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The Future of the Church

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That a topic such as "The Future of the Church" should even be consigned to the pages of a theological journal is an indicator of the current serious malaise affecting the structure of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada. The issue, of course, isn't the future of the gospel, the integrity of which is not under question.

Rather, the issue is the future of a bureaucratic organizational structure—the ELCIC—which, like most religious organizations, has tended to be viewed by those close to its management as impervious to the regular laws of change and re-ordering which affect all organizations, religious or secular, in the latter days of the 20th century.

In an era in which corporations with such well-respected "household" names as Xerox, IBM, Canadian National and Canadian Pacific Railroads, Confederation Life and The Four Seasons are undergoing serious management realignments brought about by financial shortfalls and a changing marketplace, it should not be thought unusual that the organizational structures of mainstream Protestantism might also be confronted with financial distress and the need for corporate downsizing.

Every substantial Protestant denomination in Canada including the Anglicans, United Church of Canada, Presbyterians and Lutherans is being forced to deal with major changes to the bureaucratic structures within which they operate. Usually, these changes involve reductions in staffing and the elimination of costly programs.

Unfortunately for many religious leaders, the reality of the need for radical re-structuring has been slow in dawning and even slower in coming. It reflects the common inability of

church bureaucracies to adapt to change and effectively to service the needs of constituents who are expected to pay the bills for such service.

Managers in church bureaucracies are even less able and willing than their secular counterparts to change administrative styles and functions in order better to address market expectations. Partly, this is because within the corporate management culture of religious institutions, there is pervasive denial that the church's administration is, in fact, bureaucratic in nature. Persons selected for leadership roles within the structure of the church are usually selected on the basis of skills other than those needed for managing a bureaucracy.

When it come to choosing leaders, there is an unwritten but well understood tradition in most Lutheran denominations that delegates will elect "piety" but ultimately judge "administration". This may help to explain why most speeches by candidates seeking the position of bishop are heavy with spiritual and pastoral references but contain few—if any—comments about the managerial skills necessary for leading an unwieldy bureaucratic organization.

It is at this point of election, that potential leaders sow the seeds of their future management difficulties if they do not understand that effectiveness in leading the organization will be directly proportional to their ability to move from the "pastoral" to the "managerial" role. It is instructive to note that recent lawsuits against church organizations in Canada resulting in large monetary settlements are based not upon *pastoral* mistakes by church administrators but upon *managerial* misuses including the denial of *due process*.

Compared to large corporations in Canada, most national church organizations are relatively small and ought to be readily responsive to the changing needs of their constituents. It is not unreasonable to believe that Total Quality Management or TQM (a phrase defining the management style of many surviving secular Canadian corporations) should be the norm for day to day operations within the church. TQM is a philosophy of providing service in which the needs of the client (or customer, or parishioner) are the energy which drives the management of the organization. As important as *how* services are provided is the issue of *what* the customer (or client, or parishioner) values in the organization. Indeed, if what the organization provides

is valued by its constituents, those constituents will be willing to pay for that service.

On the other hand, if what is provided is not of value, the customer or client or parishioner will not pay. Thus, it is logical to suggest that the long-term diminishing flow of funds to national church organizations is an important indicator that the services provided are no longer felt to be of value by those who are requested to pay for such services.

On the other hand, there is evidence that congregational life in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada is stable. Overall giving to congregations has increased steadily since the 1985 merger of the ELCIC. Yet, giving to national budgets has been drastically reduced. There are at least two factors responsible for this change in the flow of giving. First, it is more expensive to operate a congregation than it was one or two decades ago. The availability of volunteers has diminished. And women, once the group most actively volunteering in parish activities, are increasingly finding fulfilling career opportunities and income producing employment outside of the home and the congregation.

Second, the variety of programs provided by congregations has multiplied. Congregations have taken charge of their own ministries and rely less on national programs for direction in their parish service. Also, there is a much greater willingness to use programs and materials from other denominations and secular sources than was true at the time of merger. No longer is the structure of the denomination viewed as the primary wellspring of truth and knowledge. (What could be more Lutheran?)

It is important to note that Lutherans have peculiar problems in Canada because of their roots. Despite early Lutheran settlements in the Maritimes and Danish missionary visits to the Far North, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada has its structural roots in the United States. It was at the 1985 Constituting Convention of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada that a supposedly "Canadian" Lutheran church was being formed on the territory. The meeting in Winnipeg was an enthusiastic event flavoured at the beginning by a stirring singing of "O Canada", and marked throughout the gathering by a strong undercurrent suggesting that at last, "we will have

'our own' church, a truly Canadian church, a church that is a part of our 'home and native land'."

The desire to make the ELCIC as Canadian as possible persisted throughout the meeting resulting in some interesting delegate perceptions. The manager of the constituting convention recalls that during the balloting for representation on national boards, a delegate was heard to comment that he would vote only for persons who had been born in Canada, an indicator of the nationalistic fervor which was to characterize the gathering. If there was one distinguishing overtone to the Constituting Convention of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, it was the desire to "make this church clearly Canadian".

However, the structure that was created at convention in 1985 was not Canadian at all, but rather a literal translation of the clumsy structures of the predecessor church bodies: the Lutheran Church in America (LCA), and the American Lutheran Church (ALC) (despite the ELCC's earlier separation from the ALC). The result was an organizational melange which has been unable to address adequately the issues surrounding what it means to be a distinctly Canadian Lutheran presence.

It is not surprising that the form for the ELCIC should be American in its style and character. After all, that is the style and framework under which the predecessor Canadian wings of the LCA and ALC operated. However, what causes particular dismay is that the structure for administering the ELCIC is an American structure designed to handle the operations of large American church bodies whose combined membership at time of merger was nearly five million constituents.

Such a structure demands a significant number of "paying customers" to cover operating costs. But the total membership of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada is less than many individual synods of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), synods that operate with minimal staffing and minimal program and minimal budgets. Thus, a relatively small group of people who make up the membership of the ELCIC are responsible for the financial support of an administrative infra-structure designed to serve a far larger group.

More to the point: the numbers simply are not there to support the infra-structure constructed at the 1985 Constituting Convention. In addition, it appears that prior to the

convention, little market research was offered that might help determine what the members of the ELCIC could support, and what kind of minimal and affordable structure would be needed to serve the supporting constituents. All of this, and changing Canadian demographics and economics, suggest that the era of denominational growth for Lutherans in Canada will continue to be in steady decline.

Growth for Lutherans in Canada was linked early to the waves of Northern European immigrants who came to the country following World Wars I and II. Now, that immigrant flow is virtually stopped and the rapidly increasing source of newcomers are from Asia, Latin America and the Far East. These immigrants to Canada are persons whose faith traditions and cultural mores are apathetic or opposed to the core message of Christianity, to say nothing of being apathetic or opposed to its Lutheran expression.

Further, the overall religious scene in Canada is being transformed. Studies by Canadian sociologists such as Reginald Bibby suggest that current Protestant denominational structures likely will not last beyond the year 2000. These same studies are not suggesting that interest in things spiritual will diminish. Rather, the delivery of program services through large bureaucracies will continue to decline and eventually cease. The church body's function as a 'gatekeeper' for the constituency will become non-existent.

Because of their proximity to the parish scene, change in the structure of regional synods will not occur as quickly as that of the national church (though it is being suggested in the United States that funding of bishops by some synods may be possible only if the bishop also serves as a parish pastor). Increasingly, congregations will be responsible for sourcing and re-sourcing church programs on their own. Links with congregations of other faith groups will become more important—or as important—as were links to the national church organization and the synod. The building and maintaining of "community" will be as crucial for the congregation—perhaps even more crucial—than loyalty to a large denominational system.

It is very important to note that this change in the local significance and local impact of the national church structure does not change the distinctive and essential nature of the Lutheran understanding of the faith, i.e., *the theology of grace*. Indeed,

for the faith, the positive impress of Lutheran theology will persevere quite apart from a denominational structure. This makes the role of theological seminaries remarkably vital as conservators of the faith and centres of resource for parish ministry.

In the history of the Lutheran Church, theological seminaries long have been the caretakers of the exposition of the scriptures, the proclamation of the gospel and the interpretation of the tradition in light of scripture and faith. The security and integrity of this role in the life of the church has flourished, in part because there has always been some distance between the theological seminary and the national church structure. Increasingly, not only will theological seminaries be central to the training of clergy for congregations, they will also become leaders in the continuing education of the faithful. This will require a willingness to take the schools "to the people" resulting in innovative programs of "distance education" and flexibility in addressing the changing educational needs of clergy and laity and their communities.

The future of the church is bright, because the gospel is alive and prospering in the communities in which believers daily work out their faith. Often, the gospel prospers in concert with other faith traditions in the community, affirming the oneness of Christ and renewing the conviction that the gospel gathers together the faithful people.

It is quite possible that people no longer need the services which were once delivered to congregations through large denominational structures. The more pressing need of this period in history—the need to maintain a sense of community—can lead Lutheran congregations to link with other faith groups on the basis of geography, not national infra-structure. Thus, the theological strengths of the Lutheran tradition can be yoked to the theological strengths of other believers and their gathered congregations, augmenting the community that is under duress, even if such linking lessens the importance and the significance of a denomination's national expression.

Rather than there being "one right model" for the structure of a national church, and an organizational chart to accompany it, the forms of organization for the future church will be temporary, rising and disappearing in a truly servant mode as the needs of congregations and parishioners evolve and modify in

concert with other changes in the world. This is not cause for alarm, but a reason for great hope.

The proposed structural renewal of the ELCIC is an attempt to deal with inadequacies in the delivery of services. It will achieve its goal only if there is leadership at the top which believes that the change is necessary and is totally committed to implementing the plan.