

Reflections on the Future of the Church
and the Importance of Theological Education in the ELCIC

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There is an ancient Chinese proverb, which is sometimes alternatively referred to as a curse, that goes “may you live in interesting times”. My friends, welcome to those interesting times.

I don't know how many of you watch Youtube clips, but Bishop Pryse told me about a clip from “China's Got Talent” that I had to check out. The clip features Liu Wei, a 23 year old competitor who at the age of ten had to have his arms amputated after receiving an electric shock. His talent? Playing the piano. With his feet. Not only that, but he only started doing it at age 19. After his initial performance (and he went on to win the competition) Liu Wei said, “I think that in my life there are only two paths. To die quickly or to live your life splendidly.”

It reminded me of this passage from Deuteronomy 30 about a similar set of choices: “I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live.” (Deuteronomy 31:19)

Or, to give you just one more illustration, at the national-synodical officers consultation a couple of years ago one of the officers said “If you don't like change, how do you think you will like irrelevance?”

I hope that by now I've at least caught your attention and maybe you are starting to pick up that the changes I want to talk about in the church and in theological education, aren't just about window dressing, but rather are about the very future of both the church and the seminary.

Changes in the Church

There are many changes that have taken, and are taking place in mainline churches in North America, including the ELCIC.

1. For one thing, we are much smaller.

Let's start by looking at the ELCIC. These are the statistics for the number of congregations and baptized membership at five year intervals. The bottom line: in 23 years we are down 9.35% in terms of number of congregations and 26.64% in baptized membership.

Year	# of Congregations	Baptized Membership
1986	663	202,425
1991	662	202,822
1996	650	195,648
2001	632	186,592
2006	619	164,549
2009	601	148,506
% change	9.35%	26.64%

A couple of years ago Jeff Pym did some work looking at the number of small congregations we have in the ELCIC. He arbitrarily chose 50 households as a threshold below which a congregation would probably experience difficulty maintaining full-time pastoral ministry and a "normal" set of programs. He used 100 baptized members as a substitute indicator for the 50 households. (We don't all seem to fill in our parochial information completely!!!)

At that time the average percentage of congregations with fewer than 50 households or 100 baptized membership was 36%, with a low of 19% in the Eastern Synod and a high of 57% in the Saskatchewan Synod. The assumption Jeff made was that many of these congregations, especially if membership is in decline, will face survival issues.

It's not an assumption. It is the reality that we are experiencing.

In an October 6 entry on his "Soft Edges" blog, Jim Taylor quoted a presentation by Jim Hannah, who is part of the United Church ministerial team in Salmon Arm: "Right now the United Church has roughly 3300 congregations. At least one-third of those will be gone in 15 years. In fact, I would guess closer to half will be gone. Look around -- what percentage of your congregation is over 75? How long can they carry on?"¹

We know similar challenges are being faced by our Anglican and Presbyterian colleagues in Canada as well. It's a phenomenon shared with many European churches and our neighbours to the south.

David Housholder's Journal featured a blog entry on September 1 of this year entitled "The Lutherans Sterben Aus (Die Out)."² Not a cheery title. Let me share with you a little bit of what he wrote, because I think there are overlaps with our experience.

He wrote: "Our big problems are demographic....

1) Lutherans don't have enough babies....

Here are confirmation pictures from 1969 and 2004 from the same Lutheran congregation. These trends are the rule, not the exception, for most congregations. Do the math.



2) Lutherans don't retain enough of the babies they have.

3) Lutherans have no clue how to do evangelism which leads to large-scale adult conversion and baptism.

(This one's tough, so hold on.)

4) Many of our congregations are led by informal juntas of empty nesters and retired people which sabotage every step taken to try to create a young-adult-friendly environment, young adults who tend to have babies, by the way.

7) Lutherans are clueless about the communications revolution. Most of them spend half of their office hours producing bulletins and newsletters which are among the poorest quality print media in America, and no one reads them. Most of our pastors don't have blogs or a social media presence of any kind, let alone a podcast, that would hold anyone's attention. Many Lutheran churches have no website or screens in the church.... The mission statements are so vague that Taco Bell could probably use them."

Housholder ends by saying "There will always be Lutherans in America. But we have squandered our "pole position" which we had after WW2. Instead of contributing to the core of the project that is America, we seem to be choosing to be a quirky footnote to life here."

Daniel Aleshire, Executive Director of the Association of Theological Schools, presented a paper at a recent biennial meeting, entitled "The Future Has Arrived: Changing Theological Education in a Changed World."³ In it he makes a very pointed comment addressed at denominations in North America. "Some denominations are stronger, most are weaker, and while each has a loyal constituency, it does not appear that denominations will be the structural center of North American Christianity in the future that they have been in the past."

My second point is:

2. The way others view us and even the way we view ourselves has changed

Brand loyalty is an increasing rare phenomenon in our culture. I remember when I was growing up hearing people say things like "I'm a Ford man". How often is there that kind of intense loyalty anymore?

The same thing is happening in church land as well. Aleshire quotes The Pew U.S. Religious Landscape researchers in their conclusion that "44 percent of adults have either switched religious affiliation, moved from being unaffiliated with any religion to being affiliated with a particular faith, or dropped any connection to a specific religious tradition altogether."

A recent survey conducted by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) revealed how the personal theological views of its lay leaders are influenced by contemporary religious thought in the United States.

They noted that U.S. society has come to a "generic, conservative, evangelical, popular understanding of the Christian faith" that's different from Lutheran tradition, and noted "It's hard for our members to articulate (that difference) because we don't see ourselves as a distinctive kind of Christian, which isn't true at all."

Dr. Kenneth W. Inskip, executive for ELCA Research and Evaluation, went on to say "Pastors have to take more of a proactive role from the pulpit and in other places where they get a chance to teach and deal with the distinctive aspects of what it means to be a Lutheran and contrast those to this generic American Christianity."⁴

I would posit that we suffer similar kinds of challenges here in Canada. The view of Christianity most shown in the media is a similar generic, conservative view. And it's not a positive view.

3. The way we participate has changed

I know this comes as no surprise to you. Reginald Bibby's data on Canadian church attendance suggest that regular attendees are attending less regularly.

One of the interesting notes in terms of participation is the increased participation in house churches. The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life recently reported that seven percent of Americans say they attend religious services in someone's home.⁵

Daniel Aleshire notes that "[f]olks in North America are still going to church—the United States and Canada have the highest estimated percentage of church attenders of any Western democracy—but they are going to church differently than they used to go."⁶

4. Our place in the worldwide church is changing

Every year the Lutheran World Federation publishes membership statistics. This year they reported that the total number of members in churches belonging to the

Lutheran World Federation (LWF) last year rose by 1,589,225 to just over 70 million (70,053,316). 1.2 million of those new members were in African churches.

Three of the top five churches in terms of membership were in decline by between 1 and 2% in the last year - the Church of Sweden, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), and the Evangelical Church in Denmark. The number two and three spots have recently been taken over by churches that are still growing – the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania and the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus.

What does this mean? Well it means that the balance in Lutheranism and indeed in most denominations is shifting south. And it has implications for the way that we work together in bilateral partnerships and in Christian world communions like the LWF. And it means, since Christianity becomes enculturated where it is located, that the dominant strains of Christianity, and indeed Lutheranism, soon won't look very much like the European roots we are used to.

The balance of power is shifting. This was exemplified by the fuller participation of the churches from the Global South at the recent LWF Assembly in Stuttgart.

5. And it's not just about us!

The reality is that working ecumenically is going to increasingly be the norm. The number of shared ministries is increasing, and not just with our full communion partner. It sometimes pushes us in our theology as we work on the ground with clergy and laity from other denominations.

But that is not the only way “it's not about us” anymore. Although the presence of world religions is still a minority in Canada, it is a growing number. More and more of our chaplaincy work is done not ecumenically but on a multi-faith basis. And, as Dan Aleshire notes, the presence of the world's religions takes on an importance disproportionate to its percentage – not that that's a bad thing!

6. We are in desperate need of spiritual renewal

Our church, along with all mainline denominations in North America and Europe, has slowly drifted, over many years, to what I am calling “Christianity Lite.” Over time, we have slowly given in to the demands of our consumer culture and we haven't been willing, or we haven't known how, to challenge ourselves and each other to a full commitment in living out our lives as disciples of Jesus. I know this

is a both a simplification and a generalization, and that it doesn't apply equally in every context.

Yet, it has become clear to me that we are in need of spiritual renewal in the life of our church and in the lives of our members. I feel very strongly that God is calling us to a deeper and more spirited discipleship and to a closer daily walk with our Lord. What might this deeper discipleship look like? I think it includes: regular attendance at worship; daily prayer and scripture reading; yearly involvement in a program of study; regular service in the community (not just the congregation); regular and proportional giving similar to the understanding of the tithe found in scripture; and commitment to sharing the good news with those around us, beginning with our family and friends.

In a recent editor's blog on the site "Work and Hope: Finding Christ in the Church," Jeremy Yoder asked the question "Is MCUSA Doomed? (And Does it Matter?)"⁷

I want to share with you a few comments from his posting.

He asks: "Are we really committed to following Jesus? I have observed an element on the liberal side of the Mennonite Church that has a deep commitment to peace and social justice, but only a nominal commitment to Jesus Christ.... I am concerned about a Christ-less Christianity that I see among some of my fellow travelers who embrace the pursuit of social justice, but seem unsure or indifferent about following Jesus."

Yoder also asks: "How Serious Are We to Sharing the Gospel? Evangelism and evangelical are dirty words in some Mennonite circles because they carry connotations of the Religious Right. However, I wonder whether in our rush to prove that we're not one of *those* Christians, we have failed to present the Gospel story in our churches and our communities in a compelling way.... I recognize, of course, that traditional evangelism makes many of us deeply uncomfortable. But regardless of the type of evangelism we do, they all involve getting out of the comfort zones of our churches and developing relationships with our neighbours and communities."

And finally he notes: "I also believe that part of the current crisis is a result of our failure to evangelize our own children. I was struck by an *article in Mennonite Weekly Review* over whether Sunday School is "becoming extinct" as it fails to compete with other activities. I'm not a fan of the Sunday School model, but I do

believe that if the traditional methods no longer work, we need to deliberately explore and find others. Biblical literacy is an extremely important part of developing faith in the next generation. Do we need to view our own churches as part of the mission field as well?”

The church is experiencing a multitude of changes. And it's not all that surprising – the whole world is changing rapidly.

Douglas Coupland published a piece in the Globe and Mail a month ago entitled “A Radical Pessimist's Guide to the Next 10 Years.”⁸ Let me share with you a few of his suggestions for where the whole planet is headed.



“1) It's going to get worse

No silver linings and no lemonade. The elevator only goes down. The bright note is that the elevator will, at some point, stop. ...

3) The future is going to happen no matter what we do. The future will feel even faster than it does now

The next sets of triumphing technologies are going to happen, no matter who invents them or where or how. Not that technology alone dictates the future, but in the end it always leaves its mark. The only unknown factor is the pace at which new technologies will appear. This technological determinism, with its sense of constantly awaiting a new era-changing technology every day, is one of the hallmarks of the next decade. ...

6) The middle class is over. It's not coming back

Remember travel agents? Remember how they just kind of vanished one day?

That's where all the other jobs that once made us middle-class are going – to that same, magical, class-killing, job-sucking wormhole into which travel-agency jobs vanished, never to return. However, this won't stop people from self-identifying as middle-class, and as the years pass we'll be entering a replay of the antebellum South, when people defined themselves by the social status of their ancestors three generations back. Enjoy the new monoclass! ...

12) Expect less

Not zero, just less. ...

35) Stupid people will be in charge, only to be replaced by ever-stupider people. You will live in a world without kings, only princes in whom our faith is shattered.

...

45) We will accept the obvious truth that we brought this upon ourselves”

“We will accept the obvious truth that we brought this upon ourselves.” That line continues to haunt me!

All of these changes are raising very important questions for the future of our church.

Yoder answers his question “Is MCUSA doomed?” in this way. “Probably not — the word doom carries an idea of finality to it and I don’t believe that the denomination’s future is written in stone. But we are facing a period of contraction, when the church will not have the same amount of resources to embody and live out the mission of God in the world. We do have some hard and painful choices ahead of us. But we also have the opportunity for creativity and innovation — to find new ways of being church in this complicated world.... If the worse case scenario happens and MCUSA ceases to exist, I am also convinced that someone else will pick up where we left off.”⁹

United church pastor Jim Hannah puts it another way: “It is not which churches will survive, but what kinds of churches will survive. They will certainly not be the present one-style-fits-all congregations. Because that style obviously fits only those who are already in it.... What you have to give up is the expectation that the next generation of Christians will be images of you.”¹⁰

So what are some of the implications that these changes in the church might have for Theological Education?

1. The current model we have been training pastors for is about to disappear. I would describe that model as one congregation with a building and a paid full-time pastor who mostly serves in a chaplaincy function to the members of the congregation. Well, it's not going to completely disappear, but it won't be the majority or the norm anymore. I don't know what the norm is going to be. No one does. House churches. Circuit riders travelling to small groups of the faithful over big geographical territories. Faith groups gathered over common mission work. Certainly more shared ministries. It will probably be all of the above and a whole lot more!
2. This has huge implications for what we need the finished product to look like. We need pastors who will not necessarily work full-time in ministry. Or at least they won't be paid full-time by a congregation. They will need to be entrepreneurial by nature. They will need to equip the faithful to do mission and ministry – not do it on their behalf. They will need to work ecumenically and have some understanding of both the multi-faith and no-faith context that they and the faithful with whom they work need to reach out to. They will need to be people of deep faith and deep spiritual practice who can teach and equip others with that faith and those practices.
3. It also has huge implications for the way we do training and the way we do recruiting. What I just described above was not what I felt called to when I went to seminary. And it certainly wasn't what I was trained to do. It's hard to imagine, if all the church can offer is part-time salary, that we will be able to expect people to take four years of full time seminary education. So, baccalaureate education? Trade school? On the job concurrent training? Distance education? On-line? I don't know what the answer will be and it will probably have to be a combination of many things. But it makes me think of what Jim Hannah said: "What you have to give up is the expectation that the next generation of Christians will be images of you." I think it also means that the next generations of seminaries, denominations, pastors, bishops, and professors won't look like images of those of us serving in those roles now.
4. My hunch is that, more and more, seminaries owned by individual denominations will be replaced by those serving multiple denominations. If indeed we are looking at decreases in membership as large as 50% (and

remember we are already down 26%) then in Canada we just will not need as many seminaries. And since more of our leaders will be working in ecumenical shared ministries, well, it just makes sense to train them that way. Or to quote that synodical officer again: “If you don’t like change, how do you think you will like irrelevance?”

5. Finally, the need for lay education will increase. With the role of the clergy diminishing, mostly due to finances, lay leaders will end up doing more and more of the mission and ministry. And that is probably a good thing. But they will need to be equipped both in terms of theological education and in terms of leadership and ministry skills. We do need to help our members be able to define for themselves what it means to be Lutheran rather than just accept the melted down generic version of Christianity that is lifted up in the media.

It’s a lot of change and a lot of unknowns, and I don’t know about you, but sometimes I don’t even want to get out of bed in the morning -- it is just so darn scary.

What I do know is that we are going to have to face these challenges together. The church and the seminary need each other more than ever in the face of a rapidly changing landscape. And sometimes we will try to be protective of our own turf – so what’s new? But we are going to have to get over that!

We’ve always experienced tension, challenges and even discord in the church. We do not all agree about the priorities for mission and ministry for our church. We do not all agree about human sexuality, interpretation of scripture and a variety of other theological and ethical matters. We are a normal church. St. Augustine wrote: “Hope has two beautiful daughters: their names are anger and courage. Anger that things are the way they are. Courage to make them the way they ought to be.” My prayer is that the anger and courage that are found within our church and within this seminary can have their focus based on hope. Hope that our witness, our discipleship, our mission and our ministry will more and more be transformed into a faithful expression of the church and seminary that God wants us to be. Whatever that is!

I know I’ve said it before, but I’m going to say it again... we may not know for sure how things are going to turn out, but we do know that with God they will be good. We will be blessed and God will help us be a blessing to others.

References:

- ¹ <http://edges.canadahomepage.net/2010/10/page/8/> (Accessed December 5, 2010).
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