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Hartmut C. Horsch

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## The Church as *Geistliche Heimat* — Spiritual Home

Hartmut C. Horsch, B.A., B.D.

### Approaching the Topic

Some years ago, when the German Cluster of Metro Toronto observed the Reformation, the Rev. Dr. Eduard Riegert was invited as guest speaker and moderator of a dialogue. I no longer recall how the topic came up, but suddenly the people and the pastors of the German Cluster were talking about the church as *geistliche Heimat*, our spiritual home.

Dr. Riegert expressed his astonishment at this notion of the church, and a week or so later invited us to write an essay, explaining our idea of the church as a spiritual home. Pondering the matter off and on ever since, I think that I am now able to express myself on this topic with something approaching coherence. For the idea that one might not understand the church as a spiritual home was strange to me; that one could find the notion of “spiritual home” amazing or surprising, struck me as odd.

In addressing this issue and trying to show what I understand by spiritual home,” I cannot be objective. No idea of “home” or a description and evaluation of it can ever be objective. I write subjectively about my feelings and my personal understanding of the matter without any claim of theological accuracy or objective truth.

### *Heimat* and Home Compared

As I thought about the topic in more precise terms, and considered over and over again how to approach it, a few things occurred to me. The first was: What is “home”? A wag said: “Home is where they have to take you in.” I find this not only true, but also comforting. No matter how far I roam, or stray, there should always be a base to which I am allowed to return and where they can’t turn me away. Home is where you came from; home is where things are familiar, and have, broadly speaking, remained the same. Home is where the roots are through which I draw the strength to live and prosper.

When my sister informed me that she was about to sell her house and move into a condominium, I told her that I understood and agreed with her action, but that it nevertheless made me feel sad. This house,

though it had not belonged to our parents, had been the location where I had last visited them. For me it had taken on the character of the ancestral home. It had become for me a home base of at least imagined security.

Considering the matter further, it occurred to me that I had encountered one totally homeless group of people. It is the Canadian post WW II generation whose point of view I experienced during my university years shortly after arriving in Canada. I never understood their reasoning. I rather found it peculiar; and I never fully comprehended their ideas and actions. I simply accepted them because I felt that it behooved an immigrant to take on and adopt the ways of the society in which he had chosen to live.

Members of the above mentioned generation kept asking "Who am I?" While they were attempting to discover and to find themselves, they did not know where they had come from. Or worse: They didn't really care. They didn't know where their grandfather had come from or where he had lived, what he had done and what he might have felt. Many didn't even seem to know what their father did, nor did they appear to care all that much about it.

Sometimes I said to them loudly, and often quietly to myself: "How can you know who you are, when you don't know where you came from?" But this question was either not understood by them, or not taken seriously.

The years then were also the era of tightly closed adoption files. The idea was that an adopted child should never be able to find out anything about her or his birth parents. This was considered the good and proper thing. This too I always found most curious. For I would have wanted to know who my birth parents had been, even if they had been scoundrels and evil, and even though I loved my adoptive parents dearly. Yet, in this matter too I felt that I needed to suppress my sensitivities. For I knew that my ideas came from the old world and didn't fit into the morality which the new world was holding up before me.

Developments since then demonstrate that my old world sensitivities were more in tune with reality than the then fashionable idea about adoption. Adopted children have shown that they want to know who gave them life. Many of them used the need for medical records to break the secrecy and find out where they came from and who their birth mother and procreative father had been.

As I wondered further about the subject of "home," I realized that the English word "home" does not mean what the German word *Heimat*



expresses. Home in North American usage is basically the house in which one resides, where one feels comfortable, loved and protected.

*Heimat* does not have the component of a protective and comfortable house in which all the beloved and loving people have, or at least had at one time, their existence.

*Heimat* refers more to the soil from which one sprang, the landscape which influenced one's character, the attitude of the people who lived there, the climatic conditions which prevailed, the agriculture which was practiced in that place, and last but not least, the soil in which the ancestors were buried. *Heimat* is all that is familiar, loved, or at least accepted, and which in a sense remains relatively unchanged and unchanging. You may leave it. But it will never leave you. When things turn out badly, you get the feeling that at home, *in der Heimat*, things would be better. This feeling is often quite wrong.

*Heimat* is where you spent your formative years, where the seasons follow a predictable pattern; where at the same time each year you knew that you would have, with the minor annual fluctuations, the same weather.

*Heimat* is comfortable and comforting, and most of all a known and understood quantity.

These things are what *Heimat* entails and means for me.

### ***Geistliche Heimat* Spiritual Home**

When *Heimat* is combined with *geistlich* "spiritual" then by analogy, the same things apply as for *Heimat* in general, except, of course, in the spiritual realm.

I find "spiritual" a difficult word to come to grips with. Spirituality has become a fashionable notion and has turned into a concept that is far ranging and may include almost anything.

In my Christian context, spirituality is, and must be connected to, the Holy Spirit. I understand Christians as "spiritual" inasmuch as they are in tune with the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Much confusion reigns at this point. Christians frequently think and feel that the Holy Spirit is free-floating: doing something here and there, prodding this person to do one thing and that person another, and is active in particular and specific situations.

In the first chapters of the Gospel according to Luke, we can observe the Holy Spirit depicted as helping people to recognize the infant Jesus as the Messiah. To discover this was for me a major learning experience regarding the Holy Spirit.

According to my readings in Luther and the Lutheran Confessional writings, the Holy Spirit is seen to be at work when and where the Word of God is proclaimed. In Luther's mind spirituality has to do with the proclamation of the forgiveness of sin. Therefore, the Holy Spirit is at work through the proclamation of the forgiveness of sin, and as he causes the Gospel to be proclaimed and to be believed.

Luther gained this insight through his struggle with the enthusiasts. From his conflict with them he learned that one must somehow be able to distinguish between the prodding of the Holy Spirit and our very own human desires.

We too must learn to distinguish between the Holy Spirit and human desires. For our human desires tend to try to capture the Holy Spirit in order to bring about humanly desired ends. Lutherans ought to see the Holy Spirit at work only where Christ is proclaimed as the crucified Saviour. Spiritual, in this Christian and Lutheran sense, is that which proclaims Christ in word and deed. Spiritual is that which proclaims Christ, namely, the forgiveness of sin; and that which gives to human beings reconciliation to God through Christ's death. All other notions of spirituality are not really Christian, certainly not "Lutheran," as I understand it.

When I speak of my "spiritual home" then I speak of the Lutheran Church. It is the church in which the above spirituality had been maintained and adhered to for centuries; the church for which my ancestors risked the wrath of Emperor and Pope; the church and theology in which they lived and died; a church in which change came slowly and only in minimal ways, for Luther's theology had never been revolutionary. His outlook was not liberal in any sense, but conservative, in the sense that he, together with the whole church of that time, wanted to return to the source of all Christian truth, Scripture, and that the Christian faith should be lived and practiced where it truly counts, in the common and everyday relationships of family and work.

My spiritual home is the church in which traditions have lasted long, reaching back beyond the Reformation to the medieval church; a church in which the strain of ancient and time-tested chorales resounded; a church in which the truth was more important than being up to date; a church which was not afraid to stand alone against the weight of popular opinions (emperor and pope); a church that did not back away from controversy and from saying uncomfortable things; and most importantly, a church, in which the recognized will of God, as expressed



in Scripture, was more important than the desire of the church's adherents and leaders.

On an emotional and human level it was a church which followed the ebb and flow of the Church Year. Advent, as quiet time, was distinct from Christmas. Lent was a quiet time and the summer season the high point of activities. It was a church in which the adherents did not eat meat on Fridays, not for religious reasons, but because it was tradition, for one still understood Friday as the day of the death of Jesus.

All this I mean, when I speak of *geistliche Heimat*. In this church I was comfortable, in this church I felt at home. This church is my spiritual home. In it my Christian personality was created and formed. Can I return to it? Probably not! Is my longing for it wrong? Perhaps! Does it still exist outside my emotional needs? Probably not! Does this make me feel sad? Yes, very definitely! For it says that you can never again go home and that I am now without a spiritual home.

While we may crave it and search for one, there is no home for us on earth. This feeling of homelessness on earth makes us seek a home beyond this earth, a heavenly home. This is the positive side of our inability to return to our earthly home.

### **Spiritual Home and the Immigrant Experience**

This feeling of an inability to return to the earthly home is especially pronounced for the immigrant. It is a blessing and a curse, a wish that is always alive and yet at the same time deliberately thwarted. On the one hand there is the desire to have things as they were at home, and on the other the deliberate act of having left that home to establish a new one.

When one creates a new home one seeks to make it as much as possible like the old one. But immigrants find themselves in the position of not being able to do so. This translates into the sphere of the church as *geistliche Heimat* as well. One wishes to create a church as much as possible like the one at home, but conditions in the new land do not allow this to happen. Thus compromises are made and the attitudes of the new land are adopted as far as necessary.

For the immigrant experience, the church, seen as the local congregation, can and does become not so much a *Heimat* as a home, or in the more modern term a community. The community which was experienced in the *Heimat*, with all its redeeming and limiting aspects, has been left behind and is forever a thing of the past. But the new community which one joined is not as welcoming as one would wish.

Therefore, immigrants tend to group together and form their own, and in a sense limited, community.

The congregations which new immigrants have established and are supporting are for most of their adherents the only real community which they know and experience. For despite the alleged openness of our society, there are firm walls which are almost impenetrable.

I recall the first funeral I had after coming to the German-English congregation in Scarborough. We had to bury the wife of a highly successful businessman, who due to his financial power had found entry into the most exclusive Canadian clubs. He refused to have the funeral from our church. He felt it was neither big enough nor beautiful enough for his new friends. The funeral took place in a posh funeral home from which fellow club members had been buried. Unfortunately, he had miscalculated his own social standing, for not one of his fellow club members attended. Had it not been for the members of the congregation, he and his sons would have sat there alone.

A similar situation arose a few months later when the wife of another financially successful member died. He was on the board of directors of a symphony orchestra and he thought that his acquaintances from there would show up for the funeral and that our organ was too poor for their taste. The funeral took place from the chapel in a cemetery. The organ there was even poorer than ours and the music he had requested could not be played. Besides, only a handful of the "important" people showed up, one because she had to play the organ and another because he had a Lutheran background. Again: Had it not been for the members of the congregation, the successful business man would have been alone with a handful of people who were not his real friends but only business associates.

Immigrants, no matter from where they originate, are not easily accepted into the mainstream society and are not included in the mainstream community's decision-making. They are invited to work in it, to expend their energy for it, but are kept out of decision-making positions.

This is true in politics as well as in churches and synods. The various boards, councils, and committees include very few members whose first language is not English. Compared to the number of members of linguistic groups within the church at large one finds a great discrepancy with their number in decision-making positions. Looking at the percentage of immigrant members in even unilingual English congregations one finds that their needs are rarely taken into consideration in a way that would be commensurate with their numbers



and importance to the congregation. This at least has been my experience over the last forty-four years.

In this situation the immigrant or ethnic congregation can and does become a home for immigrants. Since immigrants even within one language group are not all of the same precise background and thus do not have the same *Heimat*, the social cement tends to be the same language. They build a community, which includes as many of the aspects of their *Heimat* as possible. These communities always represent a compromise. These communities also provide opportunities to establish new traditions and new ways of doing things.

Many immigrant congregations have been, and still are, highly successful, partly of course because they represent a community for the immigrants and partly because there is a need for community among that segment of the population.

A sizeable proportion of the regular attendees in the unilingual English congregation to which we belong now have German as their first language. If it were not for them and their loyalty to the congregation, the attendance at worship services there would be about a third smaller.

This clearly shows that they are not there because they seek a particular cultural church, but because they are loyal to a theology which they learned in their youth, and they seek a community that as closely as possible resembles that model.

Thus we immigrants of German origin seek to create a new home, a new *Heimat*, in which we can live and function as *Evangelische* (evangelical people). And in this sense, we feel that the congregation, which we have established and are supporting, is our spiritual home. For this was another aspect of our spiritual home. A church home, which almost always was more *evangelisch* (evangelical) than Lutheran, more attempting to be in tune with the Gospel than with one man's theology.

### **Cautions and Possible Dangers**

The section now following was written against my better judgment at the suggestive prodding of Dr. Riegert, and mainly represents my reaction to his expressed fears and cautions. I do not think that such cautions necessarily stand up to closer scrutiny.

In what I have said, some problems which may exist with the concept of the church as *geistliche Heimat* have been brought into the open. For my idea of a spiritual home points to, and takes its strength from, a church of a particular time and place, set within a specific



culture. This in turn could cause us to abandon the notion of a church which has universal concerns in favour of a church which only has particular concerns, thus becoming a sect.

The idea which seems to keep haunting many North American minds, that the Lutheran Church is an European sect, perhaps of the 19th century, and for the more informed, of the 16th century, points in this direction. It also shows that in many minds the Lutheran Church is a church caught in a particular time, place, and culture, and thus not attractive for the contemporary mind.

Since many Lutherans in North America have a German background, Lutherans are sometimes seen as a foreign, ethnic body within the North American church culture. One must in this connection observe that the concept of ethnicity is often used to designate all those whose background is not British. I find this judgment insulting and less than honest. For even the British have a culture and ethnicity!

When speaking of ethnic churches, one could point out that the most purely ethnic churches in Canada are the Anglican and United churches. The Anglican Church has a purely English background, the United Church is of Scottish and North American background. In that sense the Lutheran Church was always more diverse and less ethnically determined than most other churches, except the Roman Church; even though all Lutherans, never mind where they are coming from now, have a faint German *Heimat* for their spiritual home or background residing in 16th century Germany. To deny this would be foolish indeed. If they do not have that common background, can they then still be called Lutherans?

There has long been the desire among Lutherans in North America to create an indigenous North American or Canadian church in place of the perceived German dominated Lutheranism of the 19th century. This idea is based on the questionable notion that a church must be acceptable in cultural terms, before it can accomplish its mission. In other words: The ability of a church to succeed in its mission is seen as directly linked to its cultural background and acceptability.

If this notion is correct then the condition of being culturally unacceptable could lead to a severe impairment of the basic function of the church: to be in mission.

Having said this, I at once admit that I find it very difficult to understand mission in any other way than the time and culture trapped understanding of mission as the proclamation of the message regarding the crucified and risen Christ.

The loss of the ability to be in mission might be the danger which one faces when the church becomes a spiritual home and thus seeks to perpetuate itself in a guise determined by a specific culture and time. I hold this to be an unjustified hesitation and fear. A church determined by a culture of the past and of Central Europe is no more to be feared than a church determined by the culture of North America and modernity. Nor is the culture of the past and Central Europe any more a hindrance to mission than the North American culture and modernity.

On the other hand there might be a faint possibility that the idea of the church as spiritual home could actually give impetus to the purpose of the church in mission. If the adherents of a church are convinced of the correctness of their doctrinal stance and their confessional heritage, then they will not fear to express this faith. They will be proud of it and be prepared to take chances for the sake of the Lord and his church, as they perceive them.

If, to the contrary, people are in doubt about what their beliefs are and are not sure that their traditions are suitable for the society in which they live, they will surely not waste time, talent, or treasure to advance something of which they and their leaders are not convinced.

Beyond this there is this indisputable fact that all human beings always live in time and space. Human concerns are always more specific than universal. Since any church is made up of human beings, all churches are always trapped in time and space, as well as within a culture. There is no church, nor a religion that is not dependent for its inception and formation upon a specific culture and time in history. Indeed, as long as we live on earth, there cannot be such a thing as an institution or church without historical and cultural ties.

There is no organization that does not have a *Heimat*. We all — individuals, families, nations, cultures, churches, and sects — have a formative background. We are what we are by inheritance and environment. Both lie in the past and neither can be changed. Some would change themselves and deny their heritage, but then they also deny everything they were formed to be, their parents and their ancestral belief systems.

### **Hindrance to Mission**

The true hindrance to mission, I feel, is found in the relativizing statements of the leaders, and the intelligentsia within the churches. By relativizing statements I mean outpourings which make the people in



the pew insecure about their faith and thus unwilling to risk the derision which comes from speaking of the faith to others. After all, have not their "betters" sort of indicated that the teachings of the church might be wrong? The more specific a faith is, the less likely is it that people will speak of it to others, while this faith may be considered to be unfashionable, and perhaps even wrong.

Today's Lutheran churches seem to pay practically only lip service to their heritage. The Confessional writings are unknown to the people in the pew even by name and their pastors seem to have little more than a passing acquaintance with them. Many pastors have not rediscovered the Large Catechism, and the Small Catechism has lost its traditional teaching role for children to the point that it hardly makes any impact.

The ELCIC, I speak here of the church that I know, has become a church which is largely indistinguishable from the Anglican Church and wants it to be so. If churches through ecumenical efforts wish and try to be the same, and have the same goal, purpose, and truth, then both of them lose their right to a separate existence.

Mission, in our cultural reality, is no longer even desirable, for our culture understands all denominations and religions to be of equal value and to contain an equal amount of truth. This alone makes all mission, i.e., witnessing to the crucified and risen Christ, irrelevant. It is not the church of the past, our spiritual home, which makes mission an almost impossible task, but the very spirituality which is up to date and in tune with the *Zeitgeist*.

## Conclusions

The conclusion to which I am drawn is that we must make the effort to own our heritage, our spiritual home. If we discard the Lutheran heritage, others will place it back on us, if only to put us down. Since I cannot and do not want to deny my heritage, I prefer to be proud of it. For if we disown it, we become like a tree without roots that cannot grow and prosper, nor even survive for long. Disowning our spiritual home leads to spiritual starvation and death. Sooner or later people will correctly ask: What is the point of having a Lutheran church if it is not different from any other mainline Protestant church? Why should we spend time, money, and effort, to keep something alive, which our betters indicate is not necessarily a good thing to keep?

I have mentioned the reluctance to own the "German" background in the North American Lutheran constituency. This German background



is seen as the obstacle which has kept the Lutheran Church out of the mainstream of society. I would deny this. What kept the Lutheran Church in the background is the fear of being truly Lutheran, i.e., *evangelisch* (evangelical). If we pretend to be quasi this and pseudo that, then of course we are neither fish nor fowl, but a church which would like to be something but is not self-confident enough to be what it really is: Evangelical. Evangelical is the operative word! If there is no good news, then there is no proclamation, and if there is no proclamation, then there is no faith, nor can there be a mission. Thus we must first of all be evangelical.

No one is able to jump over her or his own shadow, nor should any one even try. Therefore, we might as well own and respect our heritage. I, for one, am firmly convinced that our spiritual home is what keeps us alive. It is the soil from which we grew and in which we can prosper. To deny our heritage is to deny ourselves, as well as the soil that nourished us in the past and promises to sustain us in the future.