethnic Lutheran identities, when the global expansion of Lutheranism brings a plurality of voices and concerns to our common conversation, when concerns for the unity of all Christians in worship and for mission of the gospel in and for the world sound a compelling note. What concerns will and should characterize Lutheranism’s future? In order to reflect this broad conversation, the authors in this issue have been selected to represent a variety of Lutheran voices from around the world—Eastern and Western Europe, Africa, Asia, Latin America, North America, and, in light of their changing role in this century, Lutheran women. In addition, representatives from other Christian traditions—Roman Catholic, Anglican, Reformed, Baptist, United Church of Christ, and Evangelical Protestant—have been invited to comment on Lutheranism from their perspectives. The authors were to assess or evaluate what they saw to be the current direction of Lutheranism, its strengths, its weaknesses, or issues of important concern, and to offer their views on Lutheranism for the future. What does it look like and where is it going?

The perspective essays from world Lutherans begin with that of *Reiner Stahl* of the Lutheran Theological Seminary in Leipzig, Germany. In light of the radically

changing situation of churches and society in the former German Democratic Republic, he reflects on the continuing appropriateness of Lutheran two kingdoms doctrine as a basic orientation for theology and church in the political arena. He asserts that more important even now is the basic core understanding of the church gathering around the Eucharist and hearing the Word of God.

Karsten Nissen, Dean of the Cathedral, Viborg, Denmark, like Stahl, reflects on the continuing issue of Lutheran state or folk churches in the face of growing religious pluralism. As a Western European he notes the need for a new approach to spiritual leadership in the churches, expresses concern for appropriate use of church economic resources, and highlights the challenge of new religious movements.

Ambrose Moyo argues that to be relevant in today's Africa the Lutheran church must seriously address issues of justice, peace, and the integrity of creation. He sees a need for the gospel to be translated and rooted in each culture it encounters and calls for Lutheran spirituality to use images and symbols from African cultures in its worship, its language about God, its definition of Christian community, and in its development of relevant leadership models for the future.

Pursuing implications of the term Protestant (*pro-testatio*) *Yoshikazu Tokuzen* calls Asian Lutherans to the Reformation role of checking or criticizing existing systems as well as to that of translating the gospel message in a witness to the public community that does more than simply reproduce the past.

From his Latin American context *Walter Altmann* stresses the importance of the Word of God's evangelical and critical address to concrete situations. He describes the special challenges for Christians in Latin America to witness in the social realm in such a way that the hope grounded in Christ's resurrection can speak in the midst of the realities of frustration, suffering, and despair.

Todd Nichol, reviews Lutheran immigrant history in North America, noting the challenges occasioned by the series of mergers and present declining membership. A growing diversity in theology and worship, and in the contours of Lutheran community calls for a renewed understanding and commitment to mission in the American context.

One of the major impacts on Lutheranism in the twentieth century has been the changing role of women in the church. *Brita Stendahl* sketches the impact of this changing consciousness both for women themselves and in their influence in ecumenical work of solidarity and concern for issues of justice, peace, and the environment as Lutherans approach the year 2000.

Roman Catholic theologian *Carl J. Peter* opens the essays from Christians of other traditions. He maintains that the "mountains" of differences that exist between Roman Catholics and Lutherans must be addressed honestly. In particular, he notes the need to bring the respective faith, hope, and best talents of each tradition to bear on the developing of practical norms for distinguishing between evangelization and proselytism, given the Lutheran church's current emphasis on mission and "inclusivity."

Calling attention to the common witness to the centrality of Word and Sacrament of the Augsburg Confession and the Thirty-nine Articles, *Stephen W. Sykes* notes how historical

contexts have resulted in an Anglican emphasis on the authority of the episcopate and priesthood. He notes the variety of Lutheran-Anglican relationships that exist in different corners of the world, but expresses hope for greater unity of the two traditions and for a greater Anglican appreciation of the Lutheran commitment to theological seriousness and precision.

Richard J. Mouw, Provost of Fuller Seminary, saying that in his experience the Reformed have mostly ignored Lutherans, argues that Lutherans might benefit from the Calvinist emphasis on the lordship of Christ and its calls to claim the cosmos in his name. Calvinists in turn might benefit from the Lutheran theology of the cross which tempers with the reality of tension and suffering a certain tendency to a triumphalism of faith in this world.

Baptist *Robert T. Handy* identifies the historic marks of Lutheranism as its confessional emphasis, liturgical power, tradition of prophetic preaching, and recent unitive achievements. He hopes that renewal of these strengths may enable Lutherans to get beyond tensions stemming from their immigrant history and theological battles in a creative enhancement of mission and witness.

Benjamin Griffin describes his collegial experience with Lutherans as a United Church of Christ pastor. He notes the distinguishing role that the Lutheran Confessions play, but judges that Lutheranism has become part of mainstream American Christianity. He suggests that the growing numbers in the two-thirds world will change the role both of the Lutheran doctrine of the two kingdoms and of Lutheran ecumenical commitments.

In the concluding essay in this section, *Mark A. Noll* argues that Lutherans could offer a corrective for certain excesses among American evangelical Protestants: activism, self-ism, and triumphalism. Whether they will do this depends on their ability to preserve Lutheran distinctives and communicate them in an American environment, a possibility jeopardized in part by the ELCA's concern for fitting into the American mainstream.

In keeping with the focus *Whither Lutheranism?* the Resources section offers a Face to Face discussion on the role of the Confessions for Lutherans. Several of the essayists from other Christian traditions call attention in this issue to the distinctive character that confessional commitment gives Lutheran identity and witness. But in an age of growing pluralism and concern for ecumenical commitment and awareness, what does it mean to be a Confessional Lutheran? Two noted Lutheran theologians, *Gerhard O. Forde* and *George A. Lindbeck* offer their viewpoints on this question. Forde argues that confessional subscription is not so much a question of to what one is bound, but for what one is freed, since freed from the same dangerous strictures on the proclamation of the gospel as were the reformers. Lindbeck, on the other hand, focuses on the communal power of the Confessions, their role as a commitment to the meta-dogmatic interpretive principle of justification by faith, and the flexibility which the Confessions allow in the interpretation of Scripture and in interrelationships toward Christian unity.

In the regular Texts in Context feature we depart from our usual format somewhat to present a sermon by *Roy A. Harrisville* on 2 Cor 1:20, in which he develops the distinctive Lutheran Reformation theme of justification by faith.

With this issue *Word & World* reaches a milestone of sorts. No small part of the success

this journal has had stems from the dedicated efforts of those faculty who give of their time to write or edit. Clearly the award for long-standing tenure in such a role goes to book review editor *Richard W. Nysse*, who has ably filled that position for the more than eleven years since the journal's inception, but will end those duties with this issue. We know from your responses that many of you have formed the habit of turning first to the Reviews section, so on your behalf and on behalf of the Editorial Board I express our thanks to Dick for a job well done.

J. L. B.