

HISTORICAL SURVEY  
OF THE  
FINNISH LUTHERAN CHURCHES  
IN AMERICA

Paper presented at the Lake Superior Pastor-Teacher Conference  
North Wisconsin District  
Peshtigo, Wisconsin  
April 11, 1978

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# HISTORICAL SURVEY OF THE FINNISH LUTHERAN CHURCHES IN AMERICA

## I. Old World Origins

### A. Background of Finnish Immigration

Finnish immigration, which began about 1870<sup>\*</sup>, was basically the consequence of severe famines in Finland in the 1860's. Not a single instance of emigration from Finland because of religious persecution or for religious convictions has come to the writer's attention. By the latter half of the 19th century the state church of Finland had become a theologically "broad" church, including rationalistic, pietistic, and orthodox factions under its wings<sup>\*\*</sup>.

During the 19th century Finland was a puppet state of Russia, ruled by a governor appointed by the Czar. Emigration was apparently viewed by the Czarist government as an oblique protest against the Czarist regime. Government officials, pastors, newspaper writers, etc. all tried to discourage emigration. The emigrants were called traitors, irresponsible adventurers, and moral degenerates<sup>1</sup>. As the emigrant departed, he experienced a degree of bitterness between himself and the institutions of Finnish society, such as the church. This made the task of ministering to Finnish immigrants in America extremely difficult.

### B. The Laestadian Movement

By far the greatest number of emigrants were from the northern provinces of Vaasa and Oulu, and also from the neighboring Overtornea region of Sweden. A revival movement originating in this area was to play a large part in shaping Finnish Lutheranism in America.

The Laestadian revival or awakening started in the Kaaresuvanto parish, the northernmost parish of the state church of Sweden.<sup>2,3</sup> The harsh climate of this barren, treeless region was surpassed only by the harsh, spiritually barren lives of the people of Swedish Lapland. The Lapps lived in drunkenness and immorality. The pastor of the Kaaresuvanto parish, Lars Levi Laestadius, carried out a conventional ministry. However, beginning in 1832, a series of tragedies - serious illness, the death of his favorite child, depression, bouts with alcoholism - led eventually to

\* excepting Finns in the Swedish settlements on the lower Delaware River in the 17th century, and Finns in early Alaska

\*\* For an excellent account, see Erickson, Erick E., "A History of Lutheranism in Finland", The Faithful Word 10, No. 1 (1973)

spiritual awakening. As a result of these trials Laestadius claimed to have visions, and became a John the Baptist to the Lapps, roundly denouncing the sins of the people, but passionately pointing to the wounds of Christ. The revival spread to neighboring regions of Norway and Finland. Among the largely illiterate Lapps the revivals were marked by trances, raptures, and visions. Areas without pastoral leadership saw extreme fanaticism take hold, with men identifying themselves with Christ, women leaving their husbands to become "apostle's wives", and unbelievers molested and even murdered.

The successor to Laestadius as leader of the movement was a lay preacher, Juhani Raatamaa, who had gone through struggles with alcohol, and had had a conversion experience similar to that of Laestadius. Raatamaa gave to the movement an organizational structure, and many of its peculiar doctrinal emphases.

The Laestadian or Apostolic Lutheran movement came to have the following peculiar doctrines:

- 1) To be a Christian one must receive personal absolution of sins from another Christian.
- 2) Only those who have received this personal absolution of sins constitute the true Church.
- 3) As the true Church, they alone have the power and authority from Christ to forgive sins.

This circular reasoning established the Laestadian doctrine of the Church - that the Holy Christian Church is none other than the Laestadian movement. Those not belonging to the movement were, ipso facto, not Christians. The subsequent splintering of the Laestadian movement naturally led to each faction identifying itself as the Holy Christian Church.

After the deaths of Laestadius and Raatamaa, problems of authority and leadership immediately appeared. The Kaaresuvanto congregation claimed authority to decide spiritual questions, and designated themselves the "first born", since the revival had started in their midst. A lay preacher in the Gellivaara district announced that Raatamaa had appointed him the new leader of the Laestadian "congregation". The Gellivaara or "Western" Laestadians were opposed in this by people in the next valley to the east, the "Eastern" or Tornio valley Laestadians, who called themselves "Old-Laestadians". And so it went. The conflict over Raatamaa's mantle led to a full-blown doctrine of apostolic succession with claims as extravagant as those of the Roman church. Hence the name "Apostolic Lutherans".

\*They cite Zechariah 6:8 as "proof" of their doctrine of apostolic succession

Other peculiar doctrines of the Laestadians are

- 4) The written word is powerless to convey forgiveness of sins and create faith. Even the Bible needs oral proclamation to be an effective Means of Grace.
- 5) The Laestadians reject the "Third use of the Law", as taught by the Formula of Concord. They claim that Moses' Law is of no use to the Christian, only Christ's Law.

In spite of many tensions with the authorities, the Laestadian movement in Finland remained a part of the state church. Laestadians in Finland attend and receive Communion at state church altars, but also, and more frequently, meet in their own conventicles to practice their Laestadianism.<sup>\*\*\*</sup>

## II. Beginnings of Finnish Lutheranism in America

### A. The Laestadians

The first Finnish Lutheran congregation in the United States was Laestadian, and its founding came about in this way.<sup>2,3</sup> On Quincy Hill, above Hancock, Michigan, a number of Laestadians had settled and had joined a Norwegian Lutheran congregation\*. The pastor, H. Roernaes, was mystified by the activities of the Laestadians at their separate conventicles, and was antagonized by their cool attitude towards him. Roernaes attempted to discipline the Laestadians by banning them from Holy Communion\*\*. His action only succeeded in bringing about a wholesale withdrawal of the Laestadians from the congregation, and the founding, in 1871, of the first separate Finnish Apostolic Lutheran congregation in the world.

The worship services of the Laestadians were often characterized by an extreme emotionalism, called "liikutukset" in Finnish. A description of their activities has been given by a daughter of Rev. Nils E. Boe, who was pastor of the Norwegian Lutheran Church in Calumet from 1873 to 1879:<sup>4</sup>

"Father also had a Finnish sect working against him with might and main. This sect was called Laestadians, and had sprung up in Finland some twenty years before. Its members were extremely fanatical, claiming that no one could be saved who did not share their faith. Everyone else would go to hell, they said. If a woman wore a hat or any kind of finery she was fit for hell only. Their meetings were fearfully rowdy, as rowdy as those of the holy rollers, whom they resembled a great deal. They would dance around wildly, jump over chairs and other obstacles, clap their hands and shout "Hi-ho, hi-ho!" Because of this they were often

\*Norwegians were among the earliest settlers in the Copper Country. Congregations affiliated with the Hauge Synod were established in Hancock, Quincy Hill, and Calumet. The Hancock congregation disbanded in 1918, and the Calumet congregation was defunct by about 1960.

\*\*According to one account, Roernaes overheard one Finn approaching the Communion table tell another, "Now I must take my portion from the devil".

\*\*\*It is estimated that the Laestadian movement within the state church of Finland has about 200,000 followers.

called "Hiholites". In their ecstasy some would fall to the floor, but the others kept right on going - shouting, singing, and jumping over the fallen ones in their mad dance. All but this was their religious service. And they claimed to be Lutherans at that! This sect was so bitter against Father all the years he was in Calumet that its members could have murdered him. When they met him on the streets they would say in Finnish, "To hell with you!"

The rivalries and divisions of the Laestadian movement in Finland were soon reproduced in America, as representatives of the various factions made missionary trips to America and sought to gain a hearing. Rival Laestadian groups would often share the same hall or church building until, as often happened, one group would arrive only to find the building locked and all the locks changed.

Gradually, two larger organizations crystallized out of the Laestadian maelstrom. The so-called "Big Meeting" group was loosely organized and took a broad approach to doctrine. It gradually came to include all Laestadians whose consciences did not prevent them from attending the national "Big Meetings" held every few years.

A large opposition group to the "Big Meeting" group arose about 1908. Its leader was Pastor Arthur Leopold Heideman, a young minister of the state church of Finland, belonging to the Laestadians, who was called to the Calumet Laestadian congregation in 1890. The ministries of A. L. Heideman and his son, Paul Arthur Heideman, in the large\* Calumet Apostolic Lutheran Church spanned a total of 83 years (1890 - 1973). The Heidemans were the only ordained ministers in this group. They evidently favored a type of church organization with the Calumet church as the "temple", and numerous lay ministers commissioned to go out from Calumet to conduct services at other locations. The Heidemanians have been the most active in hurling anathemas at rival groups of Laestadians.

#### B. The Suomi Synod

The state church of Finland exerted not the slightest effort to minister to Finns in the new world. Pastors who came from Finland came as a result of calls issued by groups of immigrants. The first pastor from the state church was Alfred Elsier Backman, who arrived in Calumet, Michigan on September 10, 1876. He established congregations in Calumet, Hancock, and Allouez, Michigan, and made mission trips as far away as Minnesota and Ohio. The Finnish population was

\*I would estimate its membership at 2000+

hardly receptive to any spiritual message, let alone from the state church of Finland. After seven years of frustration, with few visible fruits, Backman returned to Finland because of weakened health. For the next 10 years the spiritual needs of the Finnish immigrants in the Keweenaw peninsula of Michigan were looked after by the Norwegian Lutheran pastors who had established themselves in the region, and also by the Missouri Synod pastor in Hancock.

The next pastor from Finland was Juho Kustaa Nikander, who arrived in 1885 and inherited the three parishes established by Backman. Nikander had been a brilliant student at the University of Helsinki, and was a tireless worker. Under his firm hand Suomi College and its theological seminary were later founded in Hancock, Michigan. Nikander has been called the "Patriarch of the Finnish Lutheran Church in America".

Between 1880 and 1890 many pastors of the state church of Finland followed in the wake of the thousands of Finnish immigrants who came to American shores. Already in 1886 prominent pastors and lay leaders among the Finns were planning a Finnish Lutheran church body. On March 25, 1890, the Day of the Annunciation, four pastors and sixteen laymen held a meeting in Calumet at which the Suomi Synod was founded. The site of the meeting was Trinity church, whose name did not indicate the Holy Trinity, but the three nationalities - Finns, Swedes, and Norwegians - who together had built the church edifice. Each nationality had its own congregation and pastor, and owned 1/3 share in the building\*.

The founding of Suomi College and Theological Seminary in Hancock, Michigan in 1896 provided the Suomi Synod with a supply of trained pastors. This, together with continual arrivals from the state church of Finland, enabled the Suomi Synod to enter and retain more mission fields than the other Finnish church bodies. By 1920 about 25 per cent of the Finns in America belonged to a Finnish Lutheran church body, and of these, 50 per cent were affiliated with the Suomi Synod<sup>6</sup>.

The Suomi Synod sought to obtain from the Finnish state church official recognition that she, over against the National Church and the Laestadians, was the authentic offshoot of the church of Finland. Yet, in spite of Suomi Synod entreaties, there were no official contacts with the state church of Finland for the first three decades. The reasons for this lay in secular politics. As an

\*Trinity Church was the predecessor of Calumet National Lutheran Church. Unfortunately, the records of this congregation apparently burned in a church fire<sup>5</sup>. Even the location of the church building has been forgotten.

autonomous Grand Duchy of Russia, Finland's overseas contacts had to be guarded and restricted. Certain Finnish officials did not look kindly upon the exodus of emigrants. Finally, in 1921, the visit to America of Bishop Koskimies of Oulu established the long-sought state church recognition

### C. The National Church

One of the four founding pastors of the Suomi Synod in 1890 was J. W. Eloheimo, pastor of the Calumet congregation, whom Suomi Synod historian Ollila terms "an eccentric arrival from the church of Finland"<sup>7</sup>. Eloheimo proposed a national church body, complete with a grand bishop having absolute authority and a treasury of \$50,000. To another pastor Eloheimo confided that pastors of the church could work completely independent of congregations without worrying about anybody's opinion. Eloheimo was delegated to write the constitution for the proposed national church body. The constitution, which unfortunately was accepted, contained such provisions as a guaranteed annual wage for the clergy, and a reversionary clause which provided that if a congregation dissolved, its property would be taken over by the Synod. Another of Eloheimo's ideas, which appeared only in a rough draft of the constitution, was that financial support of the congregations could be obtained "by force".

The editor of a Finnish newspaper in Calumet, Ino Ekman, mounted an attack on the proposed constitution, and compared Eloheimo with the Shah of Persia. When Pastor Eloheimo asked his congregation in Calumet to join the newly-formed Suomi Synod, the majority declined. The incensed pastor excommunicated about 500 people, leaving only the pastor and 17 members remaining with the Suomi Synod.\* Editor Ekman then called a meeting of the

\*Eloheimo was forced to leave his congregation in Calumet since most of his parishioners had been excommunicated. He was temporarily placed in the Ironwood, Michigan parish by the consistory of the Suomi Synod. Strange stirrings were fomenting in his mind. Before long a bizarre document written in English and entitled "Proclamation of the Universal Kingdom During the Chiliad to Come" appeared. It claimed that both the angel Michael and Jesus Christ revealed to "humble minister William Elohim" that he had been chosen by God to usher in the Universal Kingdom before the second coming of Christ. Elohim, a direct descendent of Melchizek, was to be "the only Sovereign and Majesty of the Nations". It was obvious to all that the sovereign, Elohim, was to be none other than Eloheimo himself, and this appalled the consistory. An explanation was demanded. Eloheimo resigned from the Suomi Synod. The Ironwood congregation petitioned the Synod to keep Eloheimo as pastor and to readmit him to the ministerium of the church, but the consistory refused. Eloheimo made an impassioned plea at the 1892 convention of the Suomi Synod, seeking readmission and demanding that the consistory make public confession of its sins against him. Delegates were unmoved by his paranoid demands. Three weeks later Eloheimo and his congregation founded a new church body, "the Fenno-American Evangelical Lutheran Church", which was a fiasco. 8



excommunicated members at an opera house in Calumet. This group immediately organized an independent congregation which they called the "Kansallisseura Kunta". Although the name was translated "National Church", a more accurate English translation would be "People's Church". Later the National Church purchased the share of Trinity church belonging to the Swedes, and were thus joint owners of the building with the Suomi Synod. This arrangement, however, did not work out, and the Suomi Synod members sold their share. The National church now had a church building, but no pastor. During the next few years the Laestadian pastor A. L. Heideman served as vacancy pastor. In 1896 J. W. Eloheimo, the same man who had excommunicated them, was called as pastor of the Calumet National Lutheran Church. The fact that pastors Heideman and Eloheimo were accepted to serve the congregation can perhaps best be understood by bearing in mind that at that time there were only a very few pastors able to speak the Finnish language in all of America.<sup>9</sup>

In other Finnish communities there were those who, while not Laestadians, had not joined with the Suomi Synod because of its authoritarian and episcopal structure. Also among these were individuals who had been members of the Gospel Association, a movement in the state church of Finland which sought to restore confessional purity. The Gospel Association had published an edition of the Lutheran Confessions and many of Luther's sermons and commentaries. Later it also translated and published J. Theodore Mueller's Christian Dogmatics.

In 1898 Pastor Karl Koski, who served congregations in Rock Springs and Hanna, Wyoming, issued an invitation to independent congregations of the above mind to attend a meeting at Rock Springs for the purpose of organizing a Finnish "National" Evangelical Lutheran Church. Eight congregations accepted the invitation. At the organizational meeting on June 26, 1898, Pastor Koski and nine laymen were present, and drew up a constitution. Elected president was none other than Pastor J. W. Eloheimo, who had returned to the Calumet congregation. So thus it happened that the bishop of the defunct Fenno-American Church was elected president of the democratic new "People's" Church.

In 1900 Pastor W. A. Mandellof, an ordained pastor from Finland who was Eloheimo's successor in Calumet, was elected president of the National Church. For five years the National Church was to enjoy a measure of stability and growth. Then in 1905 a series of disasters shook the infant church to its foundations. The publishing house owned by the church went bankrupt. The president, William Williamson, a laypreacher who was a grocer by trade, was the object of serious moral charges and was forced to resign. Worst of all,

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a "People's College" and seminary, which had been opened in 1903 in West Duluth Minnesota and financed by selling one-dollar shares, was taken over by atheistic socialists. The socialists bought a large number of shares and voting rights, evicted the church, and turned the institution into a "Workers' College". At this point the National Church initiated serious discussions with the Suomi Synod concerning possible merger. The negotiations faltered, however, on one minor point - the Suomi Synod was unwilling to accept the lay preachers of the National Church into their ministerium without additional training. In 1918 a new seminary with one professor and two students was opened by the National Church in Ironwood, Michigan. This seminary continued in existence until 1923\*.

Beginning in the early 20's a series of events occurred which were to change the character and direction of the National Church. Freedom of religion was established in Finland in 1922, and certain confessional Lutheran pastors severed relations with the state church. The Gospel Association, which had enjoyed close ties with the Finnish National Church in America, chose to remain within the state church. This created a strained relation with the National Church, which felt a continuing duty to expose the doctrinal error and unbelief of state church pastors. Through personal contacts with Missouri Synod pastors and contacts with independent confessional Lutheran churches in Europe, the Board of Directors of the National Church approached the leaders of Missouri to inaugurate formal discussions. A first meeting was held in Ironwood, Michigan, in February of 1923. Results were so promising that another meeting ensued in Chicago in April of that year with President Pfotenbauer of the Missouri Synod. At the 1923 convention of the National Church pulpit and altar fellowship with Missouri was established.

Not all pastors and laymen in the National Church were in accord with this change of direction. Clergy friendly to the Gospel Association called a meeting to organize their forces, while those opposed to the Gospel Association held a similar meeting. President K. E. Salonen, who had played a prominent part in the negotiations with Missouri, reversed his stand, and wrote tracts attacking the Missouri Synod and defending the Gospel Association. At the end of 1923 President Salonen resigned and accepted a mission call to Japan. His successor

\*The last living graduates of the old Ironwood seminary were Rev. A. E. Kokkonen (1896 - 1973) and Rev. Gustav A. Aho (1897-1974)

was Pastor Matti Wiskari of the Calumet congregation, whose first words as President were: "Until now we have followed in the wake of the Gospel Association of Finland, but from now on, no more".

The full implications of this new affiliation remained to be worked out. The application of fellowship principles proved to be a problem throughout the 1920's. The 1925 visit to America of the leader of the Gospel Association created a crisis. Fourteen of the 67 congregations of the National Church invited him, half of the congregations extended no invitations, and the rest were neutral. The congregation at Fairport Harbor, Ohio, split over the issue. The Board of Directors of the National Church decided not to endorse his visit, but the National Church in convention adopted a selective fellowship posture. Nevertheless, by 1931, when President Wiskari retired, the issue had been settled in favor of Synodical Conference principles. Gradually the ties between the National Church and the Gospel Association were forgotten. Some of the older people left the National Church and moved into the Suomi Synod, where Gospel Association pastors found a ready welcome along with other "wings" of the state church of Finland.<sup>10</sup>

Pastor Wiskari's successor as president was Pastor Gustav A. Aho, an American-born young man only 34 years of age. His terms of office extended through 22 years (1931-1953). If Eloheimo had been the "Bishop Stephan" of the National Church, then G. A. Aho was its C. F. W. Walther. Under President Aho's strong leadership the National Church obtained a thorough grounding in confessional Lutheran theology, and moved into the wake of the Synodical Conference. President Aho encouraged pastors of the National Church to send young men to Concordia Seminary, Springfield to prepare for ministry in the National Church. This relationship was formalized in 1938 when Pastor Alexander Monto accepted a professorship at Concordia-Springfield as instructor in the Finnish language and director of the Finnish Department. Eventually a majority of the National Church pastors were Missouri-Synod trained, and "Old Missouri" doctrinal preaching held forth in National Church pulpits.

#### D. The Socialists

Almost every Finnish-American community was split four ways. In addition to the three religious groups (Laestadians, Suomi Synod, National Church) there were the Socialists, who denied the existence of God, condemned the church and the clergy, advocated armed revolution as the only cure for the ills of the workers, and demanded that preachers and capitalists be hanged. The Socialists sought to undermine all churches by overt or covert methods. Pastor A. E. Kokkonen

of the National Church, upon arriving at his first parish (Red Lodge, Montana was the target of an assassination attempt when a bullet was fired through the window of his hotel room.<sup>11</sup>

Pastor John Wargelin of the Suomi Synod has recorded the disruptive activities of the Socialists in his Virginia, Minnesota parish in the period 1907-1909:<sup>12</sup>

"Socialists would come in large numbers to disturb the service. They were insolent; they opened up the 'Tyomies' paper (a Socialist newspaper\*) and read it during the sermon, lifting it high so that the pastor could see the name of the paper. I paid no attention to this but kept on preaching..."

The Suomi Synod congregation at Butte, Montana was organized four different times from 1896 through 1925, with the result that each time Socialists would infiltrate the congregation and then elect one of their number to preach Socialism.<sup>13</sup>

The departure of about 12,000 American Finns for the Soviet Union at the height of the Depression<sup>14</sup> removed a hardened core of Socialists from the American scene. As economic conditions improved in the late 30's and early 40's, many Finns abandoned the Socialist movement. The Hitler-Stalin pact of the early 40's disillusioned even the most starry-eyed followers. As with the Freidenker and Socialist movements among the German immigrants, the Socialist movement among Finnish-Americans has dwindled to a handful of aged members.

\*Published in Hancock, Michigan until about 1960, when it was moved to Superior, Wisconsin.

### III. Subsequent History of the Finnish Lutheran Churches

#### A. The Laestadians

The Laestadian groups in America have travelled along the road from revival movements to conventional American denominations. The emotional excesses that once characterized their worship services have largely disappeared.\* The Heidemanians still hold firmly to the view that they are the Holy Christian Church outside of which there is no salvation. The official organ of the Heideman group is "Greetings of Peace", a monthly published in Calumet, Michigan.\*\*

The "Big Meeting" group is now represented in many parts of the United States.\*\*\* They have gradually abandoned many of the Laestadian peculiarities. Like other Laestadian groups, they are a non-liturgical church. Their church buildings are severely plain structures of the Reformed style, with a speaker's platform replacing the altar. Outwardly, they appear like Baptist groups, but with Luther's Small Catechism and many of his other writings occupying a prominent position. The official publication of the "Big Meeting" group is the "Christian Monthly".

In 1947 the "Big Meeting" group had 80 congregations, served by 18 ordained ministers and 23 lay preachers.<sup>15</sup> Most of the ordained ministers were from Finland, but some received their training at the seminary of the Suomi Synod in Hancock, Michigan, or at non-denominational seminaries such as Moody Bible Institute. Beginning about 1964, the "Big Meeting" group cooperated with the Association of Free Lutheran Congregations\*\*\*\* in the operation of a seminary and Bible school in Minneapolis. Dr. Uuras Saarnivaara, a Finnish-trained theologian and

\* As far as this writer can discern, "liikutukset" is no longer practiced in Laestadian congregations in Michigan.

\*\* Laestadians greet each other with the words "God's Peace". They will not use this greeting with non-Laestadians.

\*\*\* Apparently the membership statistics reported by LCUSA for the Apostolic Lutherans reflect only adult members of the "Big Meeting" group. Thus, the total number of Laestadians is much larger (perhaps twice as large) than the LCUSA statistics would indicate.

\*\*\*\* Composed mostly of congregations of the former Lutheran Free Church which did not enter into merger with the ALC, ELC, and UELC to create the present American Lutheran Church.

former faculty member at Suomi College in Hancock, Michigan, was appointed to the faculty of this seminary by the "Big Meeting" group. After a few years the Laestadians broke away and established their own seminary in Minneapolis, which they call the Inter-Lutheran Seminary. Dr. Saarnivaara is presently President and Professor at this seminary.

Saarnivaara's "History of the Laestadian or Apostolic Lutheran Movement in America", published in 1947, identified five groups within the American Laestadian movement. It is this writer's impression that this grouping is no longer accurate. Some of the smallest groups have probably disappeared and additional groups have been formed. For instance, about five years ago a group split away from the Calumet (Heideman) church over the alleged lack of Law preaching. They formed a new organization which they call "The Laestadian Congregation", and now have branches in several communities in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan.

Dr. Walter J. Kukkonen, Professor of Historical Theology at the Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago, has given the following evaluation of the Laestadian movement.<sup>16</sup>

"The story of American Laestadianism is one of revivals, internal conflicts and divisions, attempts at reconciliation, and new conflicts. It is the story of a revival movement turned church that is intensely concerned about harvesting without giving patient attention to the less exciting work of planting and fertilizing and watering."

In this writer's opinion, the errors and excesses of the Laestadian movement spring ultimately from a failure to rightly distinguish the Law and the Gospel. Divisions among the Laestadians center around this point. A group identified by Saarnivaara as the "Gellivaara Firstborn", and found in the Lake Poinsett-Estelline-Hayti district of South Dakota were "extreme opponents of everything that is new as a danger to living Christianity. Curtains, picture neckties, and even separators and telephones were condemned as sinful".<sup>17</sup> At the other extreme are the "Evangelicals", who agitate against the teaching of words of instruction, reproof, and commandments to Christians. Saarnivaara reports<sup>18</sup> of an extremist preacher of this group teaching that "it is the devil who causes man to repent of his sins - Christ has made a confession of sins for us" and "Go on sinning; it is only a debt for which payment has been made".

## B. The Suomi Synod

In the post-World War II era the language barriers that had separated many Lutheran church bodies were rapidly diminishing, and church mergers were seriously being considered. In 1957 the Suomi Synod voted in convention to relocate their small (two professors) theological seminary from Hancock, Michigan to the campus of the ULCA seminary in Maywood, Illinois. Later, a merger with three other small seminaries created the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, which was subsequently relocated to the campus of the University of Chicago.

Historically, the Suomi Synod had strong ties with the Swedish Augustana Synod. In 1956 the Suomi Synod joined with the ULCA and the Augustana Synod in the Joint Commission on Lutheran Unity. This culminated in the merger in 1963 of the Suomi Synod and three other church bodies (ULCA, Augustana, and the American Evangelical Lutheran Church(Danish)) to form the present Lutheran Church in America. Eight congregations of the Suomi Synod did not enter the merger.<sup>19</sup> Five of these subsequently became members of the Association of Free Lutheran Congregations.

In the merged church the former Suomi Synod pastors formed a special interest conference, known as the Suomi Free Conference of the LCA, for the care and edification of Finnish-speaking senior members of the church. Suomi College at Hancock, Michigan, is now a two-year junior college related to the LCA. It stresses the Finnish cultural heritage.

Of the four church bodies that formed the LCA, the Suomi Synod was undoubtedly the most confessionally oriented. This can be traced to the influence of their founder, Rev. J. K. Nikander, who was strongly conservative in matters of doctrine.

## C. The National Church

At the end of World War II the National Church entered a period of growth and missionary outreach. The church owned a publishing house in Ironwood, Michigan, and had official periodicals both in Finnish (the Auttaja and in English (The Lutheran Voice). The extreme pastoral shortage which the church had struggled with throughout its existence was near a solution. In 1938 fourteen pastors were serving 75 congregations (an average of five congregations per pastor).<sup>20</sup> In 1952, twenty-three pastors were serving 68 congregations, and there were 19 students from the National Church in

the Finnish Department of the Springfield seminary.<sup>21</sup>

In matters of doctrine the National Church had become similar to the Synodical Conference churches, except for the remaining problem of women suffrage in the congregations. The Synodical Conference position on the lodges was reaffirmed in convention, and put into practice in congregations. In 1955, the largest congregation in the National Church - the 900-member Zion congregation of Ironwood, Michigan - split in half over the lodge issue. Those remaining with the National Church formed a new congregation named Trinity. The others retained the original name and church property, and joined the Suomi Synod.

The clouds on the horizon of the Synodical Conference, occasioned by the departure of the Missouri Synod from her former doctrine and practice, were of concern to some in the National Church. In 1954, Pastor Erick Erickson resigned from the National Church because it was "condoning the sins and errors of the Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod".<sup>22</sup> Pastor Erickson then joined what was to later become the Lutheran Churches of the Reformation.

Closer relations with the Evangelical Lutheran Synod might have developed had it not been for a serious error on the part of the ELS's Doctrinal Committee, most of whose members were soon to leave the ELS. President Theodore Aaberg of the ELS, in his definitive history of that church body, gives the following account of this incident under the heading "Capable of Erring":<sup>23</sup>

"The practice of the ELS has not always conformed to its doctrine. For example, while rightly objecting to the Missouri Synod's 1944 Saginaw resolution on joint prayer, which sanctioned the opening of intersynodical conferences with the ALC with prayer, the ELS itself failed to follow its own principles of church fellowship when it refused to pray in an intersynodical conference with those with whom it should have prayed.

"The ELS initiated doctrinal discussions with the National Evangelical Lutheran Church (Finnish) in 1952. No devotions were conducted at the first meeting which was held on Dec. 1, 1952, the ELS Doctrinal Committee having decided beforehand that the meeting should not be opened with prayer. A member of the ELS clergy\* later wrote to a member of the Doctrinal Committee in regard to a proposed second meeting, and stated that 'it would appear to me that whatever is decided on, the Finns ought to be told in advance and we ought not decide it secretly and then try to keep from opening with devotion...' He received the reply\*\* that the Doctrinal Committee had talked it over and 'we decided that we would

\*Rev. Bjarne W. Teigen, president of Bethany Lutheran College

\*\*From J. A. O. Preus(!), who was then a member of the ELS



have to stand by our original decision not to open with devotion since it would be inconsistent for us on the one hand to razz Mo. (Missouri) for having prayer fellowship while we do the same things ourselves'. The second meeting was never held.

"What the ELS Doctrinal Committee ignored in its decision was the fact that the ALC was a heterodox church body, while the Finnish group was not heterodox. The formal confessional tie with the ELS was lacking with the Finnish Church, but the common confessional bond was there. The ELS could hardly plead ignorance of the situation for the Finns had been receiving fraternal help and encouragement from the Missouri Synod for many years, using Concordia Seminary at Springfield for the training of their pastors. The Missouri Synod had noted repeated in its synodical reports the confessional loyalty of the National Evangelical Lutheran Church. These reports in the Proceedings generally followed immediately the reports on the ALC and ULCA negotiations, so the ELS should have been aware of them. The fault did not rest with the Doctrinal Committee alone, for while the decision was made by the committee, and while some pastors did voice their objections, no one insisted that the Synod correct the action taken by the Doctrinal Committee.

"The ELS had much in common with the Finns and closer ties would have been of benefit to both, but a wrong application of ELS principles on prayer fellowship resulted in the ELS unnecessarily offending them."

At the 1955 annual convention of the National Church, Pastor F. J. Pies\* urged that the Committee on Intersynodical Relations of the National Church "endeavor to create closer relations with the Wisconsin Synod because many of their congregations are located in our area of work." Pastor Pies also recommended that a member of the committee attend the convention of the Wisconsin Synod.<sup>24</sup>

In 1953 Pastor J. E. Nopola was elected president of the National Church. Although a man of unwavering and forthright doctrinal convictions, he was seemingly heedless of the mounting evidence of Missouri's doctrinal deterioration. In his writings, and with the influence of his office, he strongly urged the union of the National Church with Missouri. This was effected in 1963, just as Missouri was approaching her confessional collapse.

\*Pastor Pies was of Wisconsin Synod background - a son of Mt. Lebanon congregation in Milwaukee. While attending Concordia Seminary - Springfield he made firm friends among the Finnish students, even to the extent of learning the Finnish language. Upon graduation he entered the ministry of the National Church.<sup>25</sup> This energetic pastor later obtained a Doctorate in Education, and founded the only Christian Day School in the National Church in his congregation (Salem, Detroit, Michigan).

Two pastors did not enter the merger for confessional reasons. Pastor A. E. Kokkonen of the Calumet, Michigan congregation, in advising his congregation on the matter, assessed the merger as "embarking on a very big ship with a very big leak".<sup>26</sup> The Calumet congregation voted to remain independent. Also remaining independent was Pastor Rupert Efraimson, who at the time of the merger was in the service of the Confessional Lutheran Church of Finland. Pastor Efraimson was later Pastor Kokkonen's successor in Calumet.

The demise of the National Evangelical Lutheran Church as a church body was tragic. Her voice was stilled at a time when it was particularly needed. Confessional Lutheranism in America is the poorer for the loss of the National Evangelical Lutheran Church.

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