



The Future of Denominations: Asking Uppercase Questions

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The invitation to reflect as presiding bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) on the question of this issue—“Whither Denominations?”—carries perhaps two expectations: that I will first articulate a case for denominations and then describe with compelling vision the future of denominations. I am concerned, however, that we will serve neither the conversation nor the church well if we pose the question of “whither denominations” without reflecting on the deeper and more essential questions of the history, nature, and mission of the church. We must pay attention to these matters before considering the phenomena shaping the future of denominations in the church today.

THE HISTORY OF THE CHURCH

The word “denomination” does not appear in Scripture, but is a phenomenon of history and context. To be able to answer the question of “whither denominations,” we must understand the origin of the denomination, in this case the ELCA. Lowell Almen, ELCA Secretary, indicates that

from colonial days, Lutherans joined together to engage in shared responsibilities. That pattern was first seen organizationally with the formation of the Ministerium of Pennsylvania in August 1748—what can be called the first Lutheran “synod” in colonial America. Gradually, what we now call Lutheran church bod-

The future of denominations in general—and of the ELCA in particular—depends on responding to the mission to which God calls us in the world rather than planning strategies for institutional survival.

ies emerged. For instance, the General Synod was formed in 1820. Numerous other Lutheran church bodies developed in the mid-to-late 1800s. Subsequent years witnessed multiple mergers of many of those bodies. What at one time or another during the 20th century had been about a score of separate bodies were united into the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America in 1987. Those mergers occurred for the sake of greater Lutheran unity. Increased effectiveness in domestic and international mission endeavors and reduced duplication of effort emerged through joining together.¹

Robert Wuthnow, a well-known religious researcher, argues that denominationalism is “one of the essential features of American religion” and that denominational loyalties have been both deeply rooted and sharply defined.²

THE NATURE OF THE CHURCH

The ELCA constitution in chapter 3 (“Nature of the Church”) describes an interdependent rather than independent understanding of the church. In its own self-understanding, the ELCA is a both/and church:

The Church exists *both* as an inclusive fellowship *and* as local congregations gathered for worship and Christian service. Congregations find their fulfillment in the universal community of the Church, *and* the universal Church exists in and through congregations. This church, therefore, derives its character and powers *both* from the sanction and representation of its congregations *and* from its inherent nature as an expression of the broader fellowship of the faithful. In length, it acknowledges itself to be in the historic continuity of the communion of saints; in breadth, it expresses the fellowship of believers and congregations in our day.³

When we discuss the nature of the church, we must take seriously several phenomena experienced in our context. Martin Marty, in his 2004 presentation to the ELCA Bishops’ Academy, hypothesized that an ontological understanding of the existence of the church no longer exists in our postmodern age. He said, “We deal with polarities: [the] ontological nature [of the church] and empirical reality, being and choosing, unity and diversity, given and novel. Our culture is all on the side of the empirical, on choosing, on diversity, and the novel.”⁴ Marty also reminded the bishops that our increasingly postmodern culture lacks “meta-narratives.” Without these known and shared sacred stories, we become increasingly fragmented.

For instance, in the current American context, there is little awareness that membership in a church connects individuals to a living community of faith that

¹Lowell G. Almen, personal communication to the author for this occasion.

²Robert Wuthnow, “The Declining Significance of Denominationalism,” in *The Restructuring of American Religion: Society and Faith since World War II* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988) 71.

³ELCA Constitution, Bylaws, and Continuing Resolutions, Section 3.02 (emphasis added).

⁴Martin E. Marty, “Outline: The Future Context of Ministry in Our Culture” (presentation at the 2004 Academy of the ELCA Conference of Bishops, Mundelein, IL, 6 January 2004) 2.

precedes their lives, transcends their reality, and that will continue beyond their earthly existence. Marty's ecclesiological argument is further substantiated by data from the ELCA's Department for Research and Evaluation that indicates that 70% of ELCA members have little awareness that, by virtue of their membership in a congregation, they have any involvement in a body beyond the congregation. According to Kenneth Inskip, "Distance and disinterestedness from the denominational structure make it difficult...to link members and congregations together in the cause of mission."⁵

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If Marty is right—and I am persuaded by his argument—then denominations will have to be dynamic: constantly interacting with Scripture, flexible in polity, adaptive in leadership, not equating unity with uniformity, constantly clarifying identity and mission, and tending to both relatedness and distinctiveness.

THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH

My colleague Charles Miller makes a helpful distinction between "uppercase" and "lowercase" questions, arguing that the question of "whither denominations" is a lowercase question, while the question of the mission to which God calls us is the uppercase question.

To what mission does God call this church today?

What kind of church serves God's mission in the world today?

Over millennia, the church has answered these uppercase questions through biblical study, theological reflection, confessional articulation, and contextual discovery. Without some foundational agreement about ecclesiology, mission, and identity, however, the question of "whither denominations" runs the risk of becoming an issue either of institutional survival or the preservation and transmittal of a particular immigrant subculture through a specific denomination.

Henry Melchior Muhlenberg, the eighteenth-century organizer of American Lutheranism, described the structure of the church as "the external scaffolding of the spiritual edifice." In commenting on Muhlenberg's description, H. George Anderson said, "The church structure was only there to provide for the spiritual edifice—that is, the Gospel being brought to the people of God."⁶ Anderson also

⁵Kenneth Inskip, "Change and Mainline Denominations as Large Social Institutions with Particular Focus on the ELCA" (presentation at ELCA Conference of Bishops, 2–7 March 1995, Exhibit A, Part 2, 5).

⁶H. George Anderson, "The External Scaffolding of the Spiritual Edifice" (presentation at ELCA Conference of Bishops, 5–8 October 1992, Exhibit P, 1).

commented that, although the confessors not only mentioned the ordering of the church but took it seriously, Lutherans, unlike most confessional groups, “have never wedded themselves to one particular form or structure. They have indeed only defined the church in terms of function, never structure.”⁷

Throughout a two-year period between 2001 and 2003, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America probed deep questions for the future. More than thirty thousand people participated in a process to discern God’s mission for this church and establish a strong plan for mission. The ELCA’s mission statement is powerful: “Marked with the cross of Christ forever, we are claimed, gathered, and sent for the sake of the world.” This strong statement is one more reminder of the identity and unity we are given and of God’s mission to which we are called.

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Imagining this mission through the lens of two biblical metaphors—the body of Christ and the vine and the branches—is compelling. The Apostle Paul’s image of the church as the body of Christ is reflected, in a sense, in the statement of the polity of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. That polity is defined in the ELCA’s constitution in several provisions. For instance, provision 5.01 declares: “The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America shall be one church.” The ELCA is not envisioned as an association of random congregations or a confederation of synods, but rather as a church body.

Reflecting that awareness, provision 8.11 expresses the ELCA’s polity succinctly yet profoundly: “This church shall seek to function as people of God through congregations, synods, and the churchwide organization, all of which shall be *interdependent*. Each part, while fully the church, recognizes that it is not the whole church and therefore lives in a partnership relationship with the others” (emphasis added).

Ecclesial substance and reality are reflected and acknowledged in each primary expression of the ELCA—congregations, synods, and churchwide ministries. Particular primary responsibilities are assigned to each expression for the good of the whole body.

In 2004, Martin Marty referred to this biblical image when he spoke of Paul Tillich’s contention that “the Church universal, as well as the particular churches included in it, is seen in a double aspect as the ‘body of Christ’ on the one hand—a spiritual reality—and as a social group of individual Christians on the other.”⁸ The body metaphor, as emphasized by Tillich and Marty, is the classic illustration of

⁷Ibid.

⁸Paul J. Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 3 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963) 163.

unity in diversity: unity results from the harmony of many different parts working together and depends on the diversity functioning as such.

As we see ourselves through the metaphor of the vine and the branches, we are reminded that we are members of one body. Therefore, we think less of our own denominational survival and more of the unity of this richly diverse body.

Jonathan Strandjord, the ELCA's director for theological education, used this biblical metaphor to link the ELCA's new mission statement and tag line—"Living in God's amazing grace." He said,

The image that strikes me as perhaps connecting them most effectively is that of branches grafted into a vine or tree. When being "marked with the cross of Christ" is to have a grafting scar, then both the cruciform character of "living in God's amazing grace" and the gracious character of our being "claimed, gathered, and sent for the sake of the world" come into focus. We are "marked with the cross of Christ forever," for by God's forgiving mercy, we have been grafted into Christ like branches into a vine. There we are joined by faith to God's own overflowing life, gathered in a life together no difference can deny, bearing the life-giving fruit of love by the power of the Spirit. Amazing grace!⁹

The image of denominations as parts of a living organism—the body of Christ, daily renewed by the power of the Holy Spirit through the means of grace—is the source of my hope for their future. If denominations are removed from this reality, I fear the question of their future may become one of institutional viability and survival rather than of their roles as living members of Christ's body in the world.

Article VII of the Augsburg Confession begins its description of the church with this sentence: "It is also taught among us that one holy Christian church will be and remain forever." H. George Anderson says that these believers

talked about the one holy Christian church being and remaining forever. They saw beyond the existing divisions to an eternal reality that was not destroyed by human separations, anger, or accusations. If we keep in mind that glowing sentence, it puts the future in our part of the church in a different light: "one holy Christian church will be and remain forever." The issue then is not whether we'll be overwhelmed by financial problems, or secularism, or the spirit of the times. The issue is only whether we will be true to our head, fruitful branches of that vine, of that Word that endures forever.¹⁰

It is through the gospel that the Holy Spirit creates the church and it is for the gospel that the church exists. When the mission of this church is to proclaim God's saving gospel, we trust that the Holy Spirit will continue to reform and renew us for the sake of the gospel.

⁹Jonathan Strandjord, personal communication to the author for this occasion.

¹⁰H. George Anderson, "The One Thing Needful" (presentation at ELCA Conference of Bishops, 5–8 October 1992, Exhibit P, 16).

THE FUTURE OF DENOMINATIONS

Only in the context of pondering these deeper “uppercase” questions can we identify and respond to significant factors that will affect the future of denominations. I invite you to join me in pondering several questions as we look to the future of denominations:

Will denominations, if viewed primarily as vehicles for preserving the traditions and piety of once-immigrant people and their descendents, have difficulty embracing and being changed by our increasingly pluralistic context? The book of Acts is clear: when outsiders become believers, the church is changed. Such is the work of the Holy Spirit.

Will our consumer, market-driven, transactional culture force denominations to justify their existence by competing in an environment rich in resources? If the future of denominations is based on their success in the marketplace, denominations and their partners, including parachurch organizations and congregations, are reduced to being competitors rather than resource-rich partners.

Will denominations be defined by the issues that divide them rather than the gospel, faith, and mission that unite them? If so, they may become increasingly contentious or, worse yet, face divisions that will lead to new denominations of like-minded members. Consensus about what is foundational for us as a confessional church is crucial. However, when consensus about specific issues is a prerequisite for denominational vitality—if not survival—then have we sacrificed the gifts of a dynamic, diverse organism for a static, uniform organization?

“How will those called to serve denominations respond to the growing evidence that people in this culture seek meaning in life, want faith to matter, and seek to be part of a church that makes a difference not only in their lives but also in the life of the world?”

Will denominations define themselves in terms of what sets them apart from others in the body of Christ rather than in terms of the gifts they bring as part of the body? Such a temptation leads us to be severed from rather than joined in the body of Christ. In an e-mail to ELCA rostered leaders in November 2003, I wrote that Lutheran identity—grounded in Scripture, the Lutheran Confessions, and ecumenical creeds—will at times emphasize those theological convictions that set us *apart from* other church bodies. Perhaps it is more helpful to think of Lutheran identity in terms of what we bring as *a part of* the body of Christ, even as we are open to receiving the gifts of others.

How will those called to serve denominations respond to the growing evidence that people in this culture seek meaning in life, want faith to matter, and seek to be part of a church that makes a difference not only in their lives but also in the life of the world? If denominations are not seen as responsive to these deepest desires, their future is less certain.

How can those called to lead denominations serve as prophetic voices, calling members away from self-preoccupation and into a world that cries out for healing and hope?

Martin Marty describes a denomination as “an earthen vessel, full of cracks and holes. But the church in the present-day unfolding of history needs such vessels, or something like them. Built into these denominations that stand the best chance of enduring and serving are mechanisms and impulses for reform and renewal. Their significance is less one that can be marked by ‘decline’ and more by something that sounds much simpler, but is deliciously more complex: ‘change.’”¹¹

As presiding bishop of the ELCA, I ponder “whither” and “whether” and look for as many perspectives as possible to help shape the answer: the witness of Scripture, the data of the empiricist, the wisdom of the historian, the vision of the futurist. In the midst of these, it helps to see ourselves through the eyes of one who is not a member, but who knows both us and the American church scene very well. I recently had an opportunity to hear Craig Dykstra, vice president for religion at the Lilly Endowment, Inc., who spoke with great clarity about the uniqueness of the ELCA. As he described a map of the ecology of this church, I was stunned to realize that what I (from the inside of the ELCA) too often see as fragments, he (from the outside) saw as an interrelated and interdependent whole. In this ecology, he observed that camps, seminaries, colleges, campus ministries, social ministry organizations, schools, and other institutions increasingly are drawn together out of a deepening Lutheran understanding of vocation, the dialectic of faith and reason, the call for faith to become active in love, and the desire to deepen belief and form leaders for the future.

Robert Bacher and Kenneth Inskeep have written a marvelous new book with the working title *Chasing Down a Rumor: The Death of Mainline Denominations*. I am grateful to them for providing access to an advance copy for this article. They write in the introduction, “Mainline denominations will get better if they do things that fulfill their mission purposes within the framework of their long and well-established and clearly articulated identities. They should do things that express their unique character. Put another way, mainline denominations should do things that no one else could, or would, do in the same way.”¹²

It is important to name and claim the gifts of this church. In November 2003, I suggested the following list of “rich treasures of the ongoing Lutheran Reformation.” They include, but are not limited to:

- justification by grace through faith
- the theology of the cross
- law and gospel

¹¹Martin E. Marty, quoted by Robert Bacher in “More on Denominations” (presentation at the ELCA Planning Team, Chicago, IL, 3 March 1993) 3.

¹²Robert Bacher and Kenneth Inskeep, advance copy of introduction to *Chasing Down a Rumor: The Death of Mainline Denominations* [working title] (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2005) 14–15.

- *simul iustus et peccator*
- vocation and the priesthood of all believers
- the freedom of the Christian
- *simul* and *sola*

Elaborating on the final item on the list, I said:

Maintaining a Lutheran identity in our culture is challenging. We do not live in a time when many people value dialectics or are drawn into the mystery of paradox. Yet as Lutherans, we hold onto *simul* and *sola*. We speak of:

- The creation as good *and* fallen
- Ourselves as saint *and* sinner
- Jesus as human *and* divine, crucified *and* risen
- The Word of God as incarnate, recorded, *and* proclaimed
- The Word as law *and* gospel
- God as hidden *and* yet revealed under the form of contraries
- God reigning through law and reason for the sake of order and justice *and* God reigning through the gospel for the sake of faith and salvation, and
- Holding faith *and* reason in healthy tension.

Yet we also proclaim “Sola Gratia, Sola Fide, Sola Scriptura.”¹³

These are gifts of the whole church. The ELCA has not described itself as a hierarchy, but as an interdependent church in three expressions remaining grounded in its confessional theology and sacramental liturgical life. Out of that center this church welcomes lively internal debates while deepening external relationships with ecumenical and global partners. If Craig Dykstra is at all correct in his assessment of this church’s ecology, then I am confident that we have a dynamic contribution to make and a hopeful future to anticipate. ⊕

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¹³Mark S. Hanson, “Fall Reflections from the Presiding Bishop” (e-mail to ELCA rostered leaders, November 2003).