



Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

God's work. Our hands.

Tribute to the Reverend Dr. James Robert Crumley Jr.

To hear him tell the story of his life, the Reverend Dr. James R. Crumley was convinced that God always was full of gracious surprises. One surprise unfolded into another for him. Each one prepared the way for new responsibilities. As he said upon his election in 1974 as secretary of the Lutheran Church in America (LCA), “I believe that when God calls us, God also gives us the resources to fulfill our responsibilities.” The conviction grew even deeper when—four years later, in 1978—he was chosen as the LCA’s third president and bishop.

A gracious surprise came early to him as a student at Roanoke College when he was named in 1947 as one of three youth observers from the United Lutheran Church in America for the constituting assembly of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) in Lund, Sweden. The experience widened his vision to the international dimensions of the church. Little did he realize at that time that later he would prove to be a pivotal figure in a major reorganization of the federation in 1990. The reorganization ensured increased engagement in the LWF by the churches in the southern hemisphere and greater effectiveness of the LWF as a communion of Lutheran churches throughout the world.

In his early international experience as a student, he recalled meeting Bishop Hanns Lilje of Hanover, Germany, and Bishop Eivind Berggrav, primate of the Church of Norway. Both of them had been subjected to persecution during World War II and Bishop Lilje had been imprisoned and designated for execution by the Gestapo. Dr. Crumley later recalled, “This was the first time I had witnessed face-to-face people” for whom the Christian faith meant so much “that they were ready and willing to go to prison or even be a martyr for the faith.”

Dr. Crumley was ordained on June 10, 1951, following his graduation from Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary in Columbia, S.C. While there, he met Annette Bodie Crumley, who as a musician accompanied the seminary choir. They were married on May 26, 1950, and became the parents of three children.

Following his ordination, he served a parish in Greene County, Tenn., a place that was almost an extension of his years on the farm of his parents in the mountains of Tennessee. He felt at home there, but after two years leaders of the United Lutheran Church in America asked him to serve Grace Lutheran Church in Oak Ridge, Tenn. That congregation had 300 members and 50 of them had Ph.D. degrees. He was scared, he admitted, about serving there. He would devote 20 to 25 hours a week working on his sermons. He recalled a comforting word from a physicist one day who said, “Pastor, we don’t know any more about your field than you know about ours. But we need to know about yours. We need what you have to offer more than you realize.”

Amid the turbulence of the mid-1960s, he was called to serve a congregation in turmoil at the time, Ascension Lutheran Church in Savannah, Ga. While the challenges he faced did not seem at the time to reflect God’s gracious surprises, he sought to serve in the midst of those struggles as a conscientious pastor. Years later, he recounted his joy one Sunday when serving communion in Ascension Church and seeing a White member who had been a staunch opponent of integration kneeling at the rail next to a Black member of the congregation.

Throughout his pastoral ministry and leadership as secretary and bishop, he was a loyal churchman willing to serve where the church wanted him. “It is the church’s place to tell me where to serve,” he said when chosen to lead the LCA. He also served as president of the Lutheran World Ministries and as second vice president of the National Council of Churches of

Christ in the U.S.A. In each venue of his service, God was full of gracious surprises for him, and he responded with thanksgiving and dedication.

Upon his installation as LCA bishop, the vision of greater Lutheran unity that he witnessed in Lund, Sweden, in his youth informed what he said. “We strive toward a vibrant witness from the whole Lutheran family,” Dr. Crumley declared in his sermon. “In North America, when the mission of Jesus Christ mandates that we should unite with other Lutherans, we are ready to do so.”

He was a key leader in the Committee on Lutheran Unity and the Commission for a New Lutheran Church. The latter formulated the plan for uniting the LCA, American Lutheran Church, and Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches to establish the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) on January 1, 1988.

His understanding and vision of the church was not confined only to the Lutheran context. In an historic development, he exchanged letters with Pope John Paul II in 1985. The letters affirmed the greater mutual understanding that already had emerged from U.S. Lutheran-Roman Catholic Dialogue. At the same time, the letters urged deeper commitment to further ecumenical discoveries.

Through experiences in assemblies of the Lutheran World Federation and the World Council of Churches, as well as engagement with the National Council of the Churches of Christ, he demonstrated in manifold ways his ecumenical insight and commitment.

As the years passed and the honors accumulated, Dr. Crumley remained that same gracious gentleman who had been raised in the mountains of Tennessee but was called by the church to ministry throughout this nation and the world.

Rest eternal, grant him, O Lord; and let light perpetual shine upon him.

In Christ,



The Reverend Elizabeth A. Eaton
Presiding Bishop
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

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