



# History Is Now

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Popular culture is inexhaustibly fresh, demanding that each of us strain to keep up. The premise is that everyone will make a mark in this world best by striking out on their own, without any ties or baggage to mar a carefully curated image. A future thus composed grants freedom from the past—any past—in that there is no need for history. But to live this way, we would have to sever ties with institutions, communities, and groups that existed before we came along. This great idea of freedom from the past makes each of us seem innocent and authentic.

The war now raging in Ukraine surprised and dismayed many of us because we thought the Cold War was over. Living with the uncertainty of a polarized political climate, and in the isolation of Covid, we might have hoped that coming out of the pandemic would not only be a personal release from tension but also a time of optimism, even hope. But instead, the future of so many young people in Russia, in Ukraine, and across Eastern Europe is unalterably changed for the worse. And we will also be affected.

Once upon a time, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) was known as “The New Lutheran Church” with a brand that went along these lines: it would meet the world with a new and bold vision for the church in the world. Shedding their European image and ready to be fully American, Lutherans could retire their old hymns and sing contemporary songs. New Lutherans would

*Required to take history courses in seminary, our mainly ahistorical students often resist and ask the question that bedevils most teachers: “Why do we need to know this?” It is a fair question, in the main, but for them to see history as an integral part of Christian life and ministry requires of them an imagination for the “now” of history, rooted also in the present.*

make congregations more inclusive, more representative of diversity. In cities and towns, country and suburb, Lutherans would be, by percentage, less beholden to the Northern European heritage of settlers on the prairies, less white. While bold and inspirational in that moment when the Cold War was also ending, the ambition to be “new,” it appears, was naïve, an illusion. History is not over—it is now. To become newly present in our neighborhoods and society, the church and we ourselves need to do the core action of repentance: turn our whole selves around and start in a new direction.

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History helps us summon the energy to repent and turn in a new direction. But because it bears the burden of knowing what kind of effort that will take, it is unpopular, especially in a church impatient to send a new message, to quickly pivot. For many Lutherans, dwelling on the past is a dead end, a true cul-de-sac. Going into the records uncovers stories about European roots, about immigrant holdovers, traditions, and customs. Those who keep these memories alive seem truly backward. But history work that brings to the surface the truths about us that we need to reckon with in order to be honest humans is not nostalgia. Nearsighted nostalgia closes the gates and makes a clique. It deals a final blow to evangelism, to outreach, and to honesty. History is different, for it is about now. It dismisses nostalgia as a trap that may provide an emotional escape from the present but cannot point to any future.

History works in a different direction—forward—to assess what we know about the past and to uncover what has been neglected; to find decisions and events that marked, for better or worse, a community’s engagement with the world. Were we to give up on history, it would cost us: every movement for justice would have to start anew each generation. For our communities to change and evolve, we have to start with what others before us have learned, have tried, and have accomplished. And most important, it looks honestly at failures. It is clear-eyed in seeing that unless we tell the whole truth about our story, we cannot expect anyone to trust us with their story.

Jesus once said in the Gospel of Matthew that any scribe trained for the kingdom of God will take out of the treasury things that are old and things that are new. It is a matter of discernment to learn from this lesson what things will be useful and what must be left out. In that discernment the disciple must know present needs and conditions very well. In teaching seminary students, I tell them that Jesus’s lesson instructs us to find the unique gifts in the congregation’s heritage—what is old—and use them in creative ways—what is new—to address the needs around them. But there are also new gifts aplenty in the people who constitute our

churches and neighborhoods. The combination of what is new, what is old, and the scribe who can tell what is useful makes up the craft of ministry.

Congregations have a stake in their neighborhoods. They relate to a place and a landscape as much as to a moment in time. To reach out and share the gospel with neighbors will demand reckoning with the stories in past encounters and being honest about what needs to be mended and what needs to change in order to be truly welcoming. Historical investigation makes this honesty possible. This work stitches together communities by using the past as a resource for the present. Even though some of that past may be uncomfortable, much of the rest will provide important tools to make new connections. Telling all the stories will help us recognize the cumulative efforts of many disciples and will foster honesty, create trust, and bring hope and inspiration. When willing hearts work together to uncover and recognize gifts long ignored, it will bring energy and life to the community. A congregation, a family, a person who gets interested in their long story will discover many things, and one of them is energy and enthusiasm for the future.

### TRUE CONFESSIONS

Where you work and live shapes you in a myriad of ways, or it should. Historians—and all of us who care about learning the truth about things—should learn to ask, “Where did this happen?” and not just “When did this happen?” Those who have a careerist approach to their lives perhaps can live anywhere and move around as they climb the ladder, without losing associations and friendships that rely on professional connections. In my work as a professor of church history and, before that, as a pastor in Massachusetts, the absence of family nearby, together with the challenge of doing ministry with people enmeshed in extended-family relationships, made me recognize that I was a visitor, someone who did not yet belong to the place where I worked. Theologically, I know that the church is a family and that I belonged to the wider connections of the Lutheran fold, but such abstractions had to be explained to the people I accompanied as pastor, and still later to the students I taught. This disassociation with place might be what many seminary graduates experience so negatively when they begin ministry. When generations of pastors say seminary courses did not teach them what they needed to know to be effective pastors and deacons, I agree. This kind of learning, when you find the ways to form attachments to a place, is not something easily taught or read about. It must come from immersive listening and empathy.

My way through the feelings of alienation came when I worked hard as the bishop’s assistant to the urban congregations in the synod. I had to learn the stories of the many Lutheran congregations there that had been founded by Swedish immigrants. Many of them had stories about working as maids in the houses of wealthy merchants or factory owners. Some had worked directly in the textile mills, clock factories, steel works, and stone quarries. I also descend from Scandinavian immigrants, but I grew up in the Midwest. New England’s Swedish-American community did not seem entirely strange to me, but the mill-town context and

New England accent told me I was in a different zone. The congregation smelled like glögg<sup>1</sup> at the late Christmas Eve service. The curiosity that assisted my pastoral ministry became the focus of my doctoral work. Researching at the Immigrant Institute in Växjö, Sweden, I found out what New England's immigrants wrote home about by reading their letters. Further, I read the church newspapers of the Augustana Synod and the Mission Covenant churches and learned what they fought over and what they gossiped about in letters. I read the flowery language in their sermons and their naked appeals to their ethnic pride. I became a historian through reading so many letters that I could hear the writers talking.

I feel guilty about much of the prejudice I read about in those nineteenth-century accounts, especially against the Irish, because I am a descendant of Pietists and guilt comes easily to me. I now have an Irish neighbor. The incredibly negative characterizations of Irish drinking and carousing that filled the Swedish newspaper *Skandinavia*<sup>2</sup> in Worcester, Massachusetts, for instance, were part of a public posturing that aligned Swedish immigrants with the attitudes of their New England Protestant employers. They voted Republican and promoted temperance to ingratiate themselves further. I learned from that immersive reading that these immigrants, as they assimilated into the broader culture, were extremely sensitive to how they were perceived by the New England establishment. It became a competition to be the “good” immigrant, even the valued Nordic addition to the Yankee stock. And they succeeded. Thus favored, they counted it as their achievement and judged harshly the behavior of other immigrant groups. The experience of being on the margins, not belonging, did not make them more sympathetic to others who suffered, but less. Of course, this kind of competitive jostling for favor is not unique to late-nineteenth-century immigration. American society chooses winners—that has not changed.

## WHAT STUDENTS NEED

It is always important to tell people who you are, because they then size up what you are saying and discount those aspects that seem parochial to them. We all filter what we hear, and use what we can, if it comes from someone who discloses their own point of view. I can learn from people who come from different backgrounds than I do, and I appreciate their telling me who they are and why they think the way they do. None of us is generically human, and none of our stories are generic, or universal. Jesus was a man of Galilee. God became incarnate in a specific place, but that did not mean that only Galileans could learn anything from Jesus. I think we can be a part of a diverse community best by sharing our own unique experiences and helping others do the same.

<sup>1</sup> Swedish spiced wine, laced with spirits, traditionally served around Christmas.

<sup>2</sup> For access to *Skandinavia* (*Scandinavia* in English), see <https://www.mnhs.org/newspapers/swedish-american/scandinavia>.

My family's rootedness in Scandinavian immigrant Lutheranism gives me some footing to interpret and introduce stories and patterns of church life that come from that immigrant, striving experience. Teaching church history to seminary students must bring some of that history to life for them too, and I hope that by sharing it they will find that their own family's history engenders further understanding. This would easily be the case if all my students came from generations of Lutherans. While some students claim a generational Lutheran heritage, most in my classes now take the survey because they are new Lutherans. Explaining Lutheranism to these students presents challenges. What should I emphasize for them? Should they be introduced to the doctrinal struggles that have separated conservative Missouriian Lutheranism from the ecumenically formed ELCA? I attempt to help students realize that congregations in the ELCA come from many traditions, and that we seek to relate to our communities in a fresh way, using these many legacies to new purpose.

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Detecting the traces of these former traditions in the lives of congregations today sends a signal that a pastoral leader, deacon, or youth minister is ready to listen before deciding that some practices need more translation to be useful in forging a vital connection to time and place for a congregation seeking a new way forward. To equip students to relate to their context out of the history of their congregation, I continually adjust what I teach, the subjects I cover, and the horizon of the survey course. Here is my most recent course description, which I tweak every year:

Lutheranism began as a reform movement at a university and now has become a world-embracing confessional fellowship. Different lands, languages, worship, and cultural practices continue to affect American Lutheranism. This course introduces students to this complex history so that they will be informed leaders for congregations, able to help the church both understand and preserve vital aspects of a Lutheran witness in service to local needs and the wider church and world.

It is clear from this description that I teach at an ELCA seminary. I use open language, refer to complexity, indicate the idea of witness in service to needs, suggest that there is a wider church, and state that the world has a claim on Lutherans. I do not, however, ignore the doctrinal fights that still emerge whenever the public witness of Lutherans is called for. I put the doctrinal faithfulness of Lutheranism in the picture for students because it helps them judge how Lutheranism faced the

character-defining moments in its history. Faithful witness to the powers that be in our world is a confessional act, so confessional moments will come into focus at strategic points in the survey. Particularly, students need to recognize the confessional struggle in Nazi Germany, and the independence movements in colonial Africa and Asia that made clear that Lutheranism is not a cultural movement but a theological one. Closer to home, the claim of Indigenous Native peoples and the sin of slavery are examples of when Lutherans failed to recognize the full, gifted humanity of others, and placed racial filters on the gospel witness. Redlining in cities and the flight of white people from urban centers made many congregations decide to move to the suburbs. Rapid church growth in the mid-twentieth century for Lutherans showed that Lutheran women were a bit slower in using birth control than other Protestants, and that they enjoyed the privilege of qualifying for mortgages in the expanding suburbs and benefited from the great middle-class expansion that white people realized under the New Deal.

Whether we talk about colonial settlement, Lutheran anti-slavery efforts, women's representation in church leadership, or efforts to build a cross-cultural awareness, there is plenty to talk about every week in a history survey. While teaching the history of Lutheranism, I have benefited from the rich repository of Lutheran records and stories housed at the Gettysburg seminary campus, including an exemplary collection of Lutheran periodicals. The consolidation of the two historic eastern Lutheran theological seminaries (Gettysburg and Philadelphia) in 2017 opened a new framework for viewing ecumenical Lutheranism that, despite their differences, both schools fostered. Their ecumenical momentum not only consolidated several predecessor Lutheran denominations but also fostered international Lutheran communion in the Lutheran World Federation.

Lutheran efforts toward unity in the mid-twentieth century resulted in mergers that created a Lutheran denomination fully committed to ecumenical full-communion relationships and willingness to enter interfaith-dialogue work to forge new relationships. Building an international Lutheranism often lifted the aspirations of Lutherans from their parochial concerns, but it also diverted energies from local realities in favor of faraway needs whose import could easily be manipulated. Ministry oriented toward a faraway horizon, however, is not sustainable without attending to the health of communities near at hand.

## THEOLOGY MATTERS

Whatever social concerns or burning issues I thought relevant to teaching church history when I began my career have certainly changed. My horizon has widened because students have influenced me. When I began work at the seminary, debates over the ecumenical agreements in development still produced strong feelings in congregations and emerged in my classes. Then the arguments over ordination and acceptance of gender and sexual diversity continued to roil churches. I was able to make the story of immigration, urbanism, piety, assimilation, and institution-building relevant to these stories because these issues could be detected

in the background of contemporary controversies. They still can be, but a general knowledge of this social history does not reckon with matters that have long been invisible to the examination of the history of a particular religion, or of religion in general. This is because the actual sources we need to work with—the primary accounts in letters, missionary reports, women’s society minutes, and newspaper debates—most often avoid any talk about the elephant in the room. In its attempt to stay neutral on the issue of slavery, for instance, *The Lutheran Observer*, published in Baltimore during the growing sectional crisis, did not explore how Lutheran theology might address the practice, preferring to keep subscribers both north and south fixed on other issues. But there were no other issues more important than the issue that split the nation. If students read that newspaper to find out what Lutherans thought about during the 1840s and 1850s, they will not see textual evidence that slavery was much of an issue. Still, common sense tells them that it was the principal issue that divided Lutherans into separate church bodies. The personality conflicts that exploded into rancor among ministers during their conventions, and the growing difficulty in maintaining concord when language and cultural differences increased, were all exacerbated by the barely mentioned slavery debate. They spoke and wrote about what they could control. The system of slavery was far beyond their reach. That futility undermined their courage.

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What they did not talk about is relevant today. The sectional struggle and the dismissal by church leaders in the North of the issue of enslavement as minor, denoting a moral difference rather than a more important theological and religious one, says much about what they thought the church should be at that time. The church was not to involve itself in political questions. And this was because the issue of enslavement would certainly emerge out of the shadows. Today we can agree that this failure of nerve needs to be examined and brought into the central story. This awareness of what is missing from our common memory, our received story of who we are, cannot be ignored. It is instead the prod that keeps historians on their game. For the work of history is a moral endeavor to tell the truth about who we have been. And the “we” in that last sentence expands in each generation and must contend with hospitality: when our neighbors ask, “Do I belong, have a place, in this community?” the answer needs to honestly contend with past indifference and blindness. The church will not matter to them if it is not a place where truth is sought.

Lutherans had church-dividing opinions over whether slavery was a sin or an evil. Did it separate a person from God’s mercy or was it a matter between

persons, something that could be subject to reform? The impact of that system of bondage affects us still. Debates in school boards across the country are all about the ongoing and persistent systems of racial discrimination in our country. When parental rights over the teaching of history to children reject any teaching that will make their children feel bad when they learn about the past, we should recognize that these parents harbor a guilty conscience but will not or cannot talk about it. They seem to think history should be a pleasant subject. This is an old game for the privileged.

I teach seminary students who have a sense of sin and guilt and believe that change is possible. I instruct students who understand that God is merciful in response to our honest repentance. They recognize that dishonesty about the past spreads the infection of hate and division. So if we suffer from racism today, we need to be clear that racism has a past and that the insults that have been piling up for centuries cannot be taken away by a dismissive account. We confess: “We are captive/in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves.” This is not just a formula we use to start our worship services, but a testifying to our real condition in the light of God. This is the opposite of “feel good” preaching, but it is the only restorative path for a people, for a community.

## HISTORY IS NOW

The investigative skills students use to understand texts from the past—the correspondence of women missionaries writing to their supporters, or the letters to the editor of *The Lutheran* in 1935—are skills important for pastoral ministry. History is not about dates, or victories, or glorious institutions taking shape. History reveals the predicaments and choices facing people in the past so that the decisions they made can be understood. If students learn to pay careful attention to what is written, and what is left unsaid, they gain empathy. They learn to read between the lines, to “listen” to the source to detect clues about the context. These observational skills make for better pastoral ministry, better preaching, better leadership of councils and congregations, and better judgment about social ministry. The ability to “read” a room or to sense what is happening in the neighborhood around their congregation draws on similar observational skills.

Just as systems of avoidance and silence can spread discouragement and shame, a spirit of honest investigation and truth-telling can spread hope and purpose. These observations are not new, but are the old working of the dynamics of repentance and forgiveness, of law and gospel, in the classic Lutheran formulations. The truth-telling that these Lutheran formulations require belongs not only to Lutherans but finds expression in religious traditions throughout our society. Dishonesty, incurious leadership, bullheaded planning, and ignorance of the past do not engender trust. They do not shape community life that is sustainable.

Congregations that become interested in their own history will discover things that not only push them to be more honest, but also give them reason for hope. There are resources in our experience that give us reason to believe that our



tradition has more life in it than it seems, more character and integrity than we knew, and that will give us footing as we carry forward the work God calls us to do today. History is not stuck in the past; it is now. ☩

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