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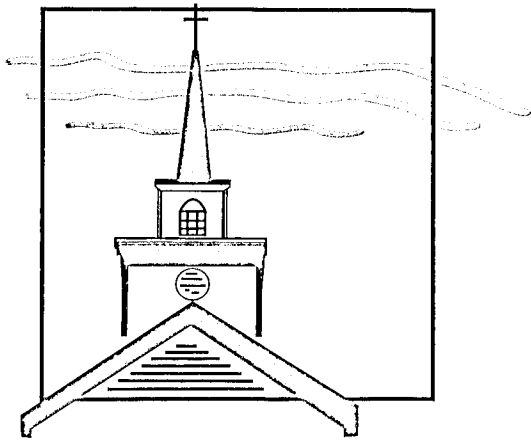
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AMERICAN LUTHERAN HISTORY

AMERICAN LUTHERANISM

FIFTY YEARS AGO—AND TODAY

Mark Granquist

History is full of arbitrary snapshots—pictures of dynamic events frozen in a single point of time. Historians capture a moment of time and use it as a benchmark to measure the progress (or regress) of a people, a country, a civilization, or whatever they wish to evaluate. There is something artificial about all this; time never stands still, and the evaluations can be manipulated by the choice of benchmarks. Yet as arbitrary as this may be, it can still be a valuable pursuit, to enable us to know where we currently are by measuring ourselves by where we have come from. To do this for our own church life, we will look back at American Lutheranism in 1959.

Why 1959? It was the last year before the major mergers that built the American Lutheran Church (1960) and the Lutheran Church in America (1962), which eventually became the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (1988). It was also the peak of the post-World War II booms that resulted in the social transformation of America, and just before the major social dislocations of the 1960s and 1970s. Since 1959 American Lutherans have seen major mergers and a major schism, internal denominational turmoil and fragmentation, and an increasing polarization between the ELCA and the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. There was an air of identity, confidence and self-assurance among American Lutherans in 1959 that stands in marked contrast to their current state. Fifty years is long enough to measure real change, while still remaining within the living consciousness of a community; there are still those in our community who well remember the way things were in 1959.

Fifty years ago, American Lutheranism was perched on the crest of the post-World War II growth. In the previous decade of the 1950s, the churches had expanded greatly in membership, congregations, and numbers of pastors. Eight Lutheran denominations were grouped together in one umbrella organization, the National Lutheran Council, and these eight denominations were soon to become two, the ALC and the LCA. These mergers took up a great deal of time, and although there was some lingering disappointment that the eight could not become one single denomination, and that the LCMS could not be enticed into merger,

there was still a general attitude that American Lutherans were moving closer together. In 1965 this hope was partially accomplished with the formation of the Lutheran Council in the USA as a framework organization for cooperative ministries among the ALC, LCA, and LCMS. In 1959 the LCMS dominated the other Lutheran umbrella organization, the Synodical Conference, along with the small Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS) and two smaller Lutheran denominations, the Evangelical Lutheran Synod and the Slovak Evangelical Lutheran Church.

By the end of the 1950s, American Lutheranism had grown tremendously, from a total of four and a half million baptized members in 1935 to slightly over eight million baptized members in 1959. There had been an equally strong increase in the number of pastors, church buildings, and finances, and a moderate overall growth in the number of congregations. The eight million baptized members constituted 1.3% of the total population of the United States (then 178 million people), and it was the fourth largest Protestant denominational family in the country. There were approximately 17,750 Lutheran pastors and 16,900 Lutheran congregations, and on average the Lutheran denominations were starting over two hundred new congregations a year, mainly in the booming suburbs that were so ubiquitous that decade. These Lutheran denominations supported nearly thirteen hundred long-term missionaries and their wives, as well as single women and men, in forty-eight different mission fields around the world.

Reading church periodical newspapers from 1959 gives one the impression of an American Lutheranism bursting with energy and optimism, with great plans for the future. The institutional growth alone was staggering, and there were constant appeals for more personnel and more funds to continue this mission expansion. Along with the growth came an increasing bureaucratization and professionalization of the whole church enterprise. Traditionally, these Lutheran denominations, even the largest of them, had been run with in minimum of professional administrators and often had no permanent church headquarters; most denominations were located wherever the president happened to live. After World War II, American Lutherans

joined their Protestant counterparts in establishing permanent church headquarters, with professional full-time staffs, but in 1959 these were still modestly sized organizations.

During the preceding fifty or sixty years, American Lutheranism had been in the midst of an intricate and involved process of negotiations surrounding the question of merger and institutional realignment, a process that consumed a tremendous amount of time and energy through the 1940s and 1950s. By 1959 the parameters of these mergers had been formed, and the eight Lutheran denominations of the National Lutheran Council were moving toward the two new denominations, the ALC and the LCA. The Missouri Synod was not a part of these mergers directly, but had been deeply involved in many of the preceding negotiations, and would soon be entering into pulpit and altar fellowship with the ALC; this was a dramatic step for Missouri to undertake. The Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod was moving away from Missouri, and when WELS left the Synodical Conference in 1961, it caused that body's eventual collapse. All the signs pointed to an increasing Lutheran convergence. Even though there were two mergers rather than one, and Missouri was still on its own, many people thought that the final amalgamation of the three major Lutheran denominations was only a matter of time.

Much has happened within American Lutheranism since 1959. The anticipated merger of the three larger denominations did not occur; although the ALC and LCA, along with a slice of the LCMS, did merge in 1988 to form the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Now in 2009, American Lutherans number 7.5 million baptized members. The LCMS has grown slightly to 2.4 million members (adjusting for the loss of members in its 1970s schism) and the WELS has also grown a bit as well to four hundred thousand members. The ELCA, which numbered 5.2 million members at its formation in 1988, has declined by

half a million members to stand at 4.7 million in 2009. Given a population increase in the United States to three hundred million people, Lutherans in 2009 constitute about 2.5 percent of the total population of this country. It is much harder to estimate the number of new mission starts and the

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total number of missionaries, as what counts in these categories has changed in the last fifty years. It is reasonable, however, to estimate that American Lutherans start between sixty and eighty new mission congregations in this country every year, and that there are about five hundred missionaries, although a large number of these are short term (six months to two years), and few are doing direct evangelism work.

If one compares the figures with 1959, it is not a pretty picture. The population of the United States has nearly doubled, but the number of American Lutherans has actually declined from eight million to seven and a half million, and the American Lutheran "market share" has declined from 4.3% in 1959 to 2.5% in 2009. This cannot be blamed simply on a general decline of religious affiliation in the United States. Figures gathered by the Gallup organization over the last fifty years show that rates of religious affiliation in America have held roughly even during this period

of time (with some fluctuations), even allowing for population increase. The numbers of new congregations started in the United States and the numbers of missionaries oversea have gone down significantly during this fifty-year history. The comparison of 1959 and 2009 is striking, and shows a pattern of decline, both in real numbers and in percentages.

There are other, less tangible, factors involved over the past fifty years. It would be safe to say that few American Lutherans would now be optimistic about the possible convergence of the ELCA and the LCMS; on the contrary, it would seem that the two largest American Lutheran denominations are pulling away from each other at a significant rate. As well, both major denominations have undergone a tremendous amount of internal strife and struggle, divided up into different factions and camps that greatly complicate their mission and ministry. American Lutheranism was battered and bruised by the social upheavals of the 1960s and by the continuing culture wars that have divided the United States since then. The easy tone of optimism and progress that seemed so apparent in 1959 is certainly not present in American Lutheranism in 2009. Rather, contemporary American Lutheranism seems divided, confused, and uncertain of how to proceed. Contemporary American Lutherans are still doing a tremendous amount of good work and good ministry around the United States, but it seems much more scattered and fragmented, and much less confident, than it did fifty years ago.

So what went wrong? Why the difference between fifty years ago and today? It is very tricky to deal with the recent past of history; often it takes centuries before the full sweep of history with all its nuances can be become apparent. Certainly by arbitrarily selecting 1959 as one benchmark, we may well have chosen a high-water mark in American Lutheranism, one from which there would inevitably have been a decline. Though this

may be true, it cannot fully account for the last five decades of American Lutheran history, and there must be other factors, internal and external, to explain this recent past.

Certainly there are external forces that had a significant impact on the recent past of American Lutheranism. Few people in 1959 could have foreseen the massive social upheavals of the next few decades, and especially the internal changes within the American family system, changes that have directly affected every Lutheran congregation in the country. The decline of the Protestant mainline, and the shift of religious power toward a resurgent Protestant evangelicalism, have meant that older, settled denominations suffered a loss of status and membership (though American Lutherans have in fact declined less than other groups). Demographic changes and the decline in Lutheran birthrates have meant that the number of people in the tradition "pool" of membership is significantly smaller. The loss of religious "brand loyalty," and the increasing mobility of Americans as a whole, has meant that Lutheranism can no longer rely on its members to remain within the Lutheran fold throughout their lifetimes.

Yet external factors cannot fully explain the decline over the past fifty years, and are less than helpful in trying to address the problems of recent Lutheran decline, as they are forces over which we have little control. Much more important are the internal factors, for these are things that we can deal with. Where have American Lutherans "missed the boat" over the past fifty years, and what can be done to address these declining trends?

In their recent book, *The Churching of America, 1776-2005: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy*, sociologists Roger Finke and Rodney Stark examine the "market" mechanisms at work among American denominations and try to explain why some religious denominations succeed and grow, while other stagnate and decline. Their provocative conclusions are not

always accepted by American religious historians, but there seems to be a large grain of truth in what they have to say. Finke and Stark suggest that successful and growing religious organizations stand in a strong and marked tension with the society around them and are able to clearly differentiate themselves from the world around them. In short, they provide their members with a clear and distinctive identity from the others around them. Growing denominations make strong demands on their members while also providing the promise of strong rewards to reimburse them for their sacrifices. This is a delicate balance: push the tensions too far and remove yourself too drastically from the world, and you will become a self-contained entity, such as the Amish or the Jehovah's Witnesses.

But success can be its own worst enemy for religious denominations, because success and growth bring demands by its members for a reduction in the tensions with society, and for a lessening of the demands placed on them. Church members want to "fit in" with the society around them, and gradually the distinctions between themselves and the rest of the world are lessened, to the point that boundaries between the church and its society are blurred beyond recognition. Though much criticism for the recent decline in American Lutheranism has been placed on its professional leaders—pastors, bishops, district presidents, and bureaucratic officials—it seems clear that the rank-and-file of American Lutherans also share much of the blame for this decline with their leaders.

A second element of decline has to do with a change in leadership and with the increasing centralization and professionalization of power. Finke and Stark suggest that growing denominations operate on a lean and decentralized model of authority, where there is much competition and the leaders are closely tied to the laypeople that they serve. What we have seen in recent American Lutheranism is the loss of these elements, and the

growth of layers of administration, centralization of power, and professionalization of the clergy, which have led to a disconnect between clergy and laity. Several studies have shown that there is a significant (and increasing) gap between the religious, social, and political attitudes of Lutheran clergy and Lutheran laypeople in the United States. The fact that this gap is much more significant in the ELCA than the LCMS may well go a long way to explaining why the recent decline in the ELCA is much stronger than in the LCMS.

A third possible element in the recent decline in American Lutheranism has to do with mergers and unification efforts. Finke and Stark suggest that movements toward these two ends signal the loss of competitive zeal and identity, and are not a strength but a weakness. Consolidation of power, whether in mergers or in ecumenical efforts, have usually throughout American religious history resulted in the loss of religious "market share," and indicate the decline of the groups involved. American Lutherans in the decades leading up to 1959 were certain that consolidation and mergers were a definite competitive advantage; institutional unity would allow them to do ministry much more efficiently than in the past. Yet the costs and disruptions of merger were never really factored into the equation. Mergers are difficult to accomplish, absorb a tremendous amount of time and resources, and often lead to a disruption of internal identity and the goodwill of the members. Perhaps these mergers, or something like them, were inevitable, but few American Lutherans seemed to have grappled with their strong potential for decline. In the late 1950s there seemed to be a general idea among American Lutherans that bigger was better, and a sense that consolidation and centralization would inevitably mean even more dramatic growth than they had already seen. They were wrong.

What was really lost after 1959 was a clear sense of identity and purpose

among American Lutherans, and a resulting loss of loyalty and affiliation to the Lutheran denominations. Unification efforts and the consolidation of power led to a loss of the old identities, and there was little effort to rebuild clear new identities; in short, confusion and drift, at a time of national upheaval. Within the groups that led to the ELCA, merger disrupted old patterns of loyalty and identity, and divisive internal struggles alienated many members. For the LCMS, the bitter internal struggles between the moderates and the conservatives led partly to schism, but more importantly to an internal balkanization of the denomination along with a loss of common purpose. Certainly it may be said that the old Lutheran denominational loyalties of the 1950s and before were largely social and cultural, based on ethnic and "tribal" elements, and these were bound to fade with the increasing acculturation of American

Lutherans. Yet it seems that there was little effort made to forge a new, common Lutheran identity to go along with the new Lutheran churches and their denominational machinery. This seems more a factor of neglect, or perhaps a self-confidence that Lutheran identity was self-evident and permanent; that we could always rely on this identity without having to invest much effort in its preservation. The blame for this loss of identity and decline can be shared equally between the leadership of American Lutheranism and the rank-and-file of American Lutheran members; both groups did not see this decline coming, not did they adequately address it along the way.

Even more difficult than trying to explain the recent past is the effort to predict the future of American Lutheranism, but it would seem that the result of our present direction will be more drift and decline. One possible way

out of these trends is to go to the root again and rebuild a Lutheran identity on a genuine confessional identity, one that might be stronger than the socio-cultural identities that have tended to characterize American Lutheranism in the past. In step with this might also be a radical decentralization of American Lutheran denominations, moving toward more initiative and responsibility by laypeople and rank-and-file pastors, more competition, and more genuine diversity. The old 1950s institutional uniformity could not and did not help us thrive during the upheaval of the past fifty years. Perhaps a true diversity of Lutheran forms and practices, undergirded by a common Lutheran theological identity, might be the way to a more confident and successful American Lutheran future. *LF*

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