

Elmbrook Community Church

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I don't know how many of you here have heard of D. Stuart Briscoe and Elmbrook Community Church. The number who would say they have not is decreasing year by year. I think that most WELS pastors around Milwaukee have either lost members to Elmbrook Community Church or have received requests for further information from members who perhaps have friends or relatives attending there. There is no doubt about it. Elmbrook Community Church is really a phenomenon in the greater Milwaukee area. It presently claims around 2500 members (93 new this last quarter ending August 30) with an average Sunday attendance in three morning services and one evening service of 5000 people. Not a few of these people either belonging to Elmbrook or regularly attending its services and Bible studies have a Lutheran upbringing, some in our own synod. That causes more than our curiosity to be aroused and moves us to ask why so many people, including WELS Lutherans, have found a comfortable home there.

I will have to admit that neither the amount of research which I have done nor the brief length of this paper will do justice to the total picture or answer all of your questions. Hopefully, I can give you a feeling for the position Elmbrook occupies in the theological spectrum in our country and for the spirit that thrives there. My information comes from a Sunday evening service which I attended; the very end of a Sunday morning communion service; a two-hour interview with Peter Wilkes, a full-time associate on the pastoral team; a three and one half hour Monday morning staff meeting led by Stuart Briscoe; a paper by Ronald Baerbock, formerly pastor of Star of Bethlehem in New Berlin, prepared for the Metro-South Conference in 1976; several articles written recently about the Briscoes and their work; plus numerous tapes and brochures. That amount of study does not make me an expert, but it does give me some very definite impressions which I shall relate to you.

I have heard Elmbrook described as a money making venture, a personality cult, a church concerned only with this life, and a Billy Graham crusade without wheels. We will see if we can find a fair and accurate picture of the church in there somewhere.

I. Its Doctrinal Position

I guess this would be a normal place for us in a confessional Lutheran church body to begin this study. What does this church stand for? Since it has no confessional ties with any denomination, what does it teach?

If we wanted to put a label on these people or try to find a pigeonhole where we could classify them, I think that generally we would describe them as Bible-based Evangelicals, part of that broad spectrum of nondenominational Evangelical Christianity that is so popular in America today. For instance they are very much at home in *The Christian Courier*, a monthly newspaper which you may have received. It reports Evangelical news and is a lasting result of the Billy Graham crusade several years ago. Elmbrook makes its announcements and reports its activities

there. It likes to make use of such schools as Wheaton and Trinity Evangelical Seminary in Deerfield, Illinois, and does support these schools to some degree.

Elmbrook does have a high regard for Scripture. Its Constitution states in Article I: “We believe the Scriptures, both Old and New Testament, to be the inspired Word of God, without error in the original writings, the complete revelation of His will for the salvation of men, and the divine and final authority for all Christian faith and life.” This commendable attitude toward the Scriptures is reflected in the preaching which I heard or listened to on tape.

Elmbrook is a Trinitarian church as its Constitution reveals: “We believe in one God, Creator of all things, infinitely perfect and externally existing in three persons, Father, Son and Holy Ghost.” And their statement concerning Christ also from the Constitution reads much like a paraphrase of the Apostles’ Creed. About the Holy Spirit this church confesses: “We believe the ministry of the Holy Spirit is to glorify the Lord Jesus Christ, and during this age to convict, regenerate, seal, indwell, guide, instruct and empower for life and service.” How these various doctrinal stands are practically applied in the life of the church we will look at later when we discuss Elmbrook’s ecumenical fellowship stance. Suffice it here to say that Elmbrook feels itself in the Evangelical mainstream, and as Peter Wilkes said it, “would never deny or try to get rid of the ancient Christian Creeds and what they teach about God.”

Concerning the sacraments we are not surprised to find the flags of Reformed theology flying. The sacraments are called ordinances and are described as acts of obedience which the Lord calls upon His people to perform. Any blessing to be derived from performing these ordinances would be general blessings that always come from God when people are obedient to His will.

There are no infant baptisms at Elmbrook. Instead parents of infants bring their babies to a dedication service where they promise to carry out their Christian responsibilities to bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. The church in turn promises to support and help them in that work. Baptism, then, becomes an act of commitment made by the grown child at some later date. In spite of all this Lutheran and Catholic baptisms are accepted at Elmbrook. Such people are not required to be re-baptized although some of them want to be.

In Holy Communion the Real Presence of Christ means nothing more than the general words of Jesus, “Lo, I am with you always, even unto the ends of the world.” (Mt. 28:20) The Real Presence of Christ’s body and blood is denied and with it the promise of forgiveness. The sacraments then become a preaching of the Law as it is to be obeyed in the sanctified Christian’s life, rather than a visible proclamation of the Gospel. As a Lutheran pastor nothing made me more sad in carrying out this assignment than the knowing that this church has many former Lutherans in it who are being taught that God has no special blessing for their infants in baptism and that the Lord’s Supper is only an act of obedience.

II. Its Emphases

This section could have been included under the doctrinal section. But there are certain things in the teaching and church life at Elmbrook that definitely stand out and are worthy of special mention. This is the reason for this section.

I believe that nowhere do we get a better view of the doctrinal emphasis at Elmbrook than when we look at sanctification. I’m going to propose an old theory of mine that what a church spends most of its time talking about and encouraging is the center of its doctrinal system. *And at Elmbrook sanctification is king.* That does not mean that justification by faith in Christ is not proclaimed. It is. Nor does it mean that the proclamation of the Gospel does not form the basis

and give the motivation for the sanctified life. It does. And yet the very strong emphasis is placed on the fact that your faith must show. I would call it the main thrust of the church's proclamation.

To illustrate this point we might first consider membership. There is no emphasis on a new birth marked by some religious experience. There are no altar calls or invitations to make your decision for Christ. You don't have to point to a moment in your life when you came to faith. I'm sure that some members of Elmbrook feel that they can, and the church is not uncomfortable with this teaching. It's only that it is felt that in a community with a Catholic and Lutheran background such practice is meaningless and counterproductive. Peter Wilkes said, "We don't care how you got there. Just so you're there."

And the church makes sure you are there. To join the church one must take a three month course of instruction on basic Christian doctrine. Following that there comes an interview with one of the pastoral team. He doesn't question so much what you believe, but rather how the indwelling of the Spirit is showing in your life. Give evidence of the way He has directed you in the past two weeks. Such testimonies are an important part of church life. During the evening service I attended a young woman interning in the music department put such a personal testimony to song. And I was told that at the beginning of the communion services that would be held on the morning of September 13 (communion is celebrated every eight weeks in the morning services) microphones were going to be passed throughout the congregation, and people were going to be called upon to make spontaneous testimonies of how the Spirit was active in their lives. It was to be a first time experiment. I never heard how it turned out. However, such an emphasis and the testimonies of so many people do apply a subtle pressure on others to start showing their faith by proving that the Spirit dwells in them and rules their lives. It produces results, but it is hardly a Gospel motivation. This emphasis also impresses the outsider and the newcomer. All the activity, all the evidence of the Spirit, here must be where the action is!

Furthermore as we will see later when discussing the program of Elmbrook, it is a great "how-to" church. Since sanctification is so central, there is a great emphasis on doing the best job possible. There are many "how-to" courses available such as how to be a successful Christian husband, wife, parent, single, young couple, teacher, youth, business man or woman, evangelist, etc. There are other examples which could be pointed to, but the more one observes life at Elmbrook, the more the point comes home: at Elmbrook sanctification is king. It is this fact that also leads outsiders to the conclusion that the church is only concerned about this life.

But if sanctification is king as far as emphasis goes, then one must hasten to add that *foreign mission work is queen*. The church is very concerned about the fact that percentage-wise the world's population is increasing more quickly than is the population of the Christian Church. And it takes very seriously the Lord's command to take the Gospel to every creature. Foreign mission work is Stuart Briscoe's first love, and he has communicated that fact to his congregation. Every year since 1977 the church has held a Missions Festival in fall for one week. Some missions expert, this year Roy Gustafson of the Billy Graham team, headlines a week of activities. Missionaries from around the world who happen to be home visit neighborhood Bible classes and speak with the people. At the end of this week the members make a "Faith-Promise," a pledge to contribute a specific amount to foreign missions. For 1981 the total pledge of the congregation was \$550,000. (Note: The total budget of the congregation in addition to the Faith-Promise is \$1.7 million. Elmbrook does not demand tithing. Each member is called upon to make a pledge. On the basis of the total of the pledges the budget is established.)

Financial support of missions is not all that is encouraged. The members themselves are encouraged to go to the world mission fields. At present Elmbrook supports about 150 mission workers, 75 of whom are from the church. Others, especially retired people, are encouraged to go on short term stays in the mission fields and apply whatever skills they might have, thereby relieving the missionaries themselves of that work. These people work for nondenominational groups throughout the world. Two groups mentioned on the back of a bulletin from last year were the Africa Evangelical Fellowship and the Evangelical Alliance Mission, both in South Africa. A map locating the various missions throughout the world which receive support from Elmbrook hangs over the main entrance to the auditorium. The workers' names are listed next to it. News from foreign missions occupies the back of most Sunday bulletins. Stuart Briscoe willingly travels throughout the world preaching to these missionaries and encouraging them in their work. Future plans call for Elmbrook to establish a mission in some area where the Gospel presently is not being preached, and then to staff and support that outreach by itself. The emphasis on foreign mission outreach at Elmbrook is impressive and praiseworthy.

III. Its Appeal

Perhaps this is the thing that interests us the most. What is the appeal of Elmbrook Church? Why is it growing so rapidly, often at the expense of other area churches? Some things such as the emphasis on sanctification have been mentioned already. In addition I have compiled a list of things that struck me as significant.

Expository Preaching. Preaching is one of the strong points of Elmbrook Church. The sermon takes about 2/3s of the allotted service time. Stuart Briscoe usually preaches 45 minutes or more in the morning, and Peter Wilkes speaks about one hour in the evening. The sermons are presented somewhat informally in keeping with the entire service which is very informal by our standards. Often there is a sprinkling of humor, and the general presentation is a mixture of what we might do in a sermon and a Bible class presentation. There is some topical preaching, but most of it is simply taking a book chapter by chapter, Sunday by Sunday, until finished. The sermon I heard on II Corinthians 8 and 9 (the text often is one whole chapter or more) was well organized. Entitled the "Gift of Giving," it grounded stewardship on God's giving to us in Christ and showed how stewardship is an inseparable part of the Christian life. It was well delivered and contained interesting illustrations and anecdotes. As far as its content was concerned it would have sounded fine coming from a WELS pulpit. A detailed outline of each sermon is printed in the bulletin, and the people are encouraged to take notes.

The emphasis of Elmbrook preaching is stating the message of God as it came to the people at the time of the writer, and then vigorously applying it to the present day listener. Peter Wilkes told me that people don't just want to know what God told the Israelites several thousand years ago. They want to know what He is saying to them now. They want to know that He will be with them when they go to their jobs tomorrow morning. This strong emphasis on application meets with success. I have heard people say that they feel closer to God, and that He is more real in their lives after they have heard the preaching at Elmbrook. To be fair and to give both sides of the picture I must also say that I have talked to some Lutherans who were totally dissatisfied with what they heard there.

There also is a great demand for such messages nation- and worldwide. Presently Briscoe's sermon tapes are played weekly on 37 stations in the United States and on eight foreign stations in Ecuador, Guam, Liberia, Monaco, Puerto Rico and South Africa. It is claimed

that none of these radio spots were sought, but the tapes were requested by the stations themselves and are played free of charge. So the radio ministry spreads on its own.

Staff and Lay Ministry. Eleven names make up the pastoral team as listed on the front of Elmbrook's bulletin. A twelfth was mentioned in conversation. When I attended the Monday morning staff meeting, I counted 19. Some of these people are more or less interns or vicars who only stay for a short time. The team is made up of Stuart Briscoe, senior pastor; Peter Wilkes, who conducts the Sunday evening services and the singles ministry; and other men and one woman who specialize in various ministries. There is a pastor for pastoral care, neighborhood groups, music, senior high school people, young couples, junior high school people, social concerns, lay Bible training including some instruction in the original languages and Christian Education (Sunday school organized by the one woman on the staff). (Note: The church is on record as discouraging full time parochial education. It feels that its children ought to be in the public schools as a Christian witness there.) All of these people have had varying degrees of training at some Bible school or at Trinity Seminary, except for Briscoe and Wilkes who are mainly self-taught, but seem to have a good grasp of theological disciplines. One member of the staff does hold a PHD in Hebrew from Cambridge.

The part this staff plays in Elmbrook's ministry is interesting. There is no clergy-laity distinction. The staff rather is made up of full-time ministers, the rest of the people in the church are part-time, but everybody has a ministry. The task of the pastoral team is to train them for their work. A statement heading a list of new members that joined the church in August gives the attitude clearly: "Please support them in your prayers as they enter into the many different ministries of Elmbrook."

Program. I don't know how much time and space it would take you to describe the full program of activities at your church, but there is no way that I am going to do justice to the program at Elmbrook in a paper of this size. Let me try to give you an overview.

There is first of all a heterogeneous program manifested in 60 neighborhood Bible classes meeting weekly throughout the area as far north as West Bend and west to Oconomowoc. 800 to 900 people attend these classes each week. They are all led by lay leaders. The pastor in charge of neighborhood groups organizes them, finds the leadership, and suggests helps for preparing the lessons. All one has to do is contact the church, and he will be assigned to a group meeting in his neighborhood. Sometimes, the groups in a certain area decide that they want to form a new congregation. This has resulted in Eastbrook meeting downtown and Westbrook meeting out near Delafield.

The program offerings at the church throughout the week and on Sunday morning are many. Sunday school classes and adult education classes are held during each of the three services on Sunday morning. 1500 children are enrolled in Sunday school. The adult Bible classes are different during each service, and the whole program changes quarterly. A family usually decides which class they wish to attend, such as one on Old Testament, New Testament, church history or Christian living. They then attend the service which starts before or after that time. The Sunday morning program has been described as a real religious smorgasbord, and most people stay around to take advantage of it. Bible classes, especially for women, are conducted by Jill Briscoe and others on Monday evenings for the working woman and on Thursday mornings for others. Over 500 women attend the Thursday morning session.

There are also the specialized classes. Let's take for example in the area of marriage. A non-Christian cannot get married to a Christian at Elmbrook. But all couples who wish to be married at the church (there are 2 to 3 weddings weekly) must complete an eight week course of

pre-marital instruction. They meet with Briscoe, a gynecologist, a psychologist and some financial advisors, all members of Elmbrook. After the course they contact one of the pastoral team. After he has ascertained that they both are committed Christians, a marriage date is set. In the future there are plans to establish post-marital classes, eventually subdividing that into couples married 1-5 years and others married longer, and the list goes on and on. For every phase of one's life and almost every condition in it there seems to be a special course or special program at Elmbrook.

The counseling program is also a big part of Elmbrook's activities. Every one of the pastoral team has a case load, often made up of people involved in their specialized ministries. People come from far and wide to receive counseling at Elmbrook. The two-hour study which began the Monday morning staff meeting was concerned with Christian counseling. The way the different members of the staff spoke showed that counseling was a phase of ministry that they all were regularly active in.

Finally there is the TTT (Telling the Truth) ministry which is an extension of Elmbrook's program. This ministry is separate from the church program proper and covers the tape and radio ministries and Jill Briscoe's ministry to women. All sermons delivered by Stuart Briscoe and Peter Wilkes and studies by Jill Briscoe are taped and are available for sale in the lobby. The proceeds from these sales and the sale of books from the bookstore fund the sending of free tapes to the foreign missionaries. A rather sizable library and resource center also makes Briscoe's books and tapes available.

Doctrinal Latitude and Positivism. "We never preach against the teachings of any other church except the sects," asserts Peter Wilkes. "We think there is much more to unite Christians than there is to separate them," he adds. Briscoe in Baerbock's paper stated, "We try to be middle of the road, not going into the ditch on either side. We don't want to be too strict so as to become stagnant and not so liberal so as to become indifferent. Ours is a policy of flexibility over against rigidity." The differences in doctrine concerning the sacraments were described to me as "theological niceties" which only are divisive in the life of the church. Such is the ecumenical spirit that pervades Elmbrook. And this stand is most appealing to American Christianity. I have met a Greek Orthodox person, Roman Catholics, Lutherans from the LCA and members of WELS who have said virtually the same things. At Elmbrook there are Lutherans, Catholics and Reformed; charismatics and non-charismatics; evolutionists and creationists; millennialists and non-millennialists; covenant Christians and newborn Christians; etc. There is very little "marking and avoiding" unless one of the fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith or of Christian living is ignored. All are taught to be comfortable with each other at Elmbrook.

"Comfortable" is a word I heard regularly when the people of Elmbrook discussed fellowship. One example came up at the staff meeting. One of the staff had attended an organizational meeting led by a Dr. Edwin Cole who is conducting a crusade for businessmen downtown. He is a charismatic brought in by the 700 Club. Elmbrook Church is not charismatic. But the staff member said that he felt comfortable with what the man was proposing to say. The fellowship principles of the church were stated to be that it would use and support any group whose ministry could further the work of the church. We tend to look more at the person and his confessional stand. They tend to look more at the subject matter and what he might say and see if they can in general agree with it. Although the staff discussed at length what kind, if any, official support they should give a man who might say things they could not agree with, yet they felt that if their people went, they should take a friend along as the crusade encouraged. Elmbrook would

then contact these people as prospects. Briscoe's reaction to the whole thing was that he could be "comfortable" with charismatics, and that "some folks will come to know their Savior that evening, and we don't want to be standing in the way."

Elmbrook separates between Scriptural doctrine and denominational traditions. Tradition is defined as an interpretation, not a proclamation, of what the Bible teaches. Many doctrinal differences which separate us from other church bodies would be called Lutheran tradition at Elmbrook. This, of course, includes the teachings on the sacraments. After telling my congregation all these years that the Roman Catholic Church places tradition on the same level as Scripture, it was a bit unsettling to hear myself accused of the same thing. There are many places where we confess that the Bible teaches clearly, where Elmbrook would simply shrug its shoulders and say, "Who knows?"

D. Stuart and Jill Briscoe. I did not mention Stuart Briscoe and his wife, Jill, as the main appeal at Elmbrook although many people would say they are. Although occasionally accused of forming a personality cult, Briscoe in a recent interview spoke this way about the attraction of his preaching at Elmbrook: "I'm sure it's an integral factor. I resist the thought that it's the exclusive factor. If I believed that was the case, I would, leave, because then I would be a hindrance to the well-being of the church. Somebody has defined preaching as the communication of truth through personality, and I think that we've got to be very careful to make sure that the personality itself doesn't obscure the truth being conveyed. That's the fine balance of the preacher."

Briscoe grew up in Britian, and his family was affiliated with a non-conformist group which had lay preachers. He describes his legalistic form of Christianity at that time as boring and dull. He felt God's Law to be oppressive. It was not until he discovered from the Bible that service and obedience can be a joyful experience in Christ that Christianity became "exciting" for him. At age 16 Briscoe was finished with school, and he went into the banking business. He stayed there until he was 29 years old, but he never gave up his preaching activities. In fact the demand for his preaching increased. Finally he was invited to join the Capernway Missionary Fellowship of Torchbearers which establishes Bible schools and trains evangelists in Western Europe. Briscoe said good-bye to banking and joined the Fellowship, serving as the assistant director for eleven years. Through the Fellowship he made many of his contacts in America and in nondenominational missions throughout the world.

In November of 1970 he came from England to Elmbrook. The church at the time had Baptist ties. Briscoe said that the church could not serve the Milwaukee community properly if it insisted that everybody be Baptist first. He took the church out of the Baptist denomination (not without some difficulty), and Elmbrook Community Church was born.

Jill Briscoe, formerly a teacher in Liverpool who conducted a teen ministry among the street kids there, met Stuart at Capernway. After their marriage they continued their separate ministries. Jill still has a separate, and ever growing, ministry to women of the area and the state. Her activities are part of TTT ministries so that they might have a wider appeal to the church at large. She regularly conducts or organizes weekly Bible classes, retreats and seminars.

I was not going to mention the appeal of a British accent. I felt that it might sound too much like sour grapes, until I listened to a tape of Jill Briscoe recorded at a retreat for women last year. She said, "Do you know how much Americans like a British accent. It gets me into places where I could never go otherwise. Pray for my British accent that I don't lose it." If she sees it as part of the appeal, who am I to say differently.

Resource for the Church at Large. Elmbrook sees its ministry as serving the church at large. Whether it is inviting Christian public school teachers in from all over the state to a day-long seminar or calling pastor's wives and other women to a Christian-Woman-as-Leader Seminar, the appeal is to all denominations. They wish the people taking part in their activities or using their services to view it the same way as we would reading a book or listening to a tape, or seeing a film by a teacher of another denomination. Jill Briscoe's ministry, as was stated before, was purposely separated from the church activities becoming instead a part of TTT so that women of all denomination can make use of her services without feeling they are a part of Elmbrook Church. Many people who come for counseling also are outsiders.

"We don't encourage people to become members of our church," Peter Wilkes stated. "We just are happy to be of service to them in their Christian life. Anyone who comes to us for counseling from another congregation is referred back to that congregation and its pastor. We do not wish to undermine anybody else's ministry." Of course, many who do come to Elmbrook for counseling and study do eventually join the church. This also is part of their appeal.

IV. Its Lessons

Can we learn anything from Elmbrook Community Church? I think we can. One thing is that preaching, if it is done well, has not lost its appeal. Peter Wilkes said that he was very disturbed at the trend among Lutherans to shorten up the length of sermons more and more. He said that one pastor told him that if he preached longer than 13 minutes, the senior pastor began to tap on his watch. Wilkes feels that if the preaching of the Word in Lutheran circles would be restored to the importance which Luther gave it, much that is wrong in Lutheranism today would be corrected.

Elmbrook proves that people are willing to listen to lengthy preaching. We should not have to apologize for preaching 25 to 30 minutes providing that we have that much worthwhile to say. Time must be spent drawing out the meaning of the text. Then the effort must be made to apply the text to the lives of our people. We who have God's Word in its truth and purity also ought to strive to proclaim it with meaning and power so that our people do not tire of us in 15 minutes or less.

Sanctification can never and dare never occupy the central role in our church that it does at Elmbrook, but that does not mean that we should ignore it or take it for granted either. Perhaps we should offer more classes, retreats and group studies on how to live as Christians in various aspects of our lives. People, our people, are interested in the "how to" of Christian living. We should make every effort to supply that need so that they do not have to go to other fellowships to find it.

And finally, we should expect involvement on the part of our people. Maybe one of the problems is that we preach involvement, but then do not provide the opportunities to become involved. I had one couple who were Lutherans that moved into the area and became interested in Elmbrook Church. They simply were not interested in our fellowship because our program was such that they felt they couldn't become involved in the way they wanted to.

In conclusion there is one lesson I learned while preparing this paper, and that is that you cannot effectively do your own job when you are constantly watching other people do theirs. There are some things that we can learn from a church like Elmbrook, but we are not that church nor are we in its position doctrinally or practically. To sit and stare at Elmbrook will never help us discover or cheerfully carry out what God has planned for us. None of us may have the natural abilities or charisma of a Stuart Briscoe. Our successes may not be as evident. But the Lord has

given us a rich heritage of Lutheran insight and understanding regarding the Word of God. We are to use it to bring in our sixty-fold or thirty-fold with the gifts and talents which the Lord has given us to do the job.