

FACE...

The ELCA at Twenty: Where To from Here? How to Be Lutheran in a New Century

HERBERT W. CHILSTROM

It was only a few months after the birth of the ELCA. Because of extensive travel, I quickly accumulated enough miles for an upgrade to first class. My seat companion noted that I was wearing a collar. Not being accustomed to seeing clergy in that section, he asked who I was and what I did. I gave him a brief description of the ELCA—5 million members, 65 regional “synods,” 11,000 congregations, and some 17,000 pastors. I added a brief description of my role as the first bishop.

I learned, in turn, that he was the CEO of a major corporation. He had no interest in faith issues. His fascination was with organization.

“*What did you do before you were elected to this position?*” I said I had been bishop for some of the Lutherans in Minnesota. “*So you were never the head of a national organization or part of its staff?*” When I said I had not been, he said, “*I see.*”

“*And what about your national staff?*” I explained that it had been decided prior to the merger that no one on the staff of one of the predecessor churches would have an advantage over new applicants. I estimated that about two-thirds of more than six hundred personnel had never served in their current positions. He replied, “*I see.*”

“*What about your synods?*” I explained that forty of the sixty-five bishops had never served in that capacity. Again, “*I see.*”

“*What about your budget?*” I told him that the most optimistic estimate of income from the financial planning group had been \$90 to \$95 million for the first fiscal period. I added that \$107 million had been recommended to the constituting convention, which, in turn, increased it to \$112 million. I explained that each congregation decided how much to give to its synod, and each synod determined how much to share with the national church. I told him that we would have no idea how much money we would actually receive until the end of the first fiscal year. Once more, “*I see.*”

After a look out the window and a long thoughtful pause he looked at me, “*Do you realize you can’t do this?*” I looked at him and said, “*You’re probably right. But we have no choice. We have to.*”

There, in a nutshell, you have it. Our greatest challenge was not money or the adequacy of the staff. We were simply “dreaming the impossible dream.” But there

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TO FACE

The ELCA at Twenty: Where To from Here? Converting our Culture, External and Internal

RICHARD BLIESE

Lutherans are rarely accused of evangelistic fanaticism. The ELCA has tried mightily for over two decades to reorient its approach to evangelizing. The results, interpreted by this optimist, have been mixed. Lutheran churches in America were established by Europeans steeped in a “state” or “established” church experience. Church membership was established through baptism, family devotions, and catechism. Our theology and ecclesial DNA is not wired to share the faith with our neighbors. And it shows!

The ELCA stands at a critical tipping point. Signs of new life are everywhere. We even have our first synod that’s growing in membership: the South Dakota Synod! But can our whole church move toward making evangelism our central call? Activities designed to do just that have been tried since 1987; unfortunately, they have had only short-term impact.

In 1991, the ELCA churchwide assembly adopted an evangelism strategy, *Telling the Story*, with an overwhelming vote: Yes-894 and No-52. The activities dedicated to this strategy were enormous. The results were disappointing:

- The vast majority of members and congregations were not convinced that evangelism was a significant part of their lives or the mission of the church.
- After ten years of evangelism focus, no more congregations had organized programs for membership recruitment than in 1977.
- Evangelism programs like “Making Disciples” had a very positive impact on growth in worship attendance. However, these gains were not sustained.
- Congregations found it difficult to sustain an evangelistic focus.
- At the present rate of growth, it will take the ELCA over one hundred years to achieve its goal of 10% people of color.
- The ambitious goal of starting fifty new congregations a year fell short by nineteen per year.

The evangelism video series is particularly revealing to study: Between January 1995 and May 1997, at least 880 congregations ordered at least one of the ELCA’s video workshops. The department of research and evaluation compared the average worship attendance in these congregations to the 8,375 congregations

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was no turning back. My reading of church history suggests that even in previous smaller mergers it took two or more decades for a church body to gel into a cohesive entity. We are, thankfully, on the way.

And where are we headed? We must stop dreaming impossible dreams and face reality.

First, if we are to be true to our heritage as a church that is historic and catholic, we must embrace the marks of that kind of church. That is why my greatest concern is with *how we worship*. No, I'm not talking about the tension between traditional and contemporary. My question is: *What elements will keep us in the historic, catholic, Lutheran faith no matter what the form may be on a given Sunday?* For me, they are these:

- praise of God in songs and hymns
- confession of sins
- a confession of faith that embraces the historic creeds
- clear and distinct reading of Scripture
- proclamation of law and gospel
- a call for generous support for the full mission of the church, local and worldwide
- sharing of the sacramental meal

Second, we need to distinguish between what is essential and what is peripheral to our common life. The Constitution of the ELCA states our common faith. Beyond that, we must struggle with the need to allow for greater diversity in synods and congregations. What is needed in a rural parish in Kansas or Minnesota or Montana may differ from what is called for in New York City or Dallas or San Francisco. We need to place greater trust in the pastoral judgment of our synod bishops, parish pastors, and their governing councils, allowing them greater flexibility to do ministry and mission where they are.

Third, we must give up the idea that lingers from our predecessor church bodies, namely, that all things, or at least most things, must be done through the ELCA. We keep flagellating ourselves because the budget of the ELCA does not increase. I wish it would. But this is a bookkeeping myth. If there were a way to tally all the support that is given by our faithful people to a variety of causes in ways that do not pass through local congregations, synods, or the churchwide organization, we would be amazed at the generosity of our members.

Some may wish we still did it “the old fashioned way.” But wishing will change nothing. We simply must think creatively about what it means to be a Lutheran church in the twenty-first century. ☩

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that did not order the videos. Congregations that ordered the video workshops had had greater losses in average worship attendance before 1994. These same congregations, however, gained in worship attendance between 1995 and 1997. Unfortunately, by 1998 and 1999 losses returned and were in fact greater than among those congregations that had never ordered the videos. Evangelism seems to have heightened the tension in congregations so as to create more decline than growth.

To its credit, the ELCA attempted a new evangelism strategy in the new millennium. The 2003 Churchwide Assembly adopted “Sharing Faith in a New Century: A Vision for Evangelism in the ELCA.” As Lutherans, we may not yet be good at evangelism, but we are convinced that this commitment belongs deeply within our grace-centered tradition. Fully briefed in 2003 about the weaknesses of past strategies, we passed another evangelism strategy. But will we provide adequate resources for these initiatives? Will our leadership make uncompromising commitments to a vision of an evangelizing church? Will we move past pure idealism into the hard work of reaching out across cultures to other ethnic and racial groups? The questions abound!

The results so far are mixed:

- There are strong commitments to evangelism in the ELCA. These commitments, however, have not led to the development of strong resources dedicated to evangelizing.
- With massive changes in ELCA staffing in Chicago, the evangelism strategy has not been lost. Focus has been maintained.
- New programs seem to be working at the same level as the older ones. The question will always be about sustainability of gains.
- New mission starts—and their successes—are not keeping pace with hopeful projections.
- Cross-cultural evangelizing is a value and commitment of the ELCA but one with little progress across our congregations.

Lutherans, with our emphasis on justification, have ironically never fully embraced evangelism as a central part of the mission of the church. Despite an enormous amount of recent effort at reorienting the church, the ELCA has lost members every year since it adopted an evangelism strategy.

The good news is that when we “do” evangelism, it “works.” The problem is that these missional gains lead inevitably to cultural clashes within congregations. The real challenge for Lutherans concerning evangelizing is not the challenge inherent in the programs, materials, or events. The challenge seems to be one of cultural change. With all our strategies, we must focus on evangelizing our internal culture as we evangelize the world. The best strategy will target our heart. ☩

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