

Our Kind of Church

By Fred Toppe

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Twelve years ago, in January of 1983, at the 500th anniversary of the birth of Martin Luther, I gave a conference paper entitled “Our Kind of People.” The paper dealt with the Lutheran Church as it is developing in these closing decades of the twentieth century. What occasioned the direction of this paper were these figures: first, from a book on the papacy, that for the first time since the Reformation Lutherans in Germany are outnumbered by Roman Catholics; second, from the World Christian Encyclopedia, that Lutherans no longer are the largest Protestant group, for their position has been taken over by the Pentecostals; and third, from “A Profile of WELS Lutherans,” the conclusion that our Synod is an exceptionally homogeneous group with a 90% Northern European background. How much we deal with “Our Kind of People” in our Synod, and how observable it is that in our Synod and among the other Lutheran churches of the world we are running out of our kind of people.

Although Christianity is growing around the world, especially in non-European areas, so that by the year 2000 only 40% of Christians will be of European background, the Lutheran churches of the world have not been growing, neither in this country nor in Europe, and today less than 10% of all Lutherans in the world do not have a northern European ethnic background. Even the Lutheran churches in such countries as Brazil, Argentina, Australia, and South Africa are predominantly European. Our missionaries in Brazil find difficulty in using the name Lutheran because the immediate perception is that we serve only the German population of that country. In the United States Lutherans reached a high of 4.6% of the total population in 1960, but we declined to 3.4% by 1990. As I gave the paper in 1983 our WELS membership was still increasing, but as we have all seen, in the past decade our growth has stopped and we are seeing a continuing decline in the membership of our Synod. We also are running out of our kind of people.

The paper dealt with the challenge facing us, can we move beyond our kind of people before we run out of our kind of people? In 1981 only 1% of our membership had a non-European background (according to the “Profile of WELS Lutherans”). Could we increase our outreach to non-Europeans? Could we keep non-Europeans in our congregations? Our Synod has increased its “cross-cultural” work and has given this challenge a great visibility, and not only in the Milwaukee area. I know that during my years in Kimberly I baptized and confirmed a Cuban, a Puerto Rican, and an Okinawan. Yet I still wonder if during the past fifteen years our WELS membership has increased much past the 1% non-European Synod membership.

It is difficult to assimilate into our churches those who do not share our northern European heritage and our industrious Germanic outlook on life. In my paper I asked, “Would we start a mission in Baton Rouge without a nucleus of ‘our kind of people’ to give it a start, or in Quebec City, or San Francisco, or New York City?” Since that time we did start a mission in Baton Rouge to serve our kind of people who had moved there.¹ We tried in New York City (Brooklyn and Manhattan), but the missions soon folded. We haven’t attempted missions in San Francisco or Quebec City, or in any place where we do not have a community of our kind of people.

In my paper I asked, could we change the mindset of our church so that we would see mission work not as the domain of home and world missionaries but as a function of all congregations and of all members in our congregations. I concluded: “Here, I think, is the direction in which we need to look, to the mission not of professionals, not of the clergy, not to the missionaries sanctioned by boards, but to the mission of all of us. ...It is in regaining a personal sense of responsibility for the souls of our neighbors that we will be able to move in our congregations beyond ‘our kind of people’ and that we will more vigorously pursue God’s command to ‘preach the Gospel to all creation’.”

¹ In recent years this congregation has reached into its local community and today its membership is half northern and half local.

In the past fifteen years we have seen a great increase in the evangelism emphasis of our Synod. At our seminary we added courses in outreach and called a world missionary to the faculty. We called mission counselors to help mission congregations do better work. In circuit and conference meetings, in workshops and publications, we have emphasized personal and congregational outreach. Many congregations began outreach programs with boards and committees encouraging the mission mindset of the people. Programs like GO-89 and GO-90 enhanced our commitment to outreach. More and more of our members have made themselves available for the ministry of our church, so that we have the workers we need to reach a wider population.

And yet, in spite of all of this emphasis and fervor, in spite of the cross-cultural sensitivity, in spite of an aggressive outreach campaign that has added sixty congregations to our Synod in the last decade, in spite of special programs of support for our Synod's work, in spite of all this, our Synod has stopped growing. We are literally running out of our kind of people.

In the years since I wrote "Our Kind of People," I have come to realize that there is another factor at work in the life of our Lutheran Church, one that I will call "Our Kind of Church." From the very beginning of Lutheranism, questions were raised, what is our kind of church, and in the answers to that question lies another dimension to the question, what is the destiny of the Lutheran Church, and of our Synod, as we enter the twenty-first century?

PART ONE: DEFINING OUR KIND OF CHURCH

The struggle to define our kind of church began almost as soon as the Reformation was underway. As territory after territory joined the Lutheran cause, some consensus had to be reached, what the church is. Bainton reports that Luther briefly considered our concept of a free church, a church of those who confessed Christ and gathered together in a particular community, but "practical difficulties... in his judgment were insuperable, and by 1526 he declared his dream to be impossible."² Lutheranism rather chose to continue the territorial church concept of the Catholic era, with the proviso that each territory was free to designate its own confession and each citizen was free to migrate to the territory and the church of his choice. Within a few years the concept of the territorial church that comprised the entire community was the principle that governed European Lutheranism, as it has continued to do so even to this present day.

The first challenge to this kind of church came from the Anabaptists. They were not as pessimistic as Luther about the ability of individual Christians to gather as a congregation. Indeed they were convinced that the church only was the church if all of its members specifically confessed their allegiance to Christ, which was then symbolized by believer's (adult) baptism. The Anabaptists felt it was an abomination that the protesting churches simply transferred the population from Catholic to Lutheran or Zwinglian. The church must be pure, through a careful control of its membership, a control of those who enter the church through a specific profession of faith, and a control of those who may remain members by following the rules of the congregation. Luther and others in the orthodox churches wrote vigorously and often against the Anabaptists and their charges. Lutherans insisted that the marks of the church are not the piety of its members nor their professions of faith, but the means of grace, the Gospel in word and sacrament that creates faith in the God who forgives sin through His Son and that creates Christian piety by the working of that same word in the hearts of those who hear it. Luther, write Kittelson, condemned the Anabaptists as destroyers of the true church "precisely because they would allow no sinners to be part of it."³ Luther understood very well that the church, like each individual member of it, is both saint and sinner, and that no amount of sectarian separation item the territorial church

² *Here I Stand*, p. 311, and Bainton's entire discussion in the Chapter.

"The Church Territorial." See also the chapter on "To Build a Church" in Kittelson, *Luther the Reformer*, and his references to Luther's introduction to "The German Mass" of 1526. There Luther describes a congregation in which people would gather voluntarily to hear the Word, admonish each other, pray, collect alms for the poor and banish the impenitent from their midst. But then Luther concluded, "I neither care nor desire to begin such a congregation ...for I do not have the people or persons for it, not enough in all of Saxony."

³ Kittelson, *Luther the Reformer*, p. 243.

could produce a church free from all sinners. No, said Lutheranism, the church is for saint and sinner, for strong and for weak Christians, a church for the whole community.

The second challenge to the territorial church came during the Pietist controversies of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The Pietists were reacting against the territorial church's weakness of having an inclusive membership. If everybody in the community is a Christian, what does it mean to be a Christian? Not just Lutherans were asking that question, but also Catholics (Jansenism) and Anglicans (Methodism and Puritanism) and others.

Spener and Francke are the two names most associated with German Lutheran Pietism. They were insistent that we should not only preach right doctrine, for we must also live right doctrine. The Pietists found it easy to point to a laxity of standards among the members of the territorial church. They called for a return to a stricter Christian living and they also called for the serious minded to gather together around the word (conventicles) apart from the means of grace offered through the local congregation. Though these gatherings developed as Bible classes, in time they became the point of separation between serious and ordinary Christian. Rather than speaking of the objective marks of the church, the Pietists had become concerned with their subjective response to those marks, to the experience of conversion and to a discernible growth in sanctification. Justification was replaced with sanctification and sanctification was replaced with methodism. The cry for orthodox theology was replaced with the cry for orthodox living.

Like the Anabaptists before them, the Pietists became convinced that the true church cannot be territorial. And like their Reformation forefathers before them, the orthodox writers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries affirmed that the church cannot be the gathering of the spiritually elite but must encompass the wider flock of strong and weak, of saint and sinner.

The third challenge to the territorial church was the establishment of the United States as a nation of religious liberty and therefore of religious pluralism, though with a decidedly Protestant character. When the Lutherans came to this country, they found themselves in a bewildering environment, and they had to develop answers to questions like organizing themselves, funding their congregations, and training pastors. Very often the model the Lutherans chose to follow was the example of the Protestant churches around them. Increasingly the question for Lutherans in America became this, do we still try to maintain our Lutheranism in this new land, or do we join the Protestant mainstream?⁴

The Lutherans in the former Colonies increasingly came under the influence of the Protestants around them, especially as the Lutherans turned to the English language for their ministry and their worship. Protestant hymns and liturgies, Protestant revivalism, Protestant emphases (legalism, modernism, millennialism, especially American triumphalism), even Protestant theology were appropriated by Lutherans in America during the first half of the nineteenth century. As Lutheran worship and theology and even the Lutheran Confessions virtually disappeared from the churches in America, it became increasingly difficult to answer the questions, what it meant to be a Lutheran, or why even continue to be a Lutheran.

The apogee of the Americanization of Lutheranism came in the Definite Platform of 1855, authored by Simon Schmucker, Mr. Lutheran in America during the second quarter of the nineteenth century, since he was founder and president of the first Lutheran Seminary in America at Gettysburg and he was also the president and the leading voice of the General Council. The Definite Platform was anything but definite or Lutheran, and if it would have been adopted and followed, Lutheranism in American would have disappeared as it blended into American Protestantism.

Even as the drive for American Lutheranism was reaching its peak, an opposing force was gathering strength. Led by the Old Lutherans who had resisted the merger of Reformed and Lutheran in Prussia, these newly arriving Germans and Scandinavians explicitly rejected any Americanization of their church and sought rather to recreate, as much as possible, the theology, the worship, and the community of the historic Lutheran territorial church. Very deliberately these newly arriving Lutherans separated themselves from the American religious mainstream. Led by men like Krauth, Grabau, Loehe, and especially Walther, American Lutheranism

⁴ For a good overview of this struggle see *Lutherans in Crisis*, David Gustafson.

took an abrupt and massive about face and returned to its roots. The Lutheran Confessions were again the basis for clerical and congregational membership in the many synods. The Lutheran emphasis on Word and Sacrament was restored. The languages of Europe were mandated to safeguard the new church against the Protestant milieu. Parochial schools were established to bring Lutheranism to succeeding generations.

Because of the great influx of immigrants from the Lutheran lands of Europe, Lutheranism exploded in America during the century following the Civil War, rising from 1.2% of the American population in 1860 to 4.6% in 1960. Where the Lutheran immigrants settled in the townships and villages and cities of this country, they built their churches in their midst and established distinctive Lutheran enclaves around them. From the neighborhood around St. Andrew's Church on Chicago's South Side to Forest Township east of Fond du Lac to villages like Princeton and Markesan, the Lutheran territorial church reestablished itself in America (as well as in other immigrant destination countries). Mission work for Lutheranism during this entire era was a matter of locating the ethnic settlements and then gathering in our kind of people to establish new congregations. For a century in our history, to the end of the Second World War, whether in Milwaukee or in the Dakotas, this was how the WELS did its mission work.⁵

Only recently, during the last generation, have we begun to face a fourth challenge to the question, what does it mean to the Lutheran Church? The Lutheran enclaves began to break down as succeeding generations became increasingly Americanized and moved away from the Lutheran territories. The church had to follow them as they moved into suburbs or to the Sun Belt and the West Coast. But as we followed them, as we and other Lutheran bodies expanded in this country, we discovered that we could no longer recreate Lutheran enclaves and that our kind of people were increasingly mixed in with the general population of our country. No longer could we make the appeal to ethnic loyalty or to loyalty to the community. We became only one of many voices in the community, Lutheran voices trying to keep our members through appeals to confessional loyalty and also trying to gather other people to join us around the pure word of God. Instead of calling new churches St. Mathew or St. Paul, even St. Katherine, as in the old country, we called them Divine Word or Risen Savior or Redeemer.

The struggle to maintain a Lutheran identity has been largely lost among the liberal Lutherans. They have been more than willing to return to the American Lutheranism espoused by their ancestors over a century ago. To them our kind of church is only an historic tradition within the ecumenical community of the Judeo-Christian heritage.

But among confessional Lutherans the struggle to maintain our Lutheran identity is still intense. We ask ourselves, how can we keep our people in our kind of church and still reach out to others to involve them in our fellowship? Increasingly what were seen as the strengths of our church have become regarded as liabilities. Our liturgical services, our doctrinal hymns, our concern for pure doctrine, our confessional integrity, all these became seen as barriers that kept us from effectively serving our communities. The church growth materials of the Protestant churches were studied and many Lutherans came to the conclusion, we have to change our kind of church, Americanize it, to be an effective church in this time and place. The church must get rid of its historic worship practices and its nineteenth century theology and its narrowly drawn confessionalism if it is to effectively reach our society and survive into the next century.⁶

We should not think that this challenge is not affecting us and our Synod. When we look at recent defections from our Synod in the Twin Cities and Taiwan and Florida and Bulgaria the common denominator is the contention that the Lutheran Church, our Lutheran Church, must change if it is to do the Lord's work. The

⁵ And did a good job! The decades of highest growth rate in our Synod were the thirties and the forties, not the sixties and seventies, as many have supposed. If we had the same growth in the eighties as we did in the thirties, we would have increased by 130,000 members instead of the actual 13,000. For more insight read "A Statistical Analysis of Trends in the WELS," Robert Meiselwitz, Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, 1980.

⁶ A recent listing of features of the with-it church include liturgical dance, hugs among the members, mini-dramas, song leaders, multiple readers of the lessons, applause and laughter during the service, a minister wandering around the church during the sermon, also the choir at times, personal testimonies, etc. (*Leadership*, Spring, 1995, Lyle Schaller)

kinds of questions before us were well-summarized in a letter to the Readers Forum in the September, 1993, “Northwestern Lutheran:”

The WELS mission as we now practice it is to preserve doctrinal purity, keep separate from anything judged to be impure, educate our children to keep the tradition going, and support collective and institutional (rather than personal) ministry and evangelism.

The membership numbers tell us it is time to change. Our mission should be to develop a personal walk with the Lord and a personal ministry, witnessing the gospel to everyone with whom we come into contact, and ministering to fellow human beings.

Bible study, Christian education, and daily prayer are necessities for fulfilling the mission. The objective is not to increase membership, but to develop committed Christians who are fired up to serve and witness.

What is the answer? Must we limit our church to the truly converted as the Anabaptists would direct us, or should we redefine our Lutheranism in the model of the Pietists, or must we abandon our Lutheran Church as the Americanizers would show us? Must we change our Lutheran church in order to save it, or by changing it will we lose it? What is the Lutheran Church? What is our kind of church? We have to answer in our time just as the Reformers had to answer in the sixteenth century and the Orthodox Lutherans in the eighteenth century and the Confessional Lutherans in the nineteenth century.

PART TWO: WHAT KIND OF CHURCH ARE WE?

When our forefathers came to this country, they faced the challenge of establishing the Lutheran Church in an environment that tolerated all religions but supported none. Our forefathers had to deal with issues that were not a concern in their previous experience with the territorial church. In his book *The Lutheran Church under American Influence*,⁷ Paul Spaude listed the challenges they faced: the form of church government, including lay involvement in the church’s organization and mission; reaching out to the world around them; funding the church’s work; relations with other churches; acceptance of the English language and culture; Sunday Schools or parochial schools.

The Lutherans who came to the Midwest beginning in the 1840’s made the deliberate choice of keeping their Lutheran distinctiveness by establishing a church that would both promote and perpetuate their faith. In the enclaves in which they settled they worked hard at maintaining their heritage, establishing parochial schools in the larger congregations and catechism schools in the smaller congregations to thoroughly indoctrinate their young. They emphasized the leadership of the pastors, with their emphasis on doctrinal concerns.⁸ Congregation members “taxed” themselves to provide these programs and leaders on both the local and synodical levels. What essentially happened was that the Lutheran Church in America reestablished the territorial churches of Europe through Lutheran enclaves scattered among the Yankees. Yet today the bulk of our Synod’s membership consists of the remains of these settlements.

At times we have resisted being a territorial church. We have thought that we should make ourselves more like American churches to be more effective in our work. We should organize our congregations the way they do, we should involve ourselves in our communities the way they do, we should evangelize the way they do, we should even finance our work the way they do. But every time we sought to have more evangelical style, we ended up having less Lutheran substance. Lutheran churches willing to become more evangelical find themselves asking questions like these: do we keep our Lutheran liturgy and hymns and our church music? Do we preach theological, law-gospel sermons? Do we insist on full confessional agreement before uniting in communion or in other fellowship? Do we even give up the name Lutheran? In the churches of ELCA and

⁷ Lutheran Literacy Board, Burlington, Iowa, 1943.

⁸ Only at our most recent Synod convention did we reverse this pattern and give the laity a vote equal to the clergy. We may not have used the term, but we have continued to function as a ministerium.

increasingly among churches of the LCMS it is increasingly difficult finding any Lutheran distinctiveness. Evangelical style destroys Lutheran substance.

Those who have been confessional Lutherans have steadfastly resisted being like the tree churches around them, primarily because doctrine is important to us. Being Lutheran is not a matter of a discardable tradition and heritage but of an irreplaceable theology. We insist that our clergy and our members learn and commit themselves to the teachings of our church before they can join us or function among us. We insist that our members live according to that confession if they are to continue in fellowship with us. Several years ago our mission boards were intrigued with the method of church planting that had become prominent in the LCA, the new mode mission. After months of canvassing the community for prospects, a kick-off service is held to gather together a new congregation from the community. This approach worked for us in communities like Appleton and Ashwaubenon where we have a strong WELS presence on which we could draw, but this approach didn't meet with much success in areas there are minimal numbers of confessional Lutherans. We are not, we never have been, nor will our confessional theology allow us to be a community church in which people with a variety of religious persuasions mingle. We want our members to be Lutheran members.

Our theology doesn't only define what we believe, it also determines how we practice our faith. Our liturgical services are not only one of different options available to us, but they are a manifestation of our emphasis on the objective means of grace in which the Gospel is freely presented to all. We do not seek decisive moments of personal commitment, for it is baptism and the word which bring a new generation into the fellowship of the church through the bestowal of God's grace and faith. Our sermons and teaching are not a continuing commentary on the means to be more worthy of God but an objective presentation of the grace of God given to us in the face of His Son, a grace that accepts us in our sins. We discipline not because someone has sinned and failed to measure up to the standards of righteous behavior but because they have given up their faith and left the communion of the saints. We confirm not those whom we expect to be faithful members over the years but all who have been instructed in the word and have indicated their acceptance of it. In our kind of church we remember that all of us are saints and sinners, that all of us sin grievously in our own ways, that none of us has the right understanding of all theology, and that ours ever should be, every must be a church of sinners and that we will never be the "pure" church that the Anabaptists and their descendants in the free churches have envisioned.⁹

When we understand what kind of church we are, then we can understand where our strength lies as a church. Where we most continue the heritage of the territorial church, there we have the strongest church. Where we are least like the territorial church, there we are a weaker church. In those communities where we have a long Lutheran presence that has been serving the people through the generations, and in those congregations where we can do the most to indoctrinate the next generation through Lutheran grade schools and especially through Lutheran high schools,¹⁰ there our church has its greatest strength and potentially its greatest growth. But the absence of even one of these elements decidedly weakens our church. Read through the Synod statistical report and note the general validity of this observation. Areas with a long Lutheran presence but without Lutheran schools have a noticeably lower level of attendance as the next generation declines in its commitment to our church. Congregations in areas without our Lutheran presence, even larger congregations with day schools and vigorous programs of outreach, find it much more difficult to attract and keep those who are not our kind of people. And congregations with a minimal Lutheran heritage and a limited program find it very difficult to become rooted in their community and reach out to the unchurched.

⁹ When you read in the Reformers, for example, Melancthon's *Loci*, one is struck by how the presentation speaks about the church as something visible, the gathering of people around the means of grace. The invisible quality of the church is the hiddenness of who has a true faith and is really a member of the church. These Reformers saw it as Anabaptist thinking if it was said that we could have a pure church without any unbelievers, for as Jesus said, in this world the good plants and the weeds are mixed together.

¹⁰ Numerous recent studies of individual congregations give the same findings; we hold on to approximately one third of our Lutheran grade school graduates, but two-thirds of our Lutheran high school graduates, compared to a tenth of those without Lutheran schooling. Copies of these studies are available through our Synod's Board for Parish Services.

After a generation of mission outreach across our country, a study of our growth from 1938 to 1983 revealed that of the communicant growth of 144,383 during those 45 years, 21% of that growth came through the congregations of the four new districts (SA, NA, SC, AZ) plus the Colorado mission district, a growth of 119 communicants for each of the 251 congregations. But 26% of the growth came in the largest 100 congregations of the Synod, almost all in the Synod's heartland, an average of 358 for each of those congregations, even allowing for the often drastic decline in the size of inner city congregations. And 53% of the growth came in the remaining 843 congregations, an average of 93 a congregation.

In the past thirty years (1963-1993) the Winnebago Conference (allowing for changes in conference boundaries) has increased from 10,800 to 13,406 communicants, a total increase of 2,666, which can be compared to the membership of the North Atlantic district at 3,603, or of the South Central District at 4,053. And we added only two new congregations to serve all this growth. And all the while we have been sending out many members who have become foundations in the congregations in the more distant districts.

What is our kind of church? In the past, in the present, and I feel, into the future as well, our strength rests in those situations in which we most closely approximate the territorial churches of Europe and have both a concentration of our members and the ability to firmly indoctrinate them into our confessional theology.

PART THREE: WHAT IS THE FUTURE FOR OUR KIND OF CHURCH?

The days are long past when we could hang out a sign, we are a German church, and they would come. The days are past when we could say, we are a German Lutheran church, and they would come. The days are past when we could say, we are a confessional German Lutheran church, and they would come. The distinctiveness of culture and language that once drew people to us no longer matters in our thoroughly Americanized communities. And the confessionalism that was drawing in refugees from other Lutheran churches only a few decades ago is now seen by Lutherans of other synods as narrow-minded extremism. Those in Reformed and Catholic churches who have spent this last generation in an environment of doctrinal laxity have no appreciation for our Scriptural concerns. Conservative churches may be growing, but confessional churches are not. Something in the American mind hates anyone telling them what to think or believe.

What will be the source of our new members in the twenty-first century? They won't be German immigrants looking for a church. They won't be confessional Lutherans still looking for a faithful church. They won't be church shoppers looking for a contemporary church. Rather they will be people in the communities where we have a strong presence, where our church is known and appreciated for the Christian faith and life of our members. They will come where we have intense programs of Christian education in which our young learn what they have and care enough about it to bring others into their faith. They will come and stay where they have the encouragement and support of family members and friends and coworkers who also belong to our congregations. Growth will come where we are most present, where we have the most strength, not where our churches have a minimal presence.

Since we have reached the point of establishing a strategic network of congregations in areas to which our people move, a network we had to establish after our break with the LCMS, is it not now time to return to our former program of emphasizing mission work and growth in the areas of our greatest strength, in areas where we already have many existing points of contact with the unchurched? Should not existing congregations in the Midwest be more vigorous in establishing programs and staff to work in their own communities, and should not the mission boards do more to help them with training programs and with investments of workers and loans? Would the fifteen vicars assigned to "mission" congregations this year find more fruitful labor in congregations like ours? Or is it valid mission work only if it is not in the Midwest and only if it carried out through "mission" congregations? Not only must we do more to awaken our members to mission-mindedness, but we must help them to see that the mission fields white for the harvest are all around us here, among the vast numbers of people in our communities who are growing up scripturally illiterate and spiritually deadened. It is the mission work of congregations like ours that will determine the future growth of our Synod.

We are a confessional church, a Bible church, a faithful Lutheran church. The more we try to change that, the less we will be what we are. But the more we try to be faithful to what we are, the less we will be appreciated the society around us. You will have your own conclusions about the destiny of our church during the next century. But as you draw your conclusions, this you must keep in mind what kind of church we are, for what we are determines what we will be.

God help us to be faithful to the responsibility and the opportunity He lays before us.