

CANADIAN LUTHERANISM - PROVING GROUND FOR LUTHERAN UNIONISM?

A Look at the Development of Canadian  
Lutheran Unionism

Church History

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Certain trends in Canadian Lutheranism over the last 10 years or so suggest that Canada may be the proving ground for Lutheran unionism in North America. Perhaps the term "proving ground" is a bit misleading, maybe rather we should say "paving the way" for American Lutheran union. However, from the standpoint of a Lutheran in the United States, Canada, perhaps is the proving ground to see if Lutheran unionism can be achieved.

After the American Lutheran Church was formed in 1960, the Canada District of this church body took steps to incorporate itself as the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Canada (ELCC). By 1966 the necessary legal steps had been taken for the assumption of autonomy by the Canada District. <sup>1</sup> In November of 1966 the Canada District severed itself from the ALC to become the first autonomous Canadian Lutheran church.

Having spent a year in Ottawa, Ontario for my vicarage, I certainly sensed what many of these Canadian Lutherans may have felt. A good majority of Canadians feel that they are constantly overshadowed by its neighbor to the south. Canadians want to run their own affairs. This is evident in the business world. Very few companies are actually owned and managed by Americans, rather they have Canadian ownership and management. Canadians don't enjoy being col-

led the United States' "51st state". To what extent these feelings of nationalism played in the decision of the Canada District of the ALC to form their own church body I don't know, but I'm sure they played an important role and factor. And it didn't take long before the newly formed ELCC began unionistic overtures to their fellow Canadian Lutherans.

By April of 1968, the ELCC Church Council announced that it would bring the recommendation to the churches convention to declare altar and pulpit fellowship with the LCMS Canadian Unit (LCMS referred<sup>to</sup> from now on means the Canadian Unit) and the LCA Canada Section (LCA-CS) saying that doctrinal consensus does exist. Similar actions had been taking place in the US.<sup>2</sup> During the convention of 1968 this recommendation was accepted and the ELCC extended fellowship offers to the LCMS, the LCA-CS and also to the Synod of Evangelical Lutheran Churches. Also at the convention a motion was adopted calling for a four church merger which would create a single Lutheran Church in Canada. If implemented, this church would encompass some 304,000 members in over 1,000 congregations.<sup>3</sup> By December of 1968 at a meeting of the Joint Commission on Inter-Lutheran Relationships (a Committee composed of members from the three big synods) a suggested timetable for such a merger was submitted. Dr. Otto A. Olson Jr., president of the Central Canada Synod of the LCA said

that this union could be effected by Jan 1, 1978 if such a church was desired and if approvals were obtained on schedule. Doctrinal and organizational studies were to be undertaken to study such a merger. <sup>4</sup>

The LCMS's Commission of Theology and Church Relations and the Council of Presidents recommended to the 1969 LCMS's convention that fellowship be established with the ELCC, which it did. However, fellowship with the LCA-CS was not established. Meanwhile the LCA-CS's convention approved the merger talks with the ELCC and the LCMS.

By December of 1970 affirmative action was being taken to effect the merger and also a total fellowship of the three major branches of Lutherans in Canada. Representatives from the three bodies adopted a statement expressing the conviction that "consensus for fellowship exists." <sup>5</sup> The hope was expressed that the LCMS would declare fellowship with the LCA-CS by 1973. A doctrinal statement that could be included in the constitution of an eventual single Lutheran Church in Canada would be studied and discussed at the next years meeting. But by the Nov 1971 meeting it was found that a theological consensus that would be sufficient for a declaration of altar and pulpit fellowship was still lacking between the LCA-CS and the LCMS. The target date of 1973 for fellowship between these two bodies had fallen through because of "technical pro-

cedural problems." 6

At its June 1972 convention the ELCC voted approval of a plan to send an invitation for a merger for one Lutheran Church body in Canada to the LCMS and the LCA-CS. The invitation was to enter into official negotiations to bring about a merger of the three bodies.

By December of 1972 both executive officers of the LCMS and the LCA-CS agreed to subject a recommendation to discuss merger to its biennial conventions. 7 At the 1973 LCMS convention, the body gave an unanimous approval to a resolution assuring the church's readiness to enter into negotiations but considering its lack of fellowship with the LCA-CS, noted that special consideration should be given to the achievement of doctrinal consensus. At its convention the LCA-CS also adopted a resolution to begin merger talks. Already by Nov of 1973 representatives of the three bodies adopted a 7 point statement on the Holy Scriptures on which they agreed. The statements were to be circulated and considered by the churches involved.

By the Nov 1974 meeting of the Joint Commission, the talks ran into a few snags. The conservative Ontario District of the LCMS voiced concern about two of these statements because of the absence of the terms "inerrant" or "do not contradict itself." Meanwhile work began by the Joint Commission on the

theses concerning the mission and church.

The November 1975 meeting of the Joint Commission didn't progress much further. A major presentation concerning a structure for the proposed church was discussed, also a study paper advocating the ordination of women was heard. Decisions were not made on either, as was planned, especially for the first. However at its July 1976 convention the ELCC went ahead and approved the ordination of women in its church body.<sup>8</sup> Perhaps influenced by this lead, the Joint Commission approved a proposal to ordain women for the proposed new body. The proposals were submitted to the churches for reaction prior to October 31, 1977. This action by the Joint Commission was to be the death blow, at least for the time being, for the merger plan which had been optimistically set for Jan 1, 1978 ten years earlier.

At the Nov 1977 Joint Commission meeting, the merger timetable was set aside after the discussion on the ordination of women revealed that there were apparent irreconcilable disagreements. Naturally it was the LCMS gentlemen who threw the monkey wrench into the works. All of these men voted "no" or abstained on this point. Yet the possibility of a merger between the ELCC and the LCA-SS and any willing congregations of the LCMS remained.<sup>9</sup>

By the November 1978 meeting the representatives from the LCMS dropped out of the Joint Commission and the two remaining bodies formed the Lutheran Merger Commission. Observers from the LCMS attended. The main purpose of this meeting was reorganization and to continue the doctrinal and organizational studies. 10

Apparently the setback at the 1977 meeting has sent merger plans reeling backwards, but probably only momentarily. Canadian Lutheran unity doesn't seem to be too far off, at least as far as the ELCC and the LCA-CS are concerned. Only the November 1979 meeting can tell us how soon the merger, and it seems probable, will occur.

As to the question, "Canadian Lutheranism, proving ground for unionism?", it seems that "proving ground" is a bit strong, but not too far off as far as I am concerned. With the feelings of national unity in Canada as high as they are today caused by the separatist movement in Quebec and with the desire to break from the Big Brother control of the United States Lutherans, the union of Canadian Lutherans doesn't seem too far off. Perhaps a "successful" union in Canada would prompt liberal American Lutherans to take notice and try the same. Perhaps for the American Lutheran, Canadian Lutheranism is the proving ground for Lutheran unionism in the U.S.

## Bibliography

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## Endnotes

- 1 E.C. Nelson, The Lutherans in North America (Fortress, 1975) p. 510.
- 2 NEWS BUREAU 4/2/68 p. 5
- 3 Ibid. 7/8/68 p. 1
- 4 Ibid. 12/4/68 p. 6
- 5 Ibid. 12/17/70 p. 1
- 6 Ibid. 12/1/71 p. 7
- 7 Ibid. 12/5/72 p. 7
- 8 Ibid. 6/25/76 p. 5
- 9 Ibid. 11/21/78 p. 10
- 10 Ibid. 11/21/78 p. 12