



# The Church of the Future and the Prospects for Ecumenism

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**I**N THE RECENT DEBATES AMONG LUTHERANS AND OTHERS ABOUT PROPOSALS FOR full communion, many who favored these actions argued that they were important for the missional future of the church. I am one of those people. But our imaginations tend to get stuck at the level of thinking that missional cooperation means the way national church units might work together in cooperative ways. We need to find a way to envision the church of the future—granted, known only to the Holy Spirit—that might spur our imaginations and help us to test the possibility that certain forms of ecumenism can enhance a common mission.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>This was clearly the intention of the Lutheran/Reformed agreement, at least as envisioned in the final dialogue that led up to the *Formula of Agreement*. See Keith Nickel and Timothy Lull, eds., *A Common Calling: The Witness of Our Reformation Churches in North America Today* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1993), especially 63-64. Yet debate of this proposal, among the Lutherans, focused almost exclusively on questions of whether there was sufficient agreement on the Lord's supper or the theological status of the United Church of Christ.

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*Ecumenism for the twenty-first century will have to serve the needs of local congregations of intentional Christians living in a loose connection with their denominational institutions. Cooperation will be necessary for mission and survival. The choice before us will not be ecumenical cooperation or confessional allegiance, but ecumenical cooperation or a dangerously Americanized generic Christianity.*

In their present form, proposals for full communion are, more than anything, most likely attempts to harvest in formal ways the new levels of ecumenical agreement achieved in the bilateral dialogues since 1962. The proposals were certainly—and understandably—concerned to summarize a greater level of agreement than had previously existed, and to argue on the basis of such agreement for new patterns of relationship and cooperation. Since we seem not to be moving toward the kind of church unity that many predicted a few decades ago, we wanted to have some way to recognize the new situation that these significant agreements represent.

But we have only begun to think of ways in which the different situation of the church in the new century may encourage a new stage of ecumenical life together, perhaps having more in common with the spirit of the missionary conferences of the early twentieth century than the bilateral dialogues of its last decades. If we think of what will be necessary for effective Christian witness not only in global outreach but in the new missional task of the local congregation, we may be able to catch a glimpse not only of the church of the future but of a dynamic new stage of ecumenical work.

## I.

Let's begin with a brief sketch of how the church might look in the future, drawing on the work of such theologians as Douglas John Hall, George Lindbeck, and Karl Rahner.<sup>2</sup> It is important to remember that the church is more than a collection of local congregations; the church has institutions and connectional structures that are key parts of its life. But perhaps the best way to envision such things is to imagine the local Christian community of whatever confession in 25 or even 50 years.

The Sunday gathering of this community will still be the heart of its life—both for itself and in its mission to the world. Christians will gather for worship (more often for the eucharist than in some protestant churches today), for education, and for community-building occasions of fellowship. Since not all members of such a community will be related, or even social friends, moments like sharing coffee or tea or a common meal become important building blocks for larger tasks.

The major festivals and even many minor festivals of the Christian year will be celebrated, whether or not they are legal holidays, both by observances in the church building and by informal gatherings in homes. People will have a positive sense of why they are members of the church and of this church, as the Christians of the future are likely to be a minority, at least in many parts of the United States.

Guests would be present many Sundays—hopefully, most Sundays—and their welcome and comfort will be a source of great concern to the community. Worship might be more or less formal, with music drawn from the Christian

<sup>2</sup>See, for example—to concentrate on more recent writings—Douglas John Hall, *Thinking the Faith* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991); George A. Lindbeck, "The Church's Mission to a Post-Modern Culture," in *Postmodern Theology*, ed. Frederic Burnham (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989); and Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, vol. 22 (New York: Crossroad, 1991), especially part III.

tradition, from local culture, or both. Hymns from the great Christian tradition will be mixed with new songs that celebrate new articulations of faith in new tones and accents.<sup>3</sup>

The word will always receive attention and interpretation, often with a more direct form of biblical preaching than prevails today. But the sermon would not be the only encounter with the scriptures for most Christians during the week. Small group Bible study will find a new life in congregations no longer afraid of being branded “evangelical” or “pietistic” in their enthusiasm for the word.<sup>4</sup> In Christian gatherings large and small, prayers for those in need in the community will be offered, linked to concrete opportunities for assistance to those in need.

So most Christians will not be content with an hour a week for the formation and renewal of their faith, although this might have to suffice for some busy persons with great responsibilities in the world. In a world largely indifferent to the faith, an hour a week just will not constitute time for social reinforcement and learning. There will be mid-week gatherings, perhaps simply for eating, for study, for prayer, and for that minimal business necessary for the life of the community. How to support Christians in their daily vocations in the world will be a major emphasis. To this end small groups of Christians might be meeting almost any time of any day of the week.

Study opportunities will be extensive, even in a small congregation—from basic biblical literacy to deep theological discussion. The Internet or its successors will surely provide opportunities for isolated and home-bound persons to participate in these programs. Diverse forms of spirituality will be taught and practiced—prayer, retreats, meditation, Christian versions of yoga, guided reading, spiritual direction. Such a church will not be able to afford being seen as scornful of “spirituality” or dismissing of those who come as “seekers for faith.”

Intergenerational work will also take place, as young people experience an interest in their future by many—not just their parents—and the elderly receive help and support from many—not just their children. Self-help groups will abound, from those for persons struggling with alcohol and addiction to those for persons in mourning because of a recent death.

The congregation will expect to make a witness in the world, probably on behalf of the poor and others in need. This might take many forms, from classic acts like feeding the hungry and clothing the naked to care for children at risk, political advocacy, environmental work, and even non-violent protest. Not all members of each local congregation will engage in the same activities, but all will respect one another for their commitments and have occasions in which they talk together about the needs of the world and their diverse responses.

<sup>3</sup>One can only continue to applaud the pioneering work of Patrick Keifert in getting congregations to formulate intentional plans to make this happen. His work marks a foundational shift in effective ministry in the public sphere. See Patrick Keifert, *Welcoming the Stranger* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992).

<sup>4</sup>Nothing would do more to clear the air for churchly renewal than overcoming the twin fears that haunt so many mainline protestants: being too Catholic in regard to weekly eucharist, and being too evangelical in regard to weekly Bible study.

Members will know that they need to give generously to support the work of the church, since religion will have little public support. These Christians of the future will have mastered the virtue of generosity, knowing even more clearly than active members today that the financial future of the church is on their shoulders—however much the renewal of the church remains in the hands of God the Holy Spirit. The local community will share a portion of its revenues for the wider connectional work of the church, acknowledging in this practical way the wider ministries they know to be necessary and the limits of what they can do alone in that location. To reflect the new missional situation, such connectional realities will, of course, need their own reinvention.

In the midst of all this will be pastors or ministers or priests—persons who take leadership in preaching the word, administering the sacraments, and building the common life. Those with formal education will be expected to play a significant role in teaching, but other leaders will have arisen from within the community's life. They will likely be surrounded by various kinds of long-term or temporary diaconal church workers. The patterns by which these leaders are trained will be more diverse than today, but familiar expectations will still surround these leaders—skill in preaching and leading worship, commitment to teaching, community building, and pastoral care. Some will earn their living from such work, but many will be part-time or even non-stipendiary workers.

The church of the future will not be the kingdom of God. It will have new problems that we cannot yet see, to say nothing of the old problems of sloth, division, and limited understanding of the breadth and scope of God's intention. But it will be the next stage along the pilgrim way, and it will seldom be a boring community or one that is scarcely visible because of its quiet passivity. Yet it too will be scanning the horizon, wondering in the midst of its rich common life about the church of the future of the twenty-second century.

## II.

If such a picture has evocative merit, then we might ask not about how ecumenism completes old trajectories, but to what extent such Christians and such communities of the future are likely to think of themselves with great confessional or denominational specificity. I cannot myself imagine the demise of denominations in the near future, because I consider the diverse forms of Christian faith that they embody far too satisfying simply to drop away. Of course many independent congregations will arise—a trend already visible. And many local communities—not for the first time—will live in a nominal rather than vital relationship to their particular confessional tradition.

But even harder to imagine than the demise of denominations is a resurgence of a closed or anti-ecumenical confessionalism.<sup>5</sup> The situation that is emerging for the future, however many of the details described above prove to be correct, is one

<sup>5</sup>I do not mean that it is hard to imagine proposals along those lines and even some local success with such approaches. But these movements get much of their energy from being "opposed" to national or synodical restructures or trends, and I think the appeal of such will be very limited in the future.

in which Christians learn to live in a post-Christian world, actively reaching out beyond their own communities to those outside the church, but with no illusion that everyone will respond or that missional emphasis will bring back Christendom.

So the great question for Christians in the twenty-first century is likely to be what it means to be a Christian—rather than a Lutheran or a Presbyterian or an Episcopalian—in a world of many Christian groups, many religions, and widespread indifference to religious affiliation. Here—and the pattern is already well established if one looks around carefully—Christians will turn wherever they can for theological vision, for church programs, for daily spiritual guidance. The source of materials will matter less than their local usefulness, and the Internet may radically increase the range of possibilities that can be accessed.

I hope this does not lead to a bland, homogenized form of Christian community, with the same tired liturgies and canned sermons available everywhere because of the superior marketing techniques of some providers. I hope for an ecumenical rather than generic future for the Christian community, because I believe that each of the confessional traditions embodies rich insights and life-forms that add to the strength of the Christian witness rather than working against it.<sup>6</sup> But I think the nature of the choice before us is this: not confessional versus ecumenical, but ecumenical verses generic.

For our concrete confessional forms of Christianity to survive the onslaught of market-driven resources, we will need forms of organizational life that do more than appeal to traditional loyalties; we will need to do better than to point out the inadequacies of what others are doing. Our social situation will be pluralistic—Lutheran Christians living among many kind of Christians, Christians living among people of many religions, with all of the social, work, and family contacts that make us skeptical of older divisions and their relevance for us.

I think wise church leadership will find a path in this changed situation that neither tries to bring back the past nor glamorizes the new situation. I think the social patterns of people's lives will presuppose—even insist—that churches work together with positive leadership and cooperation on a broad level, without pressing toward the kind of confessional mergers that would feel like a step toward a centralized church rather than remaining in service of the diverse possibilities for cooperation at the local level.

In this respect I think that the full communion agreements, however flawed in their concrete argumentation and proposals, are the best way to go for Christians who want cooperative work with integrity but do not want to speed the arrival of a homogenized, post-denominational (and therefore dangerously Americanized) church. My own support for the current ecumenical aspirations of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America has to do with my sense that these are shrewd proposals—not resting on past differences that are no longer theologically

<sup>6</sup>We need to heed the very wise advice of Avery Dulles not to dismiss all denominational particularity as a sign of a divided Christendom that must be overcome. See Avery Dulles, *The Resilient Church* (Gill and Macmillan, 1977) 185.

persuasive nor socially reinforced, but also not giving way to the temptation to say, "We're all Christians, aren't we? What difference does any of this Lutheran stuff make?"

The demise of Lutheranism has been pronounced many times in the past, and so far this church has proved to be quite resilient. I think there are deep resources in the Lutheran heritage that would make an especially effective contribution to the recovery of a missional theology for the church of the near future. But I think others have gifts as well, that we can learn from them and be enhanced by them without betraying the faith that we have inherited. It might be that the Lutheran themes are never more attractive than when they are part of a movement for Christian renewal and mission, and never more problematic than when they become a system that we must defend at all costs. ⊕