



# Confessing the Faith and Selling Church Property

WILLIAM R. RUSSELL

“The report of my death was an exaggeration,” wrote Mark Twain famously to an inquirer in 1897.<sup>1</sup> Twain’s comment reminds me of Augustana Lutheran Church, Minneapolis, Minnesota. In May 2012, the congregation sold their historic downtown building. That imposing ecclesiastical edifice, a monument to Swedish immigrant Lutheranism in the Upper Midwest, bore witness to the days when Augustana was a prominent, powerful public influencer in the region. By 2012, that building no longer served the congregation well. So, they sold it. And that means that Augustana had closed, right?

Well, no. Not even close. Augustana moved. They made some hard, gut-wrenching decisions about their ministry site. It was not easy. Part of being human entails attachment to physical things and spaces. This is part of what Kathleen Norris calls our “spiritual geography.”<sup>2</sup> It can happen in urban as well as rural settings. And it matters. We mark our lives by events and transitions that occur in particular places and at particular moments. Therefore, we do well not to downplay

<sup>1</sup> See “Death,” Directory of Mark Twain’s Maxims, Quotations, and Various Opinions, accessed May 15, 2022, <http://www.twainquotes.com/Death.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Kathleen Norris, *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography* (New York: Mariner, 1993).

*If history teaches anything, it teaches the inevitability of change. Swings of fortune, periods of growth and decline, come to religious institutions. This urban congregation in Minneapolis is no stranger to these fluctuations, but strives in the midst of them to continue to find new ways to carry out its ministry.*

the pain and grief of letting go of a building, a beloved space. There can be a deep sense of loss. And it is important to remember that to sell real estate, a building, pieces of furniture, or a parking lot is not simple or easy.

For the sake of the church's participation in God's mission, however, we are sometimes called to make tough choices. And that is what Augustana did. They moved to a spot not too far away in terms of distance, just seven blocks. But the new location in Minneapolis's Ventura Village neighborhood is a world away from the old neighborhood that is surrounded now by businesses, a hospital complex, a football stadium, crisscrossing freeways and light rail tracks, a utility substation, and parking decks. Augustana moved into a residential neighborhood, to the building that had housed their food shelf since 1971 (Community Emergency Service).<sup>3</sup> This congregation knows all too well how difficult such moves are.

Then, six months after relocating, Augustana called me to serve as their pastor.<sup>4</sup> At the time, a member of the synod staff (not the bishop) told me that my ministry would probably be to "help them close well." And for some time after my installation, various folks (from a guy at the YMCA to a former presiding bishop), in numerous ways (from chats on Facebook to chats at the Pittsburgh churchwide assembly), said, "I thought that church had closed."

The confusion is understandable. From the outside, Augustana's sale of the old building looked like a symptom of the wider malaise facing mainline Christianity in America. The so-called decline of the church has been well-documented.<sup>5</sup> Conventional wisdom has it that the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America has a problem: the ELCA is sick, may even be dying. No need to belabor the statistics.

In the face of such a future, what are we to do? How do we think theologically about the projected demise of Lutheranism in America? Part of our response lies in interpreting the church's actions accurately—placing them in a wider cultural, historical, and theological context. And that involves looking at the past—our Lutheran past. It is not the whole answer, but it is crucial to a particularly Lutheran future. Specifically, a return to our foundational documents, our confessions of faith, can give us fresh insight and perspective on the present and future church. The confessional writings in *The Book of Concord* come to us from the past—from the ancient church, from Martin Luther and Philip Melancthon and

<sup>3</sup> Community Emergency Service, accessed May 15, 2022, [www.cesmn.org](http://www.cesmn.org).

<sup>4</sup> It is important to note that Augustana's actions, which I describe appreciatively here, took place before I was called to serve as pastor. I can take no credit for the faithful leadership Augustana showed in making this move. The congregation's sensitivity to God's mission was overseen by a long line of visionary leaders, reaching back to Augustana's founding in the mid-nineteenth century. The Rev. Michelene Verlautz led the church most directly toward its move. The Rev. Duane Hetland then accompanied Augustana in the move and served as pastor until November 2012.

<sup>5</sup> Gregory A. Smith, "About Three-in-Ten U.S. Adults Are Now Religiously Unaffiliated," Pew Research Center, December 14, 2021, <https://www.pewforum.org/2021/12/14/about-three-in-ten-u-s-adults-are-now-religiously-unaffiliated/>. Cf. Dwight Zscheile, "Will the ELCA Be Gone in 30 Years?" *Faith+Lead*, September 5, 2019, <https://faithlead.luthersem.edu/decline/>; and Jean Hopfensperger, "As Churches Close, a Way of Life Fades," *Star Tribune*, July 8, 2018, <https://www.startribune.com/as-minnesota-churches-close-a-way-of-life-fades/486037461/>

their colleagues.<sup>6</sup> We would do well to take the confessions seriously, return to them regularly, and apply their insights diligently. Indeed, let us believe, teach, and confess—in our time and place—in ways the Reformers would recognize, and maybe even approve.

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The crucible of history that prompted the confessors to gather the documents in *The Book of Concord* is much like the cauldron in which we find ourselves. Both periods are marked with rapid change, information overload, plagues, wars, and political upheaval. The sixteenth-century church had inherited a system of well-intentioned (but too often destructive) theologies and practices that could not serve the church well. We find ourselves in a comparable situation.

Whatever else may be part of a distinctively Lutheran participation in God's present and future mission, it always includes a critical reappropriation of what our forebears have passed on to us. And the key features of that inheritance lie in the ten documents of *The Book of Concord*.

Therefore, Lutherans need tend to their confessional writings. The Lutheran tradition of confessing the faith, passed on to us by our forebears, is a gift to the church and world. And it is a gift that carries a risk. We risk allowing our commitment to tradition to calcify into rigid traditionalism. In Jaroslav Pelikan's felicitous phrase, "Tradition is the living faith of the dead, traditionalism is the dead faith of the living. And, I suppose I should add, it is traditionalism that gives tradition such a bad name."<sup>7</sup> Let us value tradition and eschew traditionalism.

Augustana Lutheran Church is a case in point. In the era and place of its founding, mid-nineteenth-century North America, while the US government was driving Native people from their ancestral lands, Minneapolis burgeoned into a boomtown of sorts, awash with the excitements and enticements of new money derived from agriculture, lumber, railroads, and more. Entrepreneurs like Washburn and Weyerhaeuser would harness the Mississippi, milling grain into flour and sawing trees into lumber. Then they would load their commodities onto James J. Hill's eastbound railroads or onto barges heading down the big river to New Orleans.

That took lots of laborers willing to toil for low wages under harsh conditions. And immigrants were just the ticket. Their work reflected the seasons of

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<sup>6</sup> Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000). Hereafter, *BC*. Full disclosure: I translated "The Smalcald Articles" for this edition of *BC*.

<sup>7</sup> Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Vindication of Tradition: The 1983 Jefferson Lecture in the Humanities* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 65.

harvest and production, with periods of intense and dangerous labor followed by days and weeks of downtime. Those young men worked hard and played hard. The risks inherent in their jobs made Minneapolis the nation's leading producer of artificial limbs.<sup>8</sup> Their play made Minneapolis a regional center for gambling, saloons, and various associated diversions (some of which were both unhealthy and immoral).

In this context of boom and bust, a group of folks organized a community of faith. It was a bold move, on a couple of fronts. First, the rough-and-tumble context was inhospitable, if not hostile, to the church. Second, Augustana claimed fidelity to a kind of Lutheranism that differed markedly from the state-church systems of the old country. The cultural and legal advantages afforded the folk church back home did not apply on the North American prairie. Cut off from those kinds of supports, Lutheranism would have to organize itself as a distinctively confessional church. In the US, the Lutheran church would either connect intentionally to the faith confessed by the Reformers or disappear into the prevailing generalized American Protestantism.

Here, in this place of dislocation, Lutheran identity meant—and still means—fundamentally to confess the Christian faith with accents on some specific doctrinal emphases inherited from the Reformers. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who faced dislocation and hostility toward the church in a different context, preached about this kind of confession:

It is a great comfort that Christ gives to the church: You confess, preach, bear witness to me, but I alone will do the building, wherever I am pleased to do so. Don't interfere with my orders. Church, if you do your own part right, then that is enough. But make sure you do it right. . . . Not only must church remain church, but you, my church, confess, confess, confess.

Bonhoeffer then sums this up for the assembled congregation: "Christ alone is your Lord; by his grace alone you live, just as you are. Christ is building."<sup>9</sup>

Interestingly, with similar conviction, a congregation established by Scandinavians on the banks of the Mississippi seventy years before Bonhoeffer preached that sermon sought to confess the faith in their time and place. That's why those non-native English speakers, immigrants struggling to find their way in frontier America, chose the Medieval Latin name (*Augustana*) of a German city (Augsburg) for their congregation.<sup>10</sup> They chose that moniker, however, not because it was Latin, but because they were interested in mission—God's mission.

<sup>8</sup> R. L. Cartwright, "Artificial Limb Industry in Minneapolis," *MNopedia*, July 1, 2014, <http://www.mnopedia.org/artificial-limb-industry-minneapolis>. Also, Joseph Hart, "Lost City," *City Pages*, June 11, 1997, <https://web.archive.org/web/20131104062935/http://www.citypages.com/1997-06-11/news/lost-city/full/>

<sup>9</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Collected Sermons of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, vol. 1 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012), 85–86.

<sup>10</sup> The official, constituted name was "The Evangelical Lutheran Augustana Congregation."

And they were going to participate in that mission with a particular voice. As George Forell used to say, in the choir of the church, Lutherans have a part to sing. And if we do not sing it with gusto, the choir is diminished, perhaps even distorted.<sup>11</sup> One of the notes we sing is right there in the Augsburg Confession: what makes the church the church is the proclamation of the gospel and the right administration of the sacraments.

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Augustana wanted to sing, as it were, to the raucous, rough mill workers of mid-nineteenth-century Minneapolis. And they wanted to welcome the increasing numbers of immigrants who made their way to the Upper Midwest in those days. To do that, they drew upon the historical magna carta of confessional Lutheranism, the Augsburg Confession (i.e., the *Confessio Augustana* [or, simply, “the Augustana”]). The name was strange, but its echoes of home offered a degree of welcome to poor, immigrant people, cut off from loved ones and a homeland they would probably never see again. And they did it while affirming a distinctive way of being Christian. They wanted to confess the faith as Lutherans, in continuity with those Reformers who stood before the gathered estates of Christendom in 1530 to affirm the *Confessio Augustana*.

And they began to embody the definition of the church in Augustana, Article VII: “The one holy, Christian church . . . is the assembly of all believers among whom the gospel is purely preached, and the holy sacraments are administered according to the gospel.”<sup>12</sup> That understanding of the church informed how they could be a community of faith in a rough-and-tumble nineteenth-century river town.<sup>13</sup>

As confessors of the faith, Lutherans intentionally accent certain aspects of the Christian message. These accents give us our voice. With Luther and Melancthon as our section leaders, let us be clear: When we sell real estate, we are not closing churches. We might sell the building where the church meets, but the church continues.

The church exists because God’s Word, the gospel message of the Word made flesh, exists. And we do not endure simply for the sake of longevity. We exist because the world needs to know that God has acted through Christ to “reconcile the Father to us,”<sup>14</sup> even though we do not deserve it.

<sup>11</sup> George Forell, “The Place of Theology in the ELCA,” *Lutheran Forum* 25, no. 1 (1991), 34.

<sup>12</sup> AC VI in BC, 42; also, AC VII.

<sup>13</sup> Cf., Bruce Johnson, “Historic Churches of the Augustana Evangelical Lutheran Church,” *Augustana Heritage Association*, [https://web.archive.org/web/20151121024055/http://augustanaheritage.org/historic\\_churches.php](https://web.archive.org/web/20151121024055/http://augustanaheritage.org/historic_churches.php).

<sup>14</sup> AC III.

The church lives because Christ lives. Our sadly mistaken American culture, which so overly values growth and acquisition and increasing market share, might conclude that the church is not long for this world. But we know better. Wherever the Word is proclaimed and the sacraments are administered according to the gospel, the church persists—proclaiming Christ and serving neighbors near and far. And it will always be so. That is why Jesus told his disciples that the gates of hell cannot prevail against the reality that he is the Christ, the Son of the living God (Matt 16:16–19). This is a vital component of our past that we continue to confess in our present and, if we would remain distinctively Lutheran, into our future.

And that probably means that, on the banks of the Mississippi River, the church will (at least in the short term) continue to decrease in numbers, to become increasingly marginalized. In twenty-first-century America, that may be the future of the church. The discordant cacophony of our culture does not readily welcome the revelation of God’s love in Jesus Christ. The overt and covert racism, consumerism, polarization, conspiracy theories, and falsehoods of our common life do not make for a congenial home for the good news of Jesus Christ.

Twenty-first-century America would stifle the voice of Lutherans who sing that the Word and the sacraments make the church the church. If we continue to insist that God’s law applies to everyone, and that the gospel of Jesus Christ is likewise for everyone, then our culture will reject the church and push it aside. We may be marginalized, but we can still raise our voices from the wings. And that is not a bad location for the church. Kurt Vonnegut’s character Finnerty, in *Player Piano*, puts it well: “I want to stay as close to the edge as I can without going over. Out on the edge you see all kinds of things you can’t see from the center.”<sup>15</sup>

Seems like it has been like that from the beginning. Pilate killed Jesus. Rome persecuted the early church before the empire co-opted it. Christendom declared Luther a traitor and heretic. The Enlightenment rejected God’s revelation in the messiness of Jesus’s birth and crucifixion. Yet, the church seems to have been its truest self when it lived on the margins—connecting with others who have been pushed around, set aside, left for dead.

Theological developments in the recent past demonstrate this well. The Confessing Church of Germany—small, marginalized, and persecuted—became the source of a theological revival with profound influence. *The Theological Declaration of Barmen* (1934) opposed the worship of nature associated with the myth of “blood and soil” [*Blut und Boden*], upon which the Nazis based their racism.<sup>16</sup> The resultant confrontation with Nazism meant the Confessing Church would remain on the edge, even underground (e.g., Bonhoeffer’s seminary at Finkenwalde). The Barmen Confession also ended quietist interpretations of Luther’s so-called “Two

<sup>15</sup> Kurt Vonnegut, *Player Piano* (New York: The Dial Press, 1952), 84.

<sup>16</sup> For the text of the Barmen Confession, with cogent application to current events, see Craig L. Nesson, “Learning from the Barmen Declaration of 1934: Theological-Ethical-Political Commentary,” *Journal of Lutheran Ethics* 19, no. 6 (2019). <https://tinyurl.com/2ns4cajy>. My analysis here is based on George W. Forell, “The Future of Theology in the Church,” *The Lutheran Quarterly* 4, no. 1 (1990), 1.

Kingdoms Doctrine” and taught Lutherans how to engage political issues based on their faith.<sup>17</sup>

Some Lutheran theologians who got pushed aside came as refugees to the United States (e.g., Bertha Paulssen, George Forell, Otto Piper, Paul Tillich). They understood the social-ethical implications of the Christian faith in a self-consciously Lutheran mode. Either directly through their own work or indirectly through their students, their influence was profound.<sup>18</sup> But it was not overly popular or “successful.”

These theologians grounded the need for social and political engagement precisely on Lutheran confessional convictions. For these thinkers, the witness of the confessions supplied the basis for action in the public sphere. Social engagement, rooted in confessional priorities, enables the church to serve in a world where faith is active in love and love is active in justice.<sup>19</sup>

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This almost certainly guarantees that the church will not grow much, may even continue to decline in numbers and sell off real estate. This may be the faithful future of the Christian Church in Western culture. Our society cannot help but find the gospel offensive. Joseph Sittler seems to have been clairvoyant when he said, “In the times ahead, the church is going to be a smaller, leaner, tougher church.”<sup>20</sup>

Christians in general, and Lutherans in particular, are inextricably connected to the past. God’s actions in history (e.g., creation, the covenant with Israel, the incarnation and crucifixion and resurrection of Christ) form the foundation of our faith. And we know about God’s activity because the Holy Spirit prompted the people of God to bear witness to what the Word made flesh had done. Thankfully, faithful believers in the past confessed the faith and passed it on from generation to generation. And it has come down to us.

And God’s activity is not restricted to the past. The Holy Spirit who brooded over creation is active in the present, upholding all that exists, engendering faith,

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<sup>17</sup> Lutherans like Bonhoeffer, Martin Niemöller, and hundreds of parish clergy opposed the so-called “German Christians” (*Deutsche Christen*). Many important theological voices of the Confessing Church (*Bekennende Kirche*) were “Reformed” (e.g., Karl Barth).

<sup>18</sup> Christa R. Klein and Christian D. Von Dehnen, *Politics and Policy: The Genesis and Theology of Social Statements in the Lutheran Church in America* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989).

<sup>19</sup> Forell, “The Future of Theology in the Church,” 2.

<sup>20</sup> Joseph Sittler, “Recordings of Sittler,” unpublished manuscript (Joseph Sittler Archives, Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago), 110.

inspiring folks to serve one another in love. Based on the active presence of God, we trust that the future will also be a realm of God's activity.

How do we know that God is still active in the world? Our knowledge of God begins with the Word and sacraments. Creation can be beautiful, but it is also horrifically ugly. The God of nature is always ambiguous. In the Word (specifically on the cross), Luther says, we see God's heart—self-giving, gracious, forgiving. Through the Word, God saves us and opens us to see the divine hand at work in the world.

We confess what we have received—the good news of the gospel delivered to us and received by faith. That is what Luther did seven years after Melanchthon gave Augustana VII its final form. Luther wrote, “God be praised, a seven-year-old child knows what the church is: holy believers and ‘the little sheep who hear the voice of the shepherd.’ This is why children pray in this way, ‘I believe in one holy Christian church.’ . . . Its holiness exists in the Word of God and true faith.”<sup>21</sup> No mention of impressive buildings or increasing income or cultural clout (as important as those things may be). The Reformer begins and ends with the Word, the voice of the Good Shepherd, that guarantees the church never closes.

If Luther is right, that the one, holy, catholic, apostolic church is created and sustained by God's Word, then the church is not institutional or structural but soteriological and kerygmatic. Christ is the head of the community of the saints, which constitutes the church.<sup>22</sup>

That is why Augustana, a small congregation on the edge of downtown, still exists. We worship in a building where the church gives away food to neighbors in need—not exactly a context that will lead to exponential growth in membership. Yet, we remain a vital congregation—“soteriological and kerygmatic.” Soteriological because we worship Christ, the Savior of the world. Kerygmatic, because we seek to share the gospel of Christ. Maybe Augustana will continue to meet as the people of God in its current building. Perhaps we will move again. Perhaps we will consolidate with another community of faith. Perhaps our members will plant themselves like seeds among various congregations in the area. Regardless of what happens, let it be known, the church will not close. ☩

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<sup>21</sup> The Smalcald Articles III:12 in BC, 324–25.

<sup>22</sup> David P. Daniel, “Luther on the Church,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Martin Luther's Theology*, ed. Robert Kolb, Irene Dingel, and Lubomir Batka (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 333–52.