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Harold D. Haberstock

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SPECIAL REPORT

Lutheran Fellowship and Merger -- A Local Case Study

Harold D. Haberstock

Christian unity is arranged within the will of God; it is never the lonely responsibility of mere humans. Recognizing that truth, I will always appreciate the role assigned to me to assist fellow Lutherans in Creston, B.C., to live together in Word and work. In 1969 I left the seminary campus for a Canadian parish in the mountains. I did not hold in my pocket a set of blue-prints drafted for merger. Nevertheless, my training for ministry had planted the seed of Christ's own prayer, "that they may be one . . ." (John 17:11).

In the summer of 1970 I attended a two-week Seminar on Marriage and Family Counselling in beautiful Banff, Alberta. Returning to my office I expected to become Creston's major counselling service. Instead, I was equipped to officiate in "tying the knot" for three little Lutheran congregations. Lutherans here wanted to re-dedicate themselves to unified Kingdom work. The Lord has blessed their heart-felt yearnings for unity. Together we say, "God is with us, and good things are happening!"

A BRIEF HISTORICAL SKETCH

Already in the pioneering stages of the Creston parish there was a unique blending of inter-Lutheran activity. In 1922 a group of Lutherans, primarily families from the United Lutheran Church parish in Rosthern, Sask., approached the Missouri Synod pastor in Nelson, B.C. with the request that he serve their spiritual needs. A short time later, as the mission became established, European Lutherans arrived on the scene and contributed their gifts of service. Two congregations were organized in 1930 -- one in the town of Creston; the other in the outlying rural community of Lister.

These two congregations functioned as a dual parish, affiliated with the Missouri Synod, during the Depression and the war years until 1949. The Lister congregation struggled without a church building during those formative years. Upheaval and discontent led to a brief interjection of ministerial help from a pastor of the American Lutheran Church out of the Okanagan in

1937-38. Meanwhile, the Creston congregation gained stability under the supervision of a resident pastor.

In the late 1940's, pastoral difficulties beset the parish. When an early resolve did not take place, the ULCA (which later became the LCA) was requested to provide pastoral assistance. A split developed in the parish. A new Lutheran congregation was formed in Creston (Grace) and the Lister congregation (Bethlehem) requested services from the new pastor, thus breaking their ties with the Missouri Synod. Many individual hurts resulted.

For 20 years the two Lutheran parishes carried on independent ministries. Much Kingdom work was accomplished. Many souls were nourished for eternity. Gradually, as the years rolled by, a new generation of members assumed positions of leadership. Old wounds healed. Many began to see the wisdom of a re-united Lutheran ministry in the Creston Valley. The cost of separate Lutheran churches was too high. Several meetings were held to explore the possibilities for merger.

CIRCUMSTANCES LEADING TO MERGER

An earnest desire by the lay-membership for joint ministry was the key to effective merger on the local parish level. There was also support from and communication with the leadership of the two jurisdictional bodies. Obviously the local pastors provided much in guidance.

Actual negotiations began when meetings were held in which local leaders sat face to face. These encounters formed a basis for fellowship. They took place intermittently for several years. There was no precipitating pressure or crisis. Good-will was evident. As someone once said, that which was meant to be unity can never be content to be diversity.

A working relationship between the two local Lutheran pastors developed. The laity needed to see a willingness on the part of their spiritual leaders to cooperate boldly. A significant opportunity to demonstrate such willingness to cooperate came in the summer of 1970. I was invited to fill the LCA pulpit during vacation time. Sensitive to the "altar and pulpit fellowship" stance of the Missouri Synod, it was not a snap decision. Local need for ministry became the predominate reason for saying "yes." (Isolated areas do not enjoy the luxury of available pulpit assistance; alternatives are necessary.)

The sudden resignation of the LCA pastor following his summer vacation confronted both parishes with the need to make some serious decisions. Should the LCA parish carry on a vacancy or interim ministry? Should the Missouri Synod congregation offer pastoral service? As necessity mothers invention and challenges convention, so the infant idea of merger began to toddle. The LCA jurisdictional leaders immediately informed their constituency that they would not abandon them. They wanted it known that there were alternatives to merger. Yet, they also encouraged the exploration and implementation of amalgamation. The first step was the decision of Grace and Bethlehem congregations to worship with St. Paul's congregation. Because St. Paul's had a pastor and a larger facility for worship, its church building was

the natural choice for the joint gathering. With boldness of faith, the two groups committed themselves to joint worship.

A major concern facing all involved was the necessity to respect the dignity of each other as people of God. To exploit those in need was a danger. The win-lose approach, or shooting the gun of competition were explosive potentials. These risks had to be submissive to the Spirit's guidance and control. The common faith and teachings under the umbrella of the Lutheran Confessions were recognized and accepted. This foundation was basis for strong motivation towards inter-Lutheran activity and gave reason for praising God together.

TO ACHIEVE COHESION

It is important to realize that God's people cannot remove every single obstacle before they begin fellowship. Instead, Christian fellowship, exercised in its truest sense, ought to foster cohesion. Worshipping together became a source of motivation.

A plan of action was developed. The president of Western Canada Synod (LCA), the president of the Alberta-B.C. District (LCMS) and the Counsellor of the Kootney Circuit were invited to a goal-setting meeting. That meeting set a positive tone. Our Synodical leaders demonstrated their personal commitment to foster inter-Lutheran relations with respect and integrity. (The two presidents travelled to Creston on the same OWA flight from Edmonton practicing what they preached.) The goal to develop a new constitution for a new congregation was the major task.

Subsequent constitutional meetings, with equal elected representation from the congregations involved, unravelled the process for merger. Issues that had to be dealt with concretely and practically were:

- 1) What would be the Synodical affiliation of the new congregation?
- 2) What church building would be retained, and how would the remaining structures be handled?
- 3) What worship practices from the two backgrounds would be used? How would we relate to two hymnals?
- 4) The problem of lodge membership was most sensitive.

We quickly agreed to affiliate with the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod for several practical reasons. In the Kootenays the Circuit-system of six LCMS congregations existed. There was only one ELCC congregation in Nelson, B.C. There were no LCA sister congregations within several hundred miles. We recognized that support and regional involvement with other parishes was necessary.

It was also quickly decided that the St. Paul's church facility, already being used for joint worship, continue to serve our needs. The church was constructed in 1965. It was large enough. It was well located. The Grace church building and the other parsonage were put up for sale. Proceeds from the sale of properties would first pay off several debts and the remainder would go into a special trusteeship. The Bethlehem-Lister church buildings would

remain open for special services like weddings or funerals, but regular services would no longer be supplied in this rural setting.

Lutheran worship practices needed sorting. The wording of the liturgies was similar, but the music was not as familiar to both groups. Adjustment was necessary. The Lutheran Hymnal (LCMS) with a blue cover, and the Service Book and Hymnal (CLA) with red binding were both cherished hymnals. For several months we followed the suggestion that we alternate use of these two hymn-books. The willingness to do this expressed the extent to which most of the people were open to learning the new and leaving the old. However, the time came when, for the sake of consistency and harmony, The Lutheran Hymnal became our sole choice. Because melodies and timing were different, choice of hymn tunes was critical. A small independent booklet of songs, created by our sister congregations in Cranbrook-Kimberley, was adopted. The booklet which had a "green" cover diverted some of the tension from the "blue" and the "red" books. It served well in meeting some of our singing needs. The organization of a choir to practice and lead in singing enhanced this phase of adjustment. It was at this time that the people here began to look forward to the proposed new joint Lutheran hymnal.

One of the most sensitive concerns was the handling of the "lodge issue." There were several lodge members who currently held membership in the LCA parish. In this area different Synodical practices became evident. Lodge membership was problematic to both Church bodies. However, the LCA allowed membership in the lodge to continue while dealing pastorally with persons involved. In the LCMA, membership was withheld until the lodge issue was resolved. The constitution was written to follow LCMS practice in future situations. For purposes of merger, "all communicant members" including several lodge members, would be welcomed and treated pastorally without threat to church membership. Time has not opened up "Pandora's Box" but has confirmed the wisdom of this decision.

The concept for developing a new congregation grew with enthusiasm as the new constitution was written and then was accepted by the three groups involved. There were hurdles, strong feelings, and diverse opinions to be fielded constantly. Yet the Lord was blessing the labours He had begun. As a satisfactory conclusion became imminent, and as "ribbon-cutting" festivities were planned, a new name for the new congregation became apparent. The idea of a new name brought to a climax the feelings of leaving an old path and venturing on the new. There was concern that adopting the name of a former congregation would eventually lead to a competitive, 'win-lose' attitude. It was felt by the majority that the name should be fresh. The LCA groups had left behind their church buildings, their hymnbooks, the comfort of familiar surroundings. Now the LCMS people were challenged to release loyalty to the name of their former fellowship. There was much tugging at the heart-strings for all involved. Finally, again through democratic procedure, the new name of

“Redeemer Lutheran Church” was chosen. Greater emphasis was placed on the Church as “people” rather than the Church as “building.”

On December 20, 1970, Reaffirmation Services, unattended by Synodical leadership, quietly, joyfully celebrated a new era of Lutheran ministry in the Creston Valley. To share a strong, unified Lutheran witness within our community was our mission goal. Division had been “a stumbling block” to outsiders, and had been reason for excuse to Lutheran newcomers. Now the strengths of both backgrounds were combined and the weaknesses of each were minimized. An immediate strength that LCMS people shared because they had experienced several long-term pastorates was a gift of stability in pastoral relationships. The LCA folk were equipped to share an open, eager outreach through community involvement. Now was the opportunity to bear each others burdens and to share each others joys in the strength of Christian commitment to each other.

The unfailing promise of God to bless every effort towards Christian unity led this new congregation to celebrate its 1st Anniversary on December 13, 1971. The regional Synodical presidents returned to share our thanksgiving at God’s abundant blessings. Both leaders preached in the two services proclaiming the theme: “God Is With Us, And Good Things Are Happening.” The church building dedicated in 1965 as St. Paul’s Lutheran Church was re-dedicated, Redeemer Lutheran Church to the glory of Almighty God.

JURISDICTIONAL INTER-LUTHERAN RELATIONS

Happenings on the Canadian Lutheran scene were observed with great interest by the new congregation. As the challenge for Canadian Lutheran merger was struck, this congregation understood “grass roots” implications. As is true of many small parishes in isolated mountain or prairie settings, maintaining strong Lutheran Synodical identity without an eye to increased co-operation is a costly luxury. One of the reasons why people in these settings are more open to merger negotiations is that they are already Lutherans of “rainbow” quality. Coming from different Synodical backgrounds they converge of necessity and implement a new approach to Kingdom work. The rationale progresses: “If Lutherans from different Synodical backgrounds can work together on the local level with God-pleasing results, why can’t it happen out there on the national scene? The Devil will always attempt to rally his forces to maintain division, but God is stronger who issues the call for unity in Christ.”

As our dealings with the Western Canada Synod were properly concluded, it was not with a “Good-bye, we’ll never meet again” attitude. The hope was genuine and clear that our paths would cross and inter-twine here on earth as they assuredly will in eternity. Likewise, our commitment to working within the Alberta-B.C. District of the LCMS was firm. We received our charter membership with pride. There was never a prevailing feeling that we were a “test-case” or “experiment” to be used as a pawn for future reference. The new congregation lived with its assigned task of ministry as the natural out-growth

of God's wisdom. The great freedom of the Gospel, once experienced, motivated the hope that more and more Lutherans might enjoy similar blessings.

The recent heart-rending struggles of the LCMS have been felt by this congregation as it has been felt by all of Lutheranism. It has caused prayerful concern. Yet, because of our own vulnerable setting, there was a quiet, unspoken resolve not to become heavily involved. In spite of this cautious attitude, the congregation memorialized the LCMS Convention in Dallas in 1977 to support "altar and pulpit fellowship" with the ALC. When the Convention decided to enter a "state of protest with ALC" tensions and fears stirred on the home front. When the joint-hymnal project was put into jeopardy, our unique needs and hopes were pointedly affected. Suddenly doctrinal differences, never emphasized before, began to raise their hoary heads. Because we on the local level have no right to "bury our heads" in regards to the concerns of the larger church, these new tensions are not necessarily lamentable. In fact, we are challenged to share in the debates and issues exercising our congregational right and duty. Some "knee-knocking" and "heart-pounding" accompanies this maturing role.

Now that Canadian Lutheran merger negotiations have encountered stormy seas, our own interest and participation in the process takes on new resolve. We will proceed along the well-worn path walking one step at a time under God's grace. There is a time for working and waiting, and there is a time for seeing the fulfillment of our labours in God's economy. There must be a wholesome balance between urgency and patience.

BLESSINGS AND CONTINUING PROBLEMS

A great blessing in experiencing merger is to see the healing and redemptive gifts of Christ explicit in the lives of God's people. Those pioneering in merger negotiations always encounter strong and often negative opinions, hurt feelings, and human error. As human beings on a divine mission, we do not cut a perfect path through the forest. Decisions are made to take short-cuts and allow for detours which will always stimulate opposition causing friction and heart-ache. Yet Christ walks beside us applying the 'first-aid' of reconciliation. The growing awareness of Christ's faithfulness is a cherished by-product. The faith and trust in our Redeemer matures as we live together in Word and Sacrament.

One can never under-estimate the cautious spirit that was prevalent and still lingers. A part of that is wisdom in patience. The other part is an expression of fear and unfaith quivering in the heart. The problem of "burning bridges" too quickly was evident. Not all people in an amalgamation setting can be expected to offer total commitment to the project, without reservation and condition. As an example, following the decision for merger, two church buildings were vacant. One was immediately sold. The other was kept in

abeyance for over five years. Thankfully, there was the freedom to do it both ways.

People have a vivid memory of the past. Folks still say, “when we were in the other church . . .” Most often they say it with love and devotion. I believe that memories ought never be squelched. Past history must be remembered, but always within the context of the Lord’s mercy and His abundant blessing. The present must be built on the shoulders of the past as we peer into the future. For this reason a project of writing and reading a history of Lutheran activity in the Creston Valley has been undertaken. Even as the Israelites remembered the Exodus with the annual Passover celebration, so Anniversaries provide milestone opportunities for thanksgiving.

Time molds a people of diverse backgrounds into a unity. Time is a precious gift of God. There is no substitute for time. As surely as a marriage needs time beyond the honeymoon to create oneness, so a merger needs to face the test of time. As a pastor privileged to be a part of this exciting mission, I see the moves God himself inspired to bind us together. I have received a goodly number of “calls” to serve parishes elsewhere. Each “call,” respectfully dealt with, gave us as congregation and pastor an opportunity to evaluate our purpose and direction. With hindsight one can say that a hurried decision to leave would have imposed a serious threat to the young church. The Lord of the Church has fittingly strengthened our resolve to work together. On the other hand, we can be confident that when God calls to new fields, the saints here will be equipped for continued faithful ministry.

If there is any threat to future unity it is the inclination of people to align themselves with nostalgic groupings of the past. There seems to be security in that. However, the addition of a whole new group of Christians who have joined the congregation has had therapeutic value. People are often tempted to go back home; to have it the way it was. That is unrealistic, for home is no longer back there.

LESSONS TO SHARE

One is humbly aware of the high risk involved in relating a personal experience and suggesting it will work for others. There is subjectivity. I confess to “blind-spots.” Nevertheless, the proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ has always called the Church to be vulnerable if she is to be enthusiastically diligent to her task. In our experience we have learned some lessons to be shared with the larger Church:

- 1) Striving for unity at any price is not to achieve unity to all. Concern for individual members of the Body of Christ must be fostered and maintained. Peoples’ concerns deserve a forum and ought to be respectfully heard and used for the benefit of all.
- 2) Any one group within negotiations dare never be allowed to dominate and dictate the direction of the larger body if we believe at all in the “priesthood of all believers.”
- 3) Will we be open to change? The attitude of people in merger discussions

ought to be that change is inevitable and can even be welcomed. Our security in the midst of change centres in Christ who is unchangeable. Nourished in Word and Sacrament there is no need to fear the tides of change.

- 4) We need to keep in focus the “redeeming” quality of God’s grace in Christ. Errors are to be detected and avoided; but when they happen, as they will, God’s project is not destroyed. God is in control. God says of His Word that it “shall accomplish that which I purpose, and prosper in the thing for which I sent it.” (Is. 55:11)
- 5) Will the clergy of the Lutheran Church support the laity when they express a genuine desire for inter-Lutheran ministry? Our Lutheran people cannot be held back from pursuing merger as a valid goal. Instead they ask to be nourished and strengthened for this worthy task. The amalgamation here in Creston was not imposed upon the people by any sort of hierarchy. Rather, the laity claimed it as their vision. As a result, it was their accepted task. They were an integral part of establishing the goals and it was their expectation to participate responsibly in achieving these goals for unity. God blesses such faithfulness.

Reverence for Christ must always remind us: “A man’s mind plans his way, but the Lord directs his steps.” “All the ways of a man are pure in his own eyes, but the Lord weighs the spirit. Commit your work to the Lord, and your plans will be established. (Prov. 16:9, 2-3).

Redeemer Lutheran Church, Creston, B.C. was a marriage by God’s grace of three little Lutheran congregations. The congregation celebrated its honeymoon year. It is weathering its adjustment years. It is maturing into productive years. In 1980 it anticipates the festivities of her 10th anniversary. It is the same year in which its people will look back to 50 Golden years of inter-Lutheran ministry in the valley. “God is with us and good things are happening!”