

LUTHERANISM AMONG THE FRENCH CANADIANS IN QUEBEC:  
SO MANY UNANSWERED QUESTIONS

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Although I certainly recognize that I am by no means an expert on the topic presented in this paper and although there are very few written resources from which to gather information, nevertheless, after seeing the great number of Middle East correspondents in the recent Persian Gulf War, I've decided (somewhat boldly I might add) to write about Lutheranism among the French Canadians in Quebec after having lived in Ottawa Ontario for a year and after serving our W.E.L.S. congregation there (St. Paul's Ottawa). During my vicar year in Canada I was privileged to also have served in Quebec where I preached and conducted Bible classes in Poltimore and on several occasions, Montreal. While researching this paper I came up with more questions than I found answers for and the real purpose of this paper is not just to present the material which I found, but also to make the reader stop and think about how we as a synod can best carry out the great commission of our Lord among the French Canadians in Quebec. I will try my best to give credit where credit is due as we go along, but inevitably much of this paper will be based on my own opinions<sup>and</sup> of those whom I interviewed (and may not necessarily voice the opinion of the majority in Quebec). Nevertheless. let's get the ball rolling...

One of the main questions which must be addressed when writing about Lutheranism<sup>s</sup> in Quebec is, why not more W.E.L.S. activity in Quebec? One English speaking congregation of forty members in a province of six million (80% of them French speaking) is hardly anything to brag about, especially considering that that congregation (Our Shepherd Poltimore) came over to us in 1970 after leaving L.C.M.S. (Information gathered from Raymond LaSalle member of "Our Shepherd"). I submit to you that the great number of questions surrounding Lutheranism in Quebec is the very reason for our lack of activity there. With limited manpower <sup>and</sup> funding we can't help but be "choosy" where we send it. Perhaps a better question at this point might be, "Should Quebec receive more attention from the W.E.L.S.?" It's certainly a concern of the pastors in the northern district of the Colonial Conference-North. At every Winkel

Conference which I attended, the situation in Montreal (which will be explained in further detail later in this paper) was carefully and prayerfully monitored. The general concensus at those meetings would always be, "When the Lord opens the door to us in Montreal we'll go."

It really comes as no surprise that Quebec is predominately Roman Catholic. This no doubt is largely due to the fact that Quebec was originally settled by pioneers of the Roman Catholic faith. Jacques Cartier paddled up the St. Lawrence as far as Montreal and took possession of the entire region in the name of France in 1536. In 1608 Samuel de Champlain made the first permanent settlement in Quebec. Soon afterwards, the Jesuits came on the scene (1625) and immediately began to build strong Roman Catholic education and mission outposts. For a very brief period Quebec came under the influence of Protestantism which briefly flourished under the push of French Protestant Huguenots. Unfortunately, when French Canada fell to the English in 1763 it created an untrusting bitterness among the people which resulted in the Quebec Act of 1764 making the Catholic church unrivalled in its power. (Lutheran Cyclopedia p. 131)

For nearly 200 years anyone who converted to Protestantism was a religious and cultural ourcast. During the period between the great Depression of 1930 and World War II however, Roman Catholicism lost much of it's grip on the people. In 1960, "La Revolution tranquille" (the quiet revolution) took place. A separatist government "Party Quebecois" (Party Quebec) came into power winning the election. The "reform mindedness" of the government also spilled over into the ecclesiastical realm. Vatican II deeply moved the people at this time with it's ecumenical overtones. (Lutheran Witness Artical-1986) Evangelical outreach which was previously opposed very strongly was now more possible than it had been for nearly 200 years!

The power of Quebec had gone from a conscientiously Catholic province to a more modernism minded and secular society. Materalism, agnosticism and

atheism became more rampant than ever in Quebec with its whopping 69% regularly unchurched (as opposed to 13% regularly churched) population (Ibid 1986 article). The Roman Catholic Church is, for all intensive purposes, the "state religion" in Quebec, however, although not officially. For example, last year I had the privilege of baptizing a premature baby girl in a hospital in Ottawa. Her parents are members of our W.E.L.S. church in Quebec. In order for her to be officially considered a resident of Quebec (with all its social benefits) her parents and I had to fill out a 5 page baptismal registration form for the government which I had to sign no less than 4 times. To be recognized as a citizen of Quebec one must be baptized. (Preferably Catholic - no paperwork)

This kind of religious tampering of the government has definite financial and social ramifications for non-Catholic denominations. In an interview with Reverend David Somers an L.C.M.S. minister in Gatineau Quebec, he shared with me some of his frustrations in starting a french-speaking Lutheran Church in Quebec and, God willing, someday a Lutheran Elementary school there. He informed me that Roman Catholic schools are readily recognized and financially supported by the government. In fact, they are considered on an equal par with the public school system as far as tax exemptions and public funding is concerned. Any other private school on the other hand receives no funding from the government, (financially speaking that is) for the first three years of its existence. According to Pastor Somers, the way to circumvent this bias of the government is to declare yourself to be a non-denominational private school. ("St. Luke's School" for example) or else to foot the bill on your own (in which case he says, they can't afford it).

According to Reverend Somers. it's been an uphill battle for Missouri Synod Lutheranism in Quebec right from the start. Speaking of which, Lutheranism got an extremely late start in the Evangelical push of the sixties that certainly didn't help its cause. Baptists and Pentecostals on the other

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hand have made some tremendous gains in the last 30 years largely due no doubt to their "quick start" in the sixties. (Lutheran Witness) Even Mormons and Jehovah's Witness have a solid foot in the door in Quebec which doesn't help Lutheranism either. "When we didn't have a building" said Somers, "many associated us with some fly-by-night religions like Jehovah's Witness." (Phone interview with Somers).

The Missouri Synod officially began it's work in Quebec in 1976 as they started a French mission in Montreal under the direction of Reverend Daniel Pourchot, a Missouri synod minister who came from France in the 1950's and headed the Lutheran Information Center in Montreal. Pourchot taught history at the University of Montreal until 1976 when he was called by Missouri Synod to serve as Pastor of "La Reconciliation" Lutheran Church in western Montreal. Pourchot's ties to the University have paid off in a big way. One of his students, Denis Fortin (who earned a Masters degree in Biblical studies in 1978) converted from Roman Catholicism to Lutheranism and entered the colloquy program at Concordia Seminary, in St. Louis in 1979. Fortin is presently serving "Communaite de Paque" (Paschal Community) Lutheran Church in Eastern Montreal. It was also in 1976 that the Missouri Synod opened their Gatineau mission. Reverend David Elseroad headed this French Lutheran endeavor. He has been assisted in his work throughout his years there by 4 different French-speaking vicars (one of whom was Somers).

Somers was the first of the vicars to serve in Gatineau before the Missouri Synod had a building there (1983) and he informed me that thier progress in the beginning was extremely slow. "People didn't trust us without a building," said Somers. He also told me that even with a building however it is still a challenge to get people to attend on a regular basis. According to Somers, the key is to get people to come to a worship service by any means possible. "Once they get inside we have a chance to minister to them." he said. Somers welcomes weddings and funerals which bring along them outsiders to the church.

He informed me that the liturgical service which they see at a Lutheran worship service can actually be a drawback. He claims that people who are looking for a change from Roman Catholicism see the same liturgical form in the Lutheran Church as they previously experienced and can be turned off by it. On the other hand when some people see the strong emphasis on Bible study, they associate the Lutheran Church with Jehovah's witness or with the Mormon Church which is also a drawback. The "Eglise Evangelique Luthérienne Du Sauveur Vivant" ("Living Savior Evangelical Lutheran Church") in Gatineau Quebec which started in 1983 with 12 members has slowly but surely grown to a solid 50 member congregation (1991).

Despite the slow start, Somers is extremely optimistic about the future of Lutheranism in Quebec. One of the reasons for his optimism is the French speaking Lutheran Radio Program ("Lutheran hour") which has brought a good deal of response from it's listeners. This too requires some fine tuning however, especially by it's initiator, Pastor David Elseroad. Elseroad began broadcasting a Paris version Lutheran hour in 1969. This resulted in only 2 calls from listeners it's first year due largely to the fact that the French Canadian dialect is so different from the French spoken in Paris. "The more I learned to know the Quebec dialect and outlook, the more I saw how unsuitable it was" said Elseroad. (Lutheran Witness) Elseroad and Fortin began to tape their own versions of the "Lutheran Hour" in 1980 and their broadcasts were met with tremendous success. The Letters from listeners jumped from 2 per year to anywhere between six to thirty per week. Somers tells me the radio ministry is still going strong and is really a whole ministry in and of itself.

In our conversation Somers informed me that there are presently 18 Lutheran churches in the Province of Quebec. 5 of these are Missouri Synod, one is W.E.L.S. and the rest are E.L.C.I.C. or Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada (our equivalent to E.L.C.A.). These 18 Lutheran churches serve people

in no less than 10 different languages (everything from Chinese to Japanese; from Latvian to Lithuanian). Twelve of these congregations serve people in French (3 Missouri and 9 are E.L.C.I.C.). As of this point in time there are no W.E.L.S. services being conducted in French. Our one W.E.L.S. church in Quebec is "Our Shepherd" Lutheran Church in Poltimore. As previously mentioned it has 40 members and it is served by the Pastor and Vicar of St. Paul's in Ottawa, Ontario. Poltimore is a German community which is slowly being overtaken by French. "Our Shepherd" rents a church building which belongs to St. Andrews Presbyterian church and it conducts it's services every second Sunday at 3:00 in the afternoon (giving the Pastor or vicar of St. Paul's ample time to drive there.)

As was also mentioned previously, "Our Shepherd" came to our Synod for confessional reasons from the Missouri synod in 1970. Around 40 members (less than half) split away from St. Paul's Lutheran Church in Poltimore (Missouri Synod) and formed "Our Shepherd". They then appealed to St. Paul's in Ottawa to serve them (St. Paul's Ottawa had also recently come over to our Synod from the Missouri Synod in 1969). Since it's beginning in 1970, "Our Shepherd" has neither gained nor have they lost members. The concern within the congregation however is that they will start losing numbers soon if something is not done (the average ages of the existing members are getting higher and not many new members are joining). According to Raymond LaSalle (a member of "Our Shepherd") the time for a French-speaking minister is right now. Raymond has offered his services (a native French speaking Canadian) in assisting the man who would take on the job. It was even suggested to this writer (and to many other vicars I'm sure) on more than one occasion that even if I were to study French, the members of "Our Shepherd" would be willing to build a parsonage and call me to serve as their pastor (that's how desperate they are).

It is my opinion that Poltimore would most likely not serve as a good site

however, for a possible W.E.L.S. French Canadian mission. The reason for my opinion is largely due to the fact that the spilt between the members of "Our Shepherd" and St. Paul's Politmore (Missouri Synod) created so much bitterness between the two churches some of which lasts even to this day. Stories were told to me on my vicar year by some of the members of "Our Shepherd" of how St. Paul's members would call the members of "Our Shepherd" "separatists" and other names which cannot be printed here. At one point while tempers flaired, one of the members of St. Paul's who was a farmer denied access to his to his land to a Farmer who was a member of "Our Shepherd" (They had previously been life long friends). And the stories go on. In such a small town (population 2,000) such inner bickering between the Lutheran churches can be devastating and would most certainly put a damper on an Evangelical W.E.L.S. mission endeavor there.

The more probable site for a W.E.L.S. mission among among the French Canadians (in my opinion) is in Montreal, Quebec. As of 1989 we had a nucleus of 5 confirmed W.E.L.S. members with which to work who lived and worked there. These five people were served by "abiding Word" Lutheran Church in Orleans, Ontario (Pastor Kevin Schultz). As a vicar to St. Paul's in Ottawa<sup>I</sup> had a number of opportunities to travel to Montreal (2 hours away) and I preached to this nucleus in the house of Randy and Loraine Hurst (two W.E.L.S. transplants there). Randy was a construction worker in Montreal and he and his wife had come to us from the Missouri Synod several years prior to this. The other members of this nucleus had also at one time or another come to the W.E.L.S. from the Missouri Synod for confessional reasons. This W.E.L.S. group of believers was about to carry out the necessary canvass profile of Montreal (needed by our synod to prove the need for a team of canvassers). When Randy was mysteriously fired from his job (spring of 1990) and the family was forced to move back to Pembroke, Ontario. (Where they are members of "Redeemer" church - W.E.L.S.) This of course proved to be a major setback to our W.E.L.S. mission endeavors in Montreal,

Quebec. The two men and one woman who are still there continue to be served by "Abiding Word" although their permanance in Montreal is also questionable.

Without a strong nucleus of believers who are willing to sacrifice their time, talents and treasures it is impossible to start a mission anywhere. I'm sure there are other Lutherans in Quebec who are probably tired of their liberal Lutheran churches and are looking for a more conservative Lutheran church. To be sure this is our strongest point as a Synod. In speaking with Jerry Parker who is a Music Librarian at the University of Montreal he informed me that the adherence of the W.E.L.S. to the Lutheran confession was the biggest "draw" to his coming into fellowship with our W.E.L.S. nucleus in Montreal (from the L.G. M.S. church there). Parker, however, refuses to join "Abiding Word" in Orleans, Ontario (because of the distance to travel) and is waiting for the day when the W.E.L.S. can open a mission in Montreal. This however, could be a long time in coming after losing the "Hurst" connection there. Randy and Lorraine Hurst also told me some horror stories of the liberalness of the Missouri Synod Church they were formerly members of. (In Ontario prior to their move to Montreal).

The need for a French W.E.L.S. mission in Montreal is an obvious one. The timing on such a mission however in another question. One must also wonder where the French-speaking minister to serve that mission would come from. French is certainly not one of the "higher priority" foreign languages which the young people in our Synod are encouraged to take. In fact, it isn't even offered in any of our W.E.L.S. worker training training schools. Many of the youth in Ottawa are encouraged to take it however. The majority of the students in my confirmation class last year (5 out of 7) were enrolled in a French Immersion school. (Classes taught in French only). Also in Quebec, where French is the official language, all of the schools in Quebec require their students to have at least a working knowledge of French. (Two of our confirmation students last year lived in Quebec). Surely we should be able

to "draw from this well" of French speaking W.E.L.S. youth sooner or later for the work of the public ministry.

One thing that is quite obvious after having lived in Ottawa for a year, Quebecians are very proud of their French heritage and are working hard to preserve it. For example , it is illegal to advertise in the English language in Quebec and all of the signs and billboards there must by law be printed in French. Also with the death of the Meech Lake Accord in June of 1990. (A bill that would have given Quebec the status of a distinct French society within Canada) the Quebecians threats to leave Canada to form their own country appear to be closer then ever before. While we can't predict what will happen politically in Quebec we must be ready as a Synod to carry out the work of the Gospel there. Since they are not coming closer to becoming an english province. (in fact just the opposite). we must consider training some of our ministers in French to serve them.

There are so many questions which face our Synod as we prepare to enter the 21st century. A number of them deal with the issue of Lutheranism among the French Canadians.- most of them I can't even begin to suggest an answer for. I'm confident however that our Lord will provide the answers we so desperately seek in his own time and in his own way.

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