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Theological Education for a Lutheran Church in Canada

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THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION

FOR A LUTHERAN CHURCH

IN CANADA

Harold Merklinger

I am honoured to have this opportunity to make this introductory statement on theological education. What pleases me even more is seeing you here - all of you. Your presence surely speaks well for the Lutheran Church in Canada. For you to take this time to listen to the views of others and to express your own concepts and expectations on this important subject is most heartening.

Added to this is the broad spectrum of representation at this convocation. We require and have with us the professional theological educators. Their knowledge and experience is essential. Yet, not everyone here is actively engaged in theological education. We have a representation of the products of the seminary to help us - the pastors. Out of their experience as theological students preparing for the ministry and now in office they will be able to evaluate how well they were trained for their work, or how they could have been better equipped. Most of all, I appreciate the presence of lay people, men and women, who must listen to us preachers every Sunday. You are the recipients of our ministry. I place a great deal of importance and credence in the evaluation of the ministry from the pew. After all, the prime purpose of theological education is to train and assist pastors to bring Christ to the people and the people to Christ. I anticipate a positive and valuable contribution from the lay representation. I also wish to acknowledge the presence of past and present representatives of the Boards of Governors. Out of their long experience they have a lot to offer on the subject before us. We need

their input. From their first-hand acquaintance they know what is possible from the management and control aspect. Some of us preachers are inclined to be dreamers and idealists. These governors can and, I am sure, will tell us what is workable or not.

The participation of this varied yet balanced representation must surely produce concrete results.

What I am presenting this morning is my own thinking on the subject. I have not consulted others on the views I am presenting. They are my own. Later, the task force on the theological education of which I am a member will prepare a position paper for presentation to the Joint Commission on Inter-Lutheran Relationships. I confidently look forward to meeting with Pastors Hohm and Huras to produce a plan for the theological education of one Lutheran Church in Canada, when by God's grace and guidance that comes about.

WHY LUTHERAN SEMINARIES IN CANADA?

This convocation recognizes the importance of the education and training of pastors. In fact, it is crucial for the church. As the seminaries go, so goes the church. Our pastors need and the Lord's work demands the best equipping possible for the ministry.

The Lutheran Church in Canada must train its clergy in Canada. That is basic for its development and growth.

The pioneer pastors in North America realized very early in their activities on this side of the Atlantic that clergy must be trained in the country where they are to serve. Henry Melchior Muhlenberg (1711-1782) took as his motto *Ecclesia Plantanda*: the church must be planted. That planting included not only the organizing of a synod free from European control but also the training of pastors on North American soil. Unfortunately, Muhlenberg's initial plans for a theological institution disappeared in the smoke of the Revolutionary War. Prior to the founding of Gettysburg Seminary in 1826, pastors trained native clergy in their own homes.

In a similar concern for the planting and growth of the church in North America Wilhelm Loehe (1808-1872) soon realized that his *Sendlinge* - "emissaries", "missionaries" - trained at Neuendettelsau, Bavaria, weren't the best answer to supplying pastors for North America. As a result he was instrumental in establishing a theological school at Fort Wayne, Ind., in 1846. Lack of ministers induced the Ohio Synod to establish a seminary at Canton, Ohio, in 1830, the forerunner of the Columbus Seminary (1831).

The Saxon element of the Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod founded a theological college in the same year that they landed in Missouri (1839).

Regrettably, Lutheran seminaries came to Canada rather late. Waterloo Seminary opened its doors in 1911. In Western Canada the Manitoba Synod opened a school in Edmonton in 1913, which was moved to Saskatoon two years later. Lutheran Theological School of the Norwegian Lutheran Church began in

Saskatoon in 1939. These western institutions merged in 1965 into the present Lutheran Theological Seminary, Saskatoon.

The Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod never established a Canadian seminary. However, in 1971 it approved a chair of theology at the Saskatoon Seminary and this fall it proposes to operate an extension of its Springfield Seminary at a place yet to be decided. It must be stated, of course, that Missouri did found Concordia College, Edmonton, in 1921 as a pre-theology institution. Its graduates normally obtained their theological training at St. Louis.

I have gone into this history to demonstrate that Lutheranism in North America realized and still realizes that clergy from the field must be trained on the field for the field. The growth of the present LCA in Canada and the ELCC is largely indebted to the institutions these church bodies established in Waterloo and Saskatoon. Concordia, Edmonton, has been a real blessing for the growth of LC-MS in Western Canada. Where indigenous pastors were trained, there Lutheranism flourished. Where it failed to do so, the church did not grow as it should have and could have. In some areas it shrunk instead of grew.

Nova Scotia, which boasts of the first Lutheran Church in Canada and its oldest existing congregation, once had Lutheran congregations throughout the province. However, the failure of the mother church in Germany to continue to send pastors to replace those that died or left, and its failure to train men in Nova Scotia caused many Lutheran congregations to wither away or to affiliate with the Church of England. That early history is a standing testimony to the tragedy that follows when the church fails to supply pastors from the native soil of the church. That is *not* the way the church is planted.

Training its clergy for Canada in the U.S.A., as Missouri has done, is not the best way in my opinion. I say this for several reasons. However, I shall confine myself to identifying only two.

First of all, many Canadian young men either do not want to or cannot study in the U.S.A. American immigration laws do not allow some of these men to enter the U.S.A. Of those who do enter many cannot work to help meet their education costs, depending on the prevailing immigration regulations.

Secondly, many feel as I did and still do, that training in another country does not always fill the bill. This is particularly true in the area of practical theology and to some extent in the area of historical theology. All through my studies at St. Louis no course on the history of Canadian Lutheranism was offered. Later on for a few years such a course was given. In practical theology all our courses were slanted to the prevailing American sociological and ecclesiological conditions, for example, the parochial school and the absolute separation of church and state, to name two. Can you imagine how that helps a Lutheran pastor to fit in with the climate generated by the Roman Catholic and Anglican churches which they hold in Canada or into Ontario's Ryersonian pan-Protestantism? I am informed that in recent years much of practical theology's background was

taught with the black and white struggle in mind. Our Canadian pastors need guidance on the French-English problem and the Indian-Inuit - white situation.

HOW MANY SEMINARIES?

Few of us doubt that there is a need for Lutheran theological education in Canada. One of the questions we need to ask is, "How many Lutheran seminaries do we need?" I realize that there is no easy answer.

The geography of Canada would indicate that more than the two existing institutions are required. More seminaries located in strategic geographic areas would cut down on the students' travel costs. However, with the current student travel rates this is not insurmountable. In the long run, it might even pay to subsidize student travel costs rather than multiply expensive institutions.

More seminaries, however, do afford a wider spectrum of church life in which the students can do field work and obtain in-job training. Besides, this will generate in each seminary area a greater feeling of ownership, responsibility and support.

Emotional feelings along synodical and geographic lines will prevail for a number of years after one Lutheran Church is established. This is so in any marriage. Each partner brings in his or her own traditions, culture and practices. So it will be in one Lutheran Church in Canada. I realize one can over-ride these emotional ties in a hard-nosed "this is the way it's going to be" approach. However, I wonder how much that solves. I suspect that emotions thus dealt with will only propagate counter emotions and "the last state shall be worse than the first." Would more seminaries help solve the emotional problem? I'm not sure, but I do think we ought to think about it.

Actually, considering the cost of higher education - and like everything else, theological education no longer comes cheaply either - we must ask, Can our membership of 300,000 support more than the two existing institutions? Both of them have excellent, new facilities. They are well located. They are capable of expanded student bodies. Staffing and library considerations also suggest keeping the number of seminaries to a working minimum. For these practical considerations, my opinion would be to stick with what we already have. The future may dictate otherwise.

WHAT KIND OF SEMINARY?

A question much more important than the previous one is, what kind of a seminary or seminaries do we want? This is the crucial issue. I indicated earlier that seminary education is of utmost significance for our church in Canada, for that matter, for any church. "As the seminary goes so goes the church."

I submit it must be a Lutheran seminary, not in name only but in spirit and in truth. I am sure that is so for you as for me. It must be a model Lutheran seminary in structural format and in practice, one that incorporates the spirit and teachings

of historic Lutheranism. We Lutherans have a precious heritage in our origin, history and performance, and above all in the Gospel we preach. These gifts are from the Lord. We must preserve them.

WHAT CURRICULUM CONTENT?

Historically, Lutheranism has divided theology into four principal branches: Exegetical (Biblical Studies), Systematics (Doctrinal Studies), Historical and Practical. This balanced format has served Lutheranism well and has produced a ministry of which we can be proud.

Originally I had planned to elaborate on the content of these four general areas. Time does not permit it. Elucidation, can well be left to the task force on theological education and to this convocation.

What I wish to emphasize in connection with the curriculum consideration is that it must be taught from a faith point of view. We will be training pastors whose task it is to bring people to faith and to preserve and develop the faith of those whom the Lord has committed to their charge. I stress this because, while our pastors must be scholarly, we must not educate the mind at the expense of the heart. Our aim is to equip faith-filled pastors who will communicate the same living faith to their parishioners. We are building for eternity. To that end the approval and control of the curriculum content must be a prime consideration.

WHAT KIND OF INSTRUCTIONAL STAFF ?

Of course, a seminary needs teachers. What kind of professors do we require? Obviously, the best possible spiritually and academically! They should be specialists in their field to impart the optimum training.

With current emphasis on certification and accreditation, our seminary professors will require the necessary academic degrees in theology. I am sure that the representative of the Association of Theological Schools will have a lot to say on that subject.

On the other hand, scholarship is not the sole qualification. I am sure you will agree that a theological professor in a Lutheran institution must be a Lutheran. On the other hand, he need not necessarily be an ordained pastor. In certain subjects, a well-trained lay person can fill the bill. I should imagine that a dedicated, informed layman can serve as well as a clergyman in the practical field. I am thinking of such subjects as hymnology, church music, liturgics, counselling, sermon delivery, education etc. I am confident that a qualified lay historian can do a good job in teaching church history.

Need I add that, as far as possible, the instructors should be Canadians? I ask this not for nationalist reasons nor as a result of the recent publicity on the *Symons Report* re the seeming preference for foreign professors over Canadian.

I believe that our professors should, as far as possible, be Canadian for three reasons.

The first is that, since they will train clergy for the Canadian ministry, they

should be thoroughly at home and acquainted with our Canadian thinking and ways, our sociological conditions, our problems. They should have a thorough knowledge of the history of Lutheranism in Canada and a good working acquaintance with our national history.

The second is that, if they are going to train pastors for the Canadian field, they must have the "feel" of the Canadian ministry. That acquaintance can come only through living in Canada and serving in the Canadian milieu.

The third reason I submit is that we need to train Canadians to develop theological leadership. How can we develop theological leaders if we import them from elsewhere? It is gratifying and promising for the future to see younger Canadian pastors occupying chairs in our seminaries. Some of them are with us in this convocation. The importance of Canadian theological leadership will acquire greater significance as we become an independent Canadian church. If we can't operate our own theological training, we should think again about becoming a national, autonomous church. If we haven't got the qualified staff available now, we should get busy and train these instructors now.

CONCLUSION

This, in brief, is my view on the subject of theological education for the Lutheran Church in Canada.

I realize I haven't said everything on the subject. There is nothing in this paper about the governing and control of theological institutions. Nor have I said anything about academic freedom and its relationship to Lutheran theological schools. All of these are areas requiring discussion, evaluation and answers. You may be sure that somewhere along the line these blanks will be filled in by your task force on theological education committee and carefully combed through by the Joint Commission.

In conclusion, I repeat that what I have said are not the views of the task force on theological education. They are my own. I am aware that some, if not all of them, will be discussed at this convocation by the other speakers and in the discussion groups. I hope, however, that I have given you something to think about.