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# Lutheran Bishops for Canada

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# LUTHERAN

## BISHOPS

### FOR CANADA

*Donald E. Johnson*

The question of whether the leaders of the anticipated Lutheran Church in Canada should be titled bishops may well be met with apathy. Most people do not care whether the heads of the jurisdictional units are called bishops or presidents, and they see no value in raising the question. Typical responses when the issue is raised are, "That is a useless question" or "It does not make much difference what you call them."

Since none of the churches presently involved in merger negotiations in Canada use the term "bishop" the reaction seems quite normal. Why raise the question when there are so many more important things to talk about? The answer is that, contrary to such superficial opinion, nomenclature is important; words convey meaning. The style of leadership of the church is not unrelated to the title of the person who leads and, because a new church will emerge in Canada out of the consolidation of the three present Lutheran bodies, those planning the union are obliged to consider all aspects of church life.

It is our intention here to deal primarily with two things: (1) the work of church leadership, and what the church expects its leaders to do, and (2) whether the title "bishop" is appropriate for use in the Lutheran Church in Canada. Several questions usually raised in any discussion of bishops (or episcopacy as some often call it) will not be dealt with here. One is the whole question of tenure. It is taken for granted that the bishop will be elected by the church for a limited term of years, and may or may not be able to succeed himself depending on the church constitution. The thorny question of apostolic succession (or the "historic episcopate") is also not introduced. Lutheran churches at other times and in

other places have had to face these questions, and some have come up with some very interesting answers, but neither of these questions seems appropriate to the Lutheran Church in Canada at the present.

There is another primarily emotional question in relation to the use of the term "bishop" which will also not be dealt with. This is the feeling of many people that if a person is called "bishop" rather than "president" he will tend to be more authoritarian in his style of leadership. The feeling arises out of an adverse reaction to Roman Catholicism of the past. While this feeling exists among Lutherans in Canada, it will not be changed by argumentation. It will change when persons having these fears have opportunity to talk openly about the leadership of the church.

## THE WORK OF CHURCH LEADERSHIP

The question of what a church leader should be called would seem to be conditioned by the nature of his work. If the task is primarily to preside at meetings the title "president", "chairman" or "chairperson" would appear to suffice. If the task is that of a theological leader, "teacher" would be the most appropriate term. If the task is primarily that of administration, then "president", "executive-officer" or some similar title would be appropriate. The questions are: (1) what does the church want of its leaders? and (2) what is necessary? The answers to these questions are not always the same because the church like other organizations in the world is not always aware of its needs.

It is here on the question of the nature of church leadership that the discussion must begin, before the church proceeds to nomenclature. Not only should the church deal with the role of leadership in general, but also with the specific needs of leadership in the Lutheran Church in Canada. Not all Lutheran churches have defined the task of leadership the same. For example the Lutheran Church in Ethiopia (Evangelical Church-Mekane Yesus) which has traditionally had a layman as president of the church has had a different concept of church leadership from that of the Church of Sweden with its historic episcopate. While both of these churches are interesting to study and have developed from entirely differing circumstances, the experience of neither is normative for a church in Canada formed in the latter half of the twentieth century.

Four areas appear appropriate to consider in terms of leadership in the merged church: (1) theological leadership, (2) pastoral oversight of the pastors and church, (3) leadership in mission thrust, and (4) administrative and organizational oversight. There may be others, and doubtless some persons might not rank all of these of equal importance. Others might question whether all of these should be of major importance for the jurisdictional leader. However a consideration of these areas is appropriate.

### *Theological Leadership*

The theological aspect of church leadership has become more important in Lutheranism in North America in recent years than it was in earlier decades. The

church is electing theologians to positions of responsibility for guidance. If the leader of the church is not interested in theological matters, then this aspect of the church's life falls to others who may not be in a position of exerting direct influence on the course of the church.

Every Lutheran Church must be theologically faithful on three levels: (1) the historic Christian faith from the scriptures which is the heritage of all Christian people; (2) the specific Lutheran interpretation arising out of the Reformation and recorded in the Lutheran confessional writings; and (3) witness to the Word of God in the specific time and place where the particular church lives by giving answers to questions arising out of its geographical and historical context. The answers given to questions arising in "(3)" should be in harmony with the traditions voiced in "(1)" and "(2)". An example of the kind of questions which arise on level (3) was the one which arose in the former Augustana Lutheran Church in the early 1950's concerning Mormon Baptism which was occasioned by persons of that religious group who wished to become Lutherans.

Nobody would suggest of course that each bishop (or president) should immediately have answers to all theological questions which might arise. It should be granted that the leadership of the church would want to consult with all who have theological understanding and thus avail themselves of all the information and help available. But finally the church can expect that its leaders be theologically articulate and able to deal with issues that arise in a manner grounded in theological understanding.

### *Pastoral Oversight of Pastors and Church*

The overall pastoral approach to church leadership is important. The task of theological leadership of the church would suggest that the leaders be ordained pastors, although not absolutely because there are lay-persons who are also competent theologians. But in terms of pastoral oversight of pastors and the church it appears essential that the leader be ordained. Since leadership has always been vested in the ordained clergy in each of the three churches planning merger, this is no problem.

It is obvious that every pastor must have his pastor. None are more painfully aware of this than the ministers themselves. (This does not necessarily mean that pastors have any better record in seeking out pastoral counselling than lay persons.) How well the Lutheran churches in Canada are doing now in providing pastoral care for ministers is an open question. So much depends on the personality of pastor and area leader, on geography and on the many circumstances that affect the pastor and church. Nobody would deny the need for pastoral care, and most leaders attempt to provide it within their abilities.

There is one problem in linking the work of being a pastor of pastors to that of church leadership. Realization by the pastor that his president (or bishop) has much influence in his own career opportunity works against complete honesty in all aspects. The wise church leader might delegate a good deal of counselling of

pastors to other pastors and counsellors, but the overall duty to see that there is adequate pastoral care for every minister must necessarily be his.

Along with pastoral care of the members of the ministerium goes the responsibility for pastoral care of the whole church in the area. The bishop cannot be pastor to every local congregation, but he has the duty to see that such pastoral leadership is available. The church leader's responsibility in placement of ministers is an awesome one.

### *Leadership in Mission Thrust*

This may not appear immediately to be one of the primary duties of the area church leader. Should this not be something that is delegated along with helping congregations in their evangelism and stewardship programs, and the directing of various relief work of the Church? There is good historical reason for making missions a responsibility of the bishop. In the ancient church this was one of the activities of the bishop.<sup>1</sup>

There is a particular reason why a Lutheran Church in Canada should place the work of missions high on the agenda as one that is of central importance. There are still large geographical areas of Canada where there is no Lutheran church, including one entire province. Doubtless, the church will have to give attention to this reality if for no other reason than to see that Lutherans who move into areas without a Lutheran presence have adequate pastoral care. The subject of missions thus becomes one with which the new church must wrestle to develop an adequate pattern of bringing the Gospel to the present membership and the people of Canada.

Doubtless in a functioning church some of the mechanics of mission organization will have to be delegated. This will not annul the necessity for the leaders of the church to be on top of the mission program.

Closely linked with mission in Canada is the cooperation with churches in other parts of the world to assist them to carry out their mission, the searching for new opportunities of Christian witness, and the receiving of help and insight for Christ's mission to the whole world. If the church is to be alive and effective in bringing the Gospel to human beings, the leadership of the church must be closely involved in mission.

### *Administrative and Organizational Oversight*

Little needs to be written in this area because the administrative and organizational aspect of church leadership has been the emphasis in North American Lutheran circles in the past. Although this has been put last on the list, it is not the intention to play down this part of the church leader's work. The

1. A good discussion of the episcopate between the fourth century and the Reformation is the chapter on "Church Government and the Office of Bishop from the Fourth Century to the Reformation" by Erich Beyreuther in *Episcopacy in the Lutheran Church*, edited by Ivar Asheim and Victor R. Gold and published by Fortress Press in 1970. This book was produced in response to requests to the LWF from Lutheran churches in Asia and Africa for clarification of the Lutheran understanding of church leadership. The book should be required reading for anybody contemplating decisions regarding church leadership.

bishop (or president) must have a thorough knowledge of the church constitution; he must be familiar with the annual budget; he must be able to handle personnel matters so that the staff can be brought together in a working body.

Given the above short description of the work of a church leader, is such a person a president or a bishop? Obviously such a person is not a bishop as the New Testament uses the word because at that time the diocesan episcopate had not yet developed. In the New Testament times all bishops were part of the leadership of congregations and did not have jurisdictional duties over other congregations.<sup>2</sup> Neither does the description fit exactly into the pattern of bishop's duties of the fourth century because this is not the fourth century, although in some ways the above description does approach the work of the fourth century bishops.<sup>3</sup>

It should also be stated that the pattern of church leadership described here does not fit that of the early church or district presidents in North America. Most of the latter served congregations during their term of leadership of the whole church and were not therefore full-time general church leaders.

## IS THE TITLE "BISHOP" APPROPRIATE?

The question of what to call the jurisdictional leaders of the church will not determine whether or not the Lutheran Church in Canada will be effective. The church will be able to function with either bishops or presidents. When the question is settled there will be those who are opposed to the solution. This does not mean, however, that the question is unimportant.

It becomes difficult for the writer, who admittedly favours the use of the title "bishop", to treat fairly the arguments opposing the use of the term. Try as one will, doubtless some honestly held reasons will be forgotten, and those that are mentioned will not be given with the force of one who feels differently. However, one must attempt to give a fair review of the reasons for not using the term "bishop".

### *Arguments Opposed*

It must be admitted that none of the Lutheran churches in Canada at present call their leaders "bishop". The term is not a divisive issue now, so why raise it? There are important issues to be worked through in the merger negotiations so why bring in something that many might regard as a "non-issue"?

In addition to the fact that none of the negotiating bodies at present use the term, the church's experience with bishops has not always been happy. People do not want to be reminded of the time of the worldly power of the church. This is a time when all institutional structures are suspected, and the use of the term

2. Leonhard Goppelt, "Church Government and the Office of the Bishop in the First Three Centuries", *Ibid.*

3. Beyreuther, *Ibid.*

“bishop” appears to be on the side of power and authority in the church. The term “president” seems more democratic.

One line of argumentation runs along the following line: the Lutheran Church should not use the term “bishop” because it is not the whole church, but rather a confessional movement within the church catholic. It should therefore not elect bishops whose jurisdiction overlaps that of other Christian bodies. The organizational pattern of the Lutheran Church is interim, looking forward to the day of complete church union. At that time there will be proper bishops of the whole church. This line of thinking suggests a doctrine of the episcopate (and the church) not described in this paper, but since the view has been expressed in North America in the present century it should be mentioned.

A further argument against the use of the title is that it would further complicate the already incomprehensible Lutheran organizational pattern in the world. Within world Lutheranism there already are bishops in the tradition of apostolic succession with lifetime tenure (or at least tenure until retirement), bishops outside the apostolic succession who also have lifetime tenure, bishops who are elected for a specific term of years, but who if re-elected are granted lifetime tenure, bishops elected for a specific term of years. Might not the church in Canada complicate this pattern by introducing another type of bishop?

Probably the strongest reason for not introducing the term at this time is that people are not accustomed to using it in the Lutheran tradition in Canada and it would therefore bring confusion.

Others might well have other reasons for opposing the use of the title. If the question of introducing the title becomes a live issue, these will probably emerge.

### *Reasons In Favour*

The title “bishop” has had long association with the church, and persons outside the church have some idea of what a bishop is. This is advantageous to bodies that use the term when they deal with government and other secular organizations. If a person is a bishop, the world knows that he occupies a position of leadership within the church. All too often the question is asked, “What is a Synod (District) President?” The answer given is often that he is something like a bishop in the Anglican or Roman Catholic Church. This continual explanation of the meaning of title, while not fatal to the church, can become irritating.

The introduction of the title “bishop” would give the Lutheran Church in Canada similar nomenclature to most Lutheran churches in Europe and some of the Lutheran Churches in what is called the Third World.

Since the Lutheran Church in Canada will be free to choose appropriate titles and structures, let the church choose one that expresses the realities of the late twentieth century. Church structure within Lutheranism in North America was not planned. It developed out of more simple patterns. Congregations united in synods, which had to be presided over, so it was normal that the title “synod president” should come into being.<sup>4</sup> This phase of church life has now passed,

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4. Theodore G. Tappert, “Lutheran Ecclesiastical Government in the United States of America”, *Ibid.*

and it is appropriate that a church that comes into being as a mature church should choose symbols commensurate with its status.

There is a feeling among some clergy that the title “bishop” tends to emphasize the church leader’s role as pastor of pastors, theological leader in the church, and leader of missions thrust rather than simply administrative and organizational leader.

The question of bishops does keep surfacing in the Lutheran churches in North America. It has arisen within the Lutheran Church in America, and although a majority of delegates at one convention favoured it, the majority was not large enough to effect a change in the constitution. The question arose in the Central Canada Synod of the LCA in 1975. The American Lutheran Church permits use of the term. Although some might claim that the question is a “non-issue” there are a number of persons within the church who would like to have the title used and some of these persons have given considerable thought to the question.

### *Analysis*

One reason for at least considering the use of the title is that it is hoped that the Lutheran Church in Canada will be more than the things that the merging bodies do not disagree on. In any merger a new church structure is created and that structure should be more than the sum of the parts that came together to form it. At the emergence of the Lutheran Church in Canada, those writing the constitution should search for the symbols and structures that are best able to serve the church. Because the Lutheran churches have never sanctified any particular form of polity as binding for the whole church, the particular form that is most useful for the Gospel should be employed. In fact in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania, for example, a variety of polity exists within the one church: some areas are called dioceses, and led by bishops, and some are called synods, and headed by presidents. While one would not necessarily recommend this form of leadership which grew up out of the historical condition of different regions developing in disparate traditions, it is indicative of the wide variety in organization possible in Lutheranism while being faithful to *Augustana VII*.

The introduction of the term “bishop” into the Lutheran Church in Canada need not cause confusion. While some might object to the use of the term, others would be pleased, and the duties and authority of the work would be defined in the constitution. While it might bring “another type of bishop” into the Lutheran family, this would not be destructive because Lutheran churches have proved that they can live with differing forms and symbols of polity and still work together very well on the world scene. No other confessional body has as efficiently cooperated in meeting world needs as the Lutheran. Furthermore, whatever nomenclature is used, the area leaders within the Lutheran Church in Canada will not have their positions defined as being identical with any other church.

Using the title “bishop” can be part of a recognition that the church here in Canada has reached a sufficient stage of maturity to overcome the antipathy towards titles used in Europe, and is ready to choose its own forms. (Incidentally



this antipathy was probably greater in the United States than in Canada.) The church should well recognize that abuses in the church in the past did not occur because the church had bishops, but because people in the church including the bishops were sinful. Recent political events in the U.S. have not given greater support to the idea that the term "president" is a guarantee against authoritarianism.

Whatever title is used, one significant part of the preparation of the people of the churches for merger should be open, thorough, and complete discussion among clergy and laity of the work and function of church leadership, pointing out the positive aspects of church leadership as well as its necessity. Too often both parish pastors and lay-people regard the church structure as a necessary evil so that there can be sufficient organization to maintain theological colleges for the training of parish clergy, and so that beneficiary congregations can get subsidy until they are able to be self-supporting.

As the churches merge to form a new church structure they will have to look both to the past and to the future. In the long history of the church "bishop" has been the normal title used as the area leader; in the shorter history of the church in North America "bishop" has seldom been used among Lutherans. As the church looks to the future the question must be: which of these traditions is the better for us now and in the years to come? Neither title will mean the difference as to whether or not the church functions. The question will be one between the good and the better.

## CONCLUSION

This is not intended to be the end of the discussion. Rather than be the last word on the subject, this article should provide opportunity for discussion by raising issues. It is hoped that enough interest in church leadership will have been stimulated so there can be fruitful discussion along this line. The question is more important than simply determining the title of the church leader, although it does lead naturally to this subject.

Fortunately, the Lutheran churches have opportunity to discuss the question before any decision is made for the Lutheran Church in Canada. The question need not become a contentious issue. And the decision should not be made in haste.