

A Little Lecture on Little Little-Known Lutheran Synods

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The term *little* excludes from discussion the recently formed Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches whose membership count runs into six figures. Only churches with membership rolls in five figures or less are included in this lecture.

The term *little-known* eliminates from consideration the Evangelical Lutheran Synod, the Church of the Lutheran Confession and the Protestant Conference. Supplying information about them in this gathering would be as much an exercise in the superfluous as carrying the proverbial coals to Newcastle or establishing another little Lutheran synod.

Remaining for consideration are 11 Lutheran church bodies ranging down in size from the Latvian 13,000 to the 100 some in the Eielsen Synod. They fall into these four classifications:

- I. Three Bodies with Norwegian Roots
 - A. Eielsen Synod
 - B. Association of Free Lutheran Congregations
 - C. Church of the Lutheran Brethren
- II. Three Bodies with Baltic Roots
 - A. Apostolic Lutheran Church of America
 - B. Latvian Evangelical Lutheran Church
 - C. Esthonian Evangelical Lutheran Church
- III. Two Bodies Emerging from the Synodical Conference Demise
 - A. Concordia Lutheran Conference
 - B. Lutheran Churches of the Reformation
- IV. Two Recently Formed Conservative Groupings
 - A. Conservative Lutheran Association
 - B. Evangelical Lutheran Federation

Lutheran Groups with Norwegian Roots

A. The Eielsen Synod

This is the body that is first and least: first in length of its history and least in membership count. In fact, including this church body in the ranks of present-day Lutheran synods is a risky business. If it has not yet done so, the synod could pass out of existence at any time. At last reporting, sometime ago, the Eielsen Synod was down to one pastor and some hundred members gathered in congregations that could be counted on one hand.

This is the remnant of the once numerous followers of Elling Eielsen who in 1839 brought Haugeanism and lay preaching from Norway to northern Illinois and southern Wisconsin. He served many otherwise shepherdless Norwegian immigrants. His pet peeve was organization and it extended even to the keeping of orderly minutes of meetings. His argument ran, "I have never read that Christ kept any minutes when He went about holding meetings among the people."ⁱ

When there was insistence on at least a minimum of synodical organization, strife resulted, usually over the membership requirement that "no one ought to be accepted as a member of our body, except he has passed through a genuine conversion or is on his way to a conversion."ⁱⁱⁱ There were controversies and split-offs in 1848, 1856 and 1876, the last involving the creation of the good-sized Hauge Synod.

Eielsen died in 1883 but die-hard followers struggled on despite declining membership that has continued into the present time. Dr. Schiotz, first ALC president, is supposed to have made a visit to an annual Eielsen Synod meeting. At its conclusion Schiotz asked whether there was anything at all that his big church body could do for the little Eielsen Synod. "No, thanks," said the Eielsen people. "we are getting along fine on our own as we always have." They probably still are.

B. The Association of Free Lutheran Congregations

These are the fiercely independent, anti-merger Norwegians whose roots go back to the 1870-1890 Norwegian-Danish Conference. When that church body merged with the Norwegian-Danish Synod and the Anti-Missouri Brotherhood into the United Norwegian Lutheran Church in 1890 and the college department at the Augsburg school was to be closed, a "Friends of Augsburg" association formed. In 1897 this association took the lead in forming the Lutheran Free Church. Augsburg was its school. George Sverdrup was its theological leader. Its motto was "Living Christianity in a Free Church."

When the second ALC was formed out of American Lutheran Conference members in 1960, the Lutheran Free Conference dragged its feet. Only after several extra congregational referenda, did it become part of the ALC in 1962.

Some would not, however, go along. They formed the Association of Free Lutheran Congregations and are in business today. About 60 of its 100 pastors serve some 140 congregations. The group stresses congregational independence but plays down statistical reporting and organization. Rugged individualism abounds. In the Sunday School rubric there are 4,557 pupils listed for the 126 schools. Perhaps some expert of ours in that area could venture to translate the number into church body membership count, which is not being currently supplied.

In a recent chance encounter with a clergy member of the group the writer learned that the Association is presently enjoying some growth for two reasons especially: disenchanted ALC congregations with Lutheran Free Church roots are withdrawing and finding a haven in the Association and old Suomi Synod Finns that were engulfed in the LCA merger are following the same pattern.

It may well be that the proposed 1988 merger will supply more prospective Association membership applicants. Its theological seminary in the Twin Cities that presently has some thirty students may have to expand in the near future.

C. The Church of the Lutheran Brethren

There are similarities between the Association just described and the Lutheran Brethren. There are also differences. The differences are subtle and lie chiefly in the issue of church membership. Let a Lutheran Brethren spokesman depict the nuances. In his recent book on the Church of the Lutheran Brethren, published with official blessing at Fergus Falls, Joseph Levang puts it this way:

The difference between the Lutheran Free Church [Augsburg] and the Church of the Lutheran Brethren was essentially in the concept of church membership. The Free Church accepted the unsaved into its "living congregations"; the Lutheran Brethren would not accept unbelievers into its "Biblical congregation." The Lutheran Brethren would practice church discipline to maintain its practice of a "Biblical congregation"; the difference was qualitative, not quantitative. Sverdrup and the Lutheran Free Church would not actively practice church discipline.ⁱⁱⁱ

The quotation uses past tense because it is describing the beginnings of the Church of the Lutheran Brethren at the very turn of the century. It is, however, useful in portraying the contemporary character of the Lutheran Brethren. This church body, it would seem, is consistent in outdoing all other Lutheran church bodies in an effort at a “pure” congregation, with all tares uprooted.

The essayist customarily describes the Lutheran Brethren in class lectures as the most un-Lutheran of Lutheran Church bodies because of this aspect. The insistence on a special conversion experience beyond Baptism and confirmation reminds one of practices in church bodies that are not Lutheran.

The Church of the Lutheran Brethren has its synodical headquarters at Fergus Falls. Its attractive periodical is *Faith and Fellowship*. Its 106 congregations are served by 59 of its 122 ordained ministers.

The denominational strangeness of the church body is emphatically revealed by the relation of confirmed to baptized members. The current listings have:

Bapitized members	3847
Confirmed members	6206

Three Lutheran Church Bodies with Baltic Roots

A. The Apostolic Lutheran Church of America

This is a Finnish Church. The Finnish Lutherans in the United States are very much like other national groups of the denomination in that there are sharp doctrinal divisions and distinct groupings among them. Some of the Finns, the Suomi branch, have become a part of the LCA. Another group is now in the Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod. One congregation is in fellowship with us.

The Apostolic Lutheran Church has roots in the Laestadian movement, named after the Swedish revivalist leader, Lars Laestadius. Special features were revivals, lay preaching and member-to-member confession and absolution.

In 1928 Finnish immigrants to this country with these leanings formed the Apostolic Lutheran Church in America as a fellowship of independent congregations rather than as a synod in our sense of the term. As could be expected, centralization and organization are kept to a minimum and up-to-date statistics are hard to come by.

According to the last available reports the Apostolic Lutherans number just under 10,000, 9384 to be precise. There are 64 congregations served by 36 pastors.

B. The Latvian Evangelical Lutheran Church of America

As the name implies, this is an ethnic grouping. These 13,361 Latvians prefer to keep their 61 congregations out of other church bodies, at least for the time being.^{iv} In 1957 they set up a loose federation of congregations that in 1976 transformed itself into a more centralized church body.

Some time back there were contacts between these Latvian Lutherans and our Synod. Latvians in Milwaukee, as an example, were granted the use of WELS worship facilities during their organizational stage. Eventually, however, the Latvians embarked on pathways we would not want to follow. They are now full-fledged members of the Lutheran Council in the U.S.A.

C. The Esthonian Evangelical Lutheran Church

A few differences distinguish this grouping from that of the Latvians. It was originally organized in Sweden back in the WWII year of 1944. It currently reports a shade under 8400 members gathered in 23 congregations. It does not report confirmed members and it is not yet a LCUSA member.

Two Bodies Emerging from the Synodical Conference Demise

A. The Concordia Lutheran Conference

When the Synodical Conference was coming apart at the seams in the middle years of this century tensions created threats to the existing alignments. There were no immediate problems on the left. Dissatisfaction there achieved an actual take-over of the largest Synodical Conference member synod, Missouri. Only a surprising turn-about somewhat later could effect the AELC development.

It was on the right that upheavals asserted themselves and changed the listing of Lutheran church bodies, especially in the “little” category. The first actual group break-away was the Orthodox Lutheran Conference organized in 1951, mostly by disgruntled Missourians who correctly diagnosed the malady of their church body but were less successful in prescribing the correct cure. The Orthodox Lutheran Conference would eventually disband but before its dissolution it spawned a new grouping, the Concordia Lutheran Conference.

In January 1956 the members of the Orthodox Lutheran Conference disagreed seriously enough among themselves to split over fellowship issues. A minority accused the Orthodox leaders of a waffle stand on fellowship principles and practices and went off on their own. For about a year there was a contest for the “Orthodox” designation but in 1957 the group under discussion organized under their present name.

In those years of intense intramural debate within the Wisconsin Synod over the issue of continuing the Synodical Conference fellowship, some who grew impatient found their way into the Concordia Lutheran Conference. But such additions were few and far between and the Conference has remained small.

According to the latest available reports there are 6 congregations, 6 pastors and 325 members. A theological seminary operates in the Chicago area when there are students. A recent issue of the Conference periodical carried the notice that Pastor Luedtke had lost his membership in the group for holding to a church-ministry position that is like ours.^v

B. Lutheran Churches of the Reformation

The plural in the title is essential. The LCR is determined to uphold the independence of the local congregations that hold membership in the federation. The federation itself is viewed as a service organization to assist congregations and their ministers in developing a sense of fellowship and purity of doctrine and practice.

Since the 1964 organization, which brought together conservatives protesting developments in Missouri and remnants of the defunct Orthodox Lutheran Conference, the body has had its ups and downs. For a decade the strong stand for the “Old Missouri” position won followers. Efforts at fellowship with the Wisconsin Synod were made but floundered on an extreme “local congregation and pastor of the local congregation” view point.

Worst of all for the church body, the overly energetic espousal of congregational independence seemed to invite dissension and strife, protest and withdrawal. The count of congregations and pastors dwindled. The study center at Shepherd, Michigan, had to close its doors recently.

The latest roster printed in the church periodical, *One Accord* lists 10 member congregations and 3 associated congregations. Statistics admittedly not current show a membership total of 650. One of the seven listed pastors was previously in our church body. It is reported that a recent addition to the clergy roll is the controversial Pastor Kinery. Mention should be made of the church body’s mission effort in Nigeria.

Two Recently Formed Conservative Groupings

A. Conservative Lutheran Association

The Conservative Lutheran Association is the youngest church body being given attention. It was organized two years ago by ALC conservatives after the expulsion of Central Lutheran in Tacoma by the ALC because it had on its clergy staff a Faith Lutheran seminary graduate who lacked official clergy credentials. A recent issue of the periodical *Lutherans Alert* lists 7 member congregations and three additional "mission churches."^{vi} These congregations stretch from the West Coast to Alabama and from Texas and Louisiana to Canada. Statistics for 1981 credit these congregations with 2,287 members. Central Lutheran in Tacoma accounts for a good chunk of this total.

The members of the Conservative Lutheran Association hope to grow in the next few years as the ALC moves more closely to the LCA. Their cause is the cause of conservatism and it should attract at least some ALC congregations that still have a strong enough sense of their theological roots to make the pathway into the proposed Lutheran superchurch impossible to follow.

B. Evangelical Lutheran Federation

For obvious reasons, the alphabetical abbreviation of the denomination should be supplied with the periods that are customarily omitted in such shorthand. Without periods, however, the abbreviated designation makes sense. This church body is small. There are six congregations with a total membership in three figures, probably near 500. The church body is young. It organized in 1977.

Geographically, the Evangelical Lutheran Federation is far from elflike. Congregations of the Federation are scattered in such states as Washington and New York, Indiana and Ohio. The six congregations are tied together tightly in the matter of their conservative theological stance but loosely in the matter of polity. To protect congregational autonomy, all convention resolutions affecting the local congregations are submitted to them for approval by referendum. At conventions there are two lay delegates for every pastor delegate.

The most recent convention, held last fall at the congregation of President E.C. Dobberstein in Washington, voted to seek fellowship with Missouri and to use its schools for pastor training. At the same time the E.L.F. withdrew its official approval of Faith Evangelical Lutheran Seminary, a school closely identified with Tacoma's Central Lutheran and the Conservative Lutheran Association.

This break between E.L.F. and CAL appears to be over "position of the lodge." The October 18, 1982 issue of *Lutheran Perspective* quotes President Dobberstein as explaining the difference by asserting that his church body's policy is "to exclude" while the Faith Seminary position "is to speak but not to exclude."^{vii} The conflict appears to be a delayed replay of what occurred when the General Council was forming in the late 1860's. Then, too, lodge membership merited consideration in the debate over the "Four Points" and both sides in the debate presented conservative claims and credentials and disapproved of lodge membership. Then, too, the one side chose to operate with an "educative," the other side with a "disciplinary" approach.

To round off this report, mention could be made of an International Lutheran Fellowship with an imposing name but not so imposing statistics. Three pastors serve some 300 members in three congregations. Beyond this, little information about the International Lutheran Fellowship is available.

Finally, there are about a dozen independent pastors and congregations listed in the LCUSA statistics. Some of these independent congregations are on the large size, for the eleven congregations report a total membership of 4000.

To keep matters in perspective, a look at the composite of this portraits of little, little-known Lutheran groupings may be in place. The total of baptized members is in the neighborhood of 60,000 found in 440 congregations. Ranked by size, the Latvians and the Association of Free Lutheran Congregations hold the top spots. On the other end of the scale are the Evangelical Lutheran Federation, the International Lutheran Fellowship and the Concordia Lutheran Conference. There is just about as much variance in theological stance, with a spread that ranges again from the Latvians in LCUSA to the Church of the Lutheran Brethren and the Apostolic Lutheran Church of America.

ⁱ E. Clifford Nelson and Eugene L. Fevold, *The Lutheran Church Among Norwegian- Americans*, Vol. I, 1825-1890 (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1960), p.127. Hereafter cited as Nelson Fevold.

ⁱⁱ Nelson-Fevold, pp.337-338.

ⁱⁱⁱ Joseph H. Levang, *The Church of the Lutheran Brethren* (Fergus Falls, Minnesota: Lutheran Brethren Publishing Company, 1980), p.34-35.

^{iv} The statistics supplied by the LCUSA are for 1981.

^v *Concordia Lutheran*, Nov.-Dec. 1982, p.107. The notice quotes a resolution of the Conference's 31st Annual Conference held last June at Lebanon, Oregon.

^{vi} *Lutherans Alert*, September 1982, p.21.

^{vii} *Lutheran Perspective*, October 18, 1982,