

ECCLESIOLOGY, MISSION, AND STRUCTURE

By the Reverend Dr. H. George Anderson

former presiding bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

Thank you for the invitation to share my understanding of the ecclesiology of this church. While the ecclesiology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) can be placed within the framework common to all doctrines of the Church since New Testament times, it also bears the stamp of Reformation insights and the marks of its history in America. In this paper I will try to pick up the conversation that was begun in the papers you have read, and then make some observations about present possibilities.

“One of the features of ‘the body of Christ’ image is that, like the word ‘church,’ it can refer to either the church universal or the local community of believers. In his own writings Paul can speak of the church as a universal entity (1 Corinthians 10:32; 15:9; Galatians 1:13; Philippians 3:6) or as a specific congregation, meaning the church in that place (Romans 16:1, 5; 1 Corinthians 1:2; 1 Thessalonians 1:1).

The situation is more complex in the disputed letters of Paul—letters that are widely regarded as deuteropauline. In Colossians, as in the undisputed letters, the term ‘church’ can refer to the church as universal (1:18, 24) or local (4:15-16). Within Ephesians, on the other hand, the term ‘church’ always means the universal church (1:22, 3:10, 21; 5:23-32).¹

Arland Hultgren’s observation on the dual use of the term “church” provides us with a useful framework for considering our present situation. In fact, one might look at the whole history of Christian ecclesiology within that framework. Depending on the times and circumstances one or another of the two poles—universal and local—has dominated. The question before the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is, “How do we find the appropriate relationship between these two poles today?” Of course we are not the first to ask that question. It is the perennial question before the Church since the time of St. Paul. It has been answered in every generation, and those answers have varied.

It is clear that during and after the New Testament period the “local” side of the balance moved toward the bishop and away from a single congregation. That is, the distinction between “local” and “universal” moved up a notch, so to speak, so that Roman Catholicism came to call the diocese the “local church” in contrast to all the dioceses in communion with Rome, which constituted the “universal church”. Still the tension between local and universal continued, although it played out in the struggles between councils and popes.

In Luther’s day the battles were almost over and the papacy seemed to have consolidated its power around the “universal” pole so that bishops could not be consecrated without papal permission. It was the institution, the Roman Catholic Church, that was fully

¹ Arland Hultgren, “The Church as the Body of Christ: Engaging an Image in the New Testament,” *Word and World* 22 (2002), 127. Hultgren emphasizes the unity of the two dimensions—an important reminder as we

consider the historic tendencies to prize one pole at the expense of the other. He reminds us of the need for sharing individual gifts with the whole church and supporting individual gifts by the whole church.

“church” and the old slogan “no salvation outside the church” was appropriated to mean that only those in communion with the Bishop of Rome could be saved.

Luther’s definition of the church as “holy believers and sheep who hear the voice of their Shepherd”² broke out of the medieval box and restored both a more universal and a more local dimension. His assertion that the gospel could be found among the Turks, for example, called for a view of the church that transcended any institutional boundaries. At the same his emphasis on the “holy believers . . . who hear the voice of their Shepherd” focused attention on the local gathering of believers around word and sacrament. Lutheran history might be seen as the attempt of Luther’s followers to embody both those dimensions of “church”.

The growth of national sovereignty during and after the Reformation tended to re-institutionalize the church within a national bureaucracy. On the one hand, this focus tended to reduce the “universal” dimension to a confessional family—the Lutherans versus all others whether Roman Catholic, Calvinist or Anabaptist, and on the other hand it reduced the local congregation to being dependent on the state for leadership and support. In time this pattern was challenged by revival movements and awakenings that asserted local claims. Lay leaders arose who preached without official permission; they were supported directly by other lay people. On occasion, when government imposed unwelcome changes, even clergy would revolt and call for their congregations to separate from the state. So by the nineteenth century Lutherans in Europe were engaged in a contest between the state church and grass-roots religion.

This re-emergence of the universal-local theme in the early nineteenth century came just at the time that Lutheran emigration to America picked up again after two generations of isolation. Some of the immigrants brought along the new resurgence of local initiative. They soon found, however, that they needed to educate their pastors, so they founded colleges and seminaries that provided a collective identity. Many other Lutheran immigrants tried to recreate the state church structure of their homelands, but they had to do that without any help from the secular state. Funding, for example, had to come through local congregations. Thus in a real sense, the age-old polarity between universal and local became a defining factor in the self-understanding of Lutherans in America. All of the church bodies they created had both local and “universal” dimensions, but the relative importance of those dimensions varied.

It is no accident, then, that when the ELCA was formed, its constitution embodied this dual understanding of “church”.

This church exists both as an inclusive fellowship and as local congregations gathered for worship and Christian service. Congregations find their fulfillment in the universal community of the Church, and the universal Church exists in and through congregations. This church, therefore, derives its character and powers both from the sanction and representation of its congregations and from its inherent nature as an expression of the broader

² SA III, 12:2

**fellowship of the faithful. . .
(ELCA 3.02.).³**

Hidden in this definition is a strong reminder that the “universal” dimension of the Church is not restricted to the ELCA. The language speaks of “congregations”, “this church” [ELCA] and the “universal Church”. We capitalize “Church” in all our documents to refer to the universal Church and use “this church”—without capitals—for the ELCA because the ecumenical movement has reminded us of Luther’s assertion that the Gospel is not confined to any single ecclesial structure.

For the purpose of our work within the ELCA structure, however, we can leave the ecumenical dimension aside for the moment and ask, “Given a church body that recognizes both the “inclusive fellowship” and the “local congregation,” how does this work out in practice? How are both dimensions recognized and involved in the operation of the church?” This first-order question has been answered in the ELCA through the principle of “interdependence”:

The congregations, synods and churchwide organization of this church are interdependent partners sharing responsibly in God’s mission. In an interdependent relationship primary responsibility for particular functions will vary between the partners. Whenever possible, the entity most directly affected by a decision shall be the principle party responsible for decision and implementation, with

the other entities facilitating and assisting. . . (ELCA 5.01.c.).

Within this broad principle there is room for rearrangement, for second-order questions like, “How should this or that function be organized?” Indeed change is almost dictated because responsibility for decision-making will move to “the entity most directly affected”.⁴ Changes in our culture will inevitably shift the weight of decision from one entity to another. For example, in these early years of the ELCA the issue of trust has become the elephant in the room. It has complicated our discussions and exacerbated reactions to decisions.⁵ I’d like to suggest that it is not accidental. It is inherent in our complex history. Our constitution not only recognizes that polarity; it also provides a way to build on it.

It seems to me that this trust issue arises from a perceived mismatch between “the entity most directly affected by a decision” and “the principle party responsible for decision and implementation.” Do we need to explore the nature of the trust problems that most directly affect the churchwide organization? Is there something we can do about it? Can we turn the tension between “churchwide” and “local” into something richer than each pole alone?

We do have extraordinary fluidity because the ELCA is not riveted to one single form of governance. We do not derive our structure from a particular New Testament pattern, as the Congregational, Presbyterian and Episcopal traditions do. Instead, our

³In fact, when the ELCA was being organized tensions over balancing the universal and local dimensions led to the creation of this article just before the final draft of the constitution was to be presented.

⁴The constitution provides specifically for this restructuring in ELCA 5.01.e.

⁵Craig L. Nesson, “We Are the Body of Christ,” in *The Difficult but Indispensable Church*, edited by Norma Cook Everist, Minneapolis, Minn.: Augsburg Fortress (2002), 127.

ecclesiology flows from Luther's core insight that the church is constituted by "holy believers and sheep who hear the voice of their Shepherd". When this concept was criticized as defining a "Platonic republic" that was invisible to the world, the reformers insisted that one could always detect it by the outward signs of the pure preaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments in accord with that gospel.⁶ But this ecclesiology does not dictate any specific structure. Any structure that allowed for gospel preaching and receiving would do.

Luther himself worked with a number of structures, starting with virtual congregational autonomy in 1523, and, when that proved ineffective against "clandestine and infiltrating preachers," through the establishment of consistories in supportive territories and ultimately through the ordination of a Lutheran bishop in 1538. It was the office of proclamation, not any specific ordering of that office, that was God-given and essential.⁷

Beyond the definition of the church as the gathering of believers around gospel and sacrament, and the stipulation that the "office of preaching" is necessary to insure that the good news is proclaimed, the Augsburg Confession also notes that the church is not constituted by the holiness of its members.⁸

⁶ Augsburg Confession, Art. VII.1, takes Luther's insight and adds the objective signs, defining the church as: "the gathering of all believers, in which the gospel is purely preached and the holy sacraments are administered in accord with the gospel." See also the chapter on "Church—Body in Conflict," in Gritsch and Jenson, *Lutheranism*, pp. 124–136.

⁷ Augsburg Confession, Art. V

⁸ Augsburg Confession, Art. VIII, 1: "In this life many false Christians, hypocrites and even open sinners are mixed in among the godly."

Thus it is neither structure nor discipline that makes a church authentic. The church cannot be defined by its inner structure or its outer limits. It is, in essence, a happening on both the universal and local level that we can only follow and attempt to perpetuate.⁹

And this brings me to the question of mission. The confessional documents certainly emphasize the centrality of proclamation in Word and Sacrament, but they do not tell us what this requires and entails. Evidently each generation has to answer these questions for itself.

The ELCA constitution lists six consequences of the church's being "called and sent to bear witness to God's creating, redeeming and sanctifying work in the world" (ELCA 4.02.). They are proclamation, outreach, service, worship, nurture and manifesting Christian unity. We have seen fit to carry out these activities through a number of churchwide divisions. However, essays on ecclesiology and the nature of the church¹⁰ seldom mention these important structures in modern church life. I say "modern" church life because the character of churchwide expressions has changed vastly over the last century.

If we just look at the Lutheran experience in America we discover that the earliest expression of the church beyond the congregation was a synod or other body established for annual deliberation about issues that were important to the particular group involved. Since the bodies were principally deliberative in nature, there was little continuing structure. Their officers

⁹ Note this point in Marc Kolden, "The Doctrine of the Church in the Lutheran Confessions," p. 3.

¹⁰ This is true, for example of the essays we read in preparation for this discussion.

were also full-time pastors of congregations. There was no central office, staff, departments or—in most of the early days—treasury. Almost invariably their chief business was to discuss how to provide leadership for the congregations.

As time went on certain “great causes” caught the imagination of the people. Foreign missions and education were usually the first. Home missions, especially among immigrants of their own tradition, soon followed. Institutions of mercy, newspapers, and auxiliaries came along as well. In each case, though, the first line of response was to set up a “Society” or a “Board” to attend to the matter, rather than adding staff to the synod or church body. These parallel organizations often met in conjunction with the synod or church body, and gradually their sessions became more integrated into the synodical or church meeting itself. Since the main function of these societies was to raise money for their cause, they needed a central treasury and, as they grew in activities, a person to manage the raising and disbursement of funds.

By the beginning of the twentieth century full-time offices appeared, both for the judicatories and their societies. From there it was a short step to incorporating all the activities at a central location, making appointments full-time, and establishing a continuing structure. As time passed, more projects and programs were hung on the existing structure, although some of the older societies remained. Most of us are familiar with groups like the Lutheran Laity Movement and the World Mission Prayer League, which maintained that separate status. And the age of “great causes” is not over, as we have seen with the surge of support for World Hunger, Lutheran Disaster Relief, and the Fund for Leaders in Mission.

I give this brief and all-too-simplified account in order to emphasize that the way the mission of the church is carried out has constantly changed. Consider a few examples of how mission has driven shifts in structure:

- The education of pastors originally was dependent on an apprentice system tied to individual congregations. The need for better preparation and overall consistency later moved that responsibility to seminaries.
- Social action, on the other hand, once expressed chiefly through synodically-sponsored institutions, has been taken up by congregations—not only in their ongoing contributions to Lutheran institutions of mercy but especially through sponsoring local food banks, shelters, and free clinics. Part of this shift came because the churchwide expression encouraged more “local social ministry”.
- Lutheran institutions, in turn, requiring more funding than synods could provide, have taken responsibility for their own fund-raising, relying less on synodical or congregational grants and more on individual donors.
- The recent concept of “accompaniment” in global mission prompted development of the Companion Synod Program, which has brought direct contact with overseas partners to the synodical level instead of managing all activity on a churchwide scale.

We cannot assume that such transfers of responsibility will eliminate the involvement of the original entities. In the Companion Synod Program, for example, while synodical and congregational participation has greatly heightened interest in overseas work, we also have discovered that congregations tend to repeat the “lady bountiful” tendency of nineteenth century mission societies. They want to “do something to help”

congregations they have visited in companion synods without thinking of the total needs of those synods. Sometimes their shock at poverty and difficulties within companion synods make them overlook the strengths in faith and ministry that could be a lesson to their own congregations. Guidance from experienced churchwide staff can help congregations realize the potential of a truly reciprocal ministry.

A similar process is now underway in regard to starting new congregations. A few years ago the Division for Outreach began a program in which congregations could share directly in the support of new mission starts. Now some synods have decided that starting new missions is their responsibility and are using dollars locally instead of making them available for churchwide outreach. What division of labor (and funds) best serves the purpose of the whole ELCA?

It is clear from these examples that changes are taking place whether planned or not. It seems to me that the Church Council needs to monitor these shifts and harness them for the benefit of God's mission.

An even greater danger, of course, is that structure developed to support a cause takes on immortality and will *not* change. At the same time, the new causes that spring up develop structures of their own. The few examples I have given above, however, show how responsibility for the many facets of mission can be moved around among the expressions of the church. The question should always be, "What needs to be done and who can do it best?" I suspect that, in every facet of mission, each of the three expressions of the church has a role to play. We have seen this sort of negotiation occur in the synodical consultation process. The division of labor should follow the

distribution of gifts: who is best qualified to perform each sub-routine in the total effort?

I once wrote a book called *A Good Time To Be the Church*. I still think it is a good time to be the church, but I don't think it is a good time to be the *old* church. We have a broad array of needs to address today, but we also have a rich variety of resources to call upon. While we tend to focus on dwindling funds available at the churchwide level, we also need to keep in mind that congregational treasuries have grown substantially. Have our structures and funding patterns seriously taken this reality into account?

Keep in mind that the whole Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is stronger financially than it has ever been. How can we employ these unprecedented resources toward the opportunities of God's mission? How can we organize our vision, our talent and our funding around the great causes which that mission entails?