

# “For the Sake of the Gospel”

## Part I: Confessional Lutheran Identities in the Canadian Context An Overview of Free Conferences

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### 1. Introduction: “For the sake of the Gospel”

Welcome to the first session of this Webinar conference! One of the objectives in the creation of the coordinating group for the Canadian Lutheran History Project has been to focus on cooperation among Lutherans in Canada, and this webinar series is a fruit of this focus.

The overarching theme of this webinar series is “For the sake of the Gospel.” At first, it may seem strange to focus on such a phrase, because it is so obvious—not unlike Sunday School students quickly realizing that the correct answer for almost every question is “Jesus.” Whatever we do, not just as Lutherans, but as Christians, is for the sake of the gospel. That is our reason for being (*raison d’être*). Thus, rather than focussing on the question of “What would Jesus do?”—as posed by Charles Sheldon in his 1890s book, *In His Steps*,<sup>1</sup> a better, clarifying question for Lutherans would be, “how do we live and relate to each other and creation, *for the sake of the gospel of Jesus Christ?*” After all, Jesus himself consistently proclaimed the gospel—the message that breathes life into people, communities, and all creation.

At the heart of Luther’s reformation agenda was his desire to “drive home the gospel,”<sup>2</sup> so that people could hear, see, and experience the gospel. Nothing was more important. It governed his approach to pastoral care and informed his methodology for translating the Bible. For example, the *Small Catechism* is saturated with his single-minded focus on driving home the gospel so that people could see the gospel in all creation and to help their neighbour for the sake of that same Gospel. That was Luther’s focus and, dare I say, it has been a central theme in our history as Lutherans in Canada.

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<sup>1</sup> Charles M. Sheldon, *In His Steps: What Would Jesus Do?* (New York: Wilbur B. Ketcham, 1896)

<sup>2</sup> Luther uses the phrase “*was Christum treibt*” in the “Preface to the Epistles of St. James and St. Jude (1546),” LW 35:396; WA DB 7:384,27-29. See also Timothy J. Wengert, *Reading the Bible with Martin Luther: An Introductory Guide* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), vii, 5, 10-11. Often translated as “what inculcates Christ,” this translation misses, I think, the sense of the ‘immediacy’ and forceful impact that Luther intended.

This focus on the gospel is also the primary mission of the church. Christ's birth, life, death, and resurrection are proclaimed in order to drive—or to use a word hardly used anymore, *inculcate*—Christ into a legalistically ruled and personal-rights centered society. The church is called do everything for the sake of the gospel. This is what forms and shapes our confessional identity as Lutherans, and as Christians.

## 2. Confessional Lutheranism

To emphasize the gospel, I therefore teach a course that is very deliberately called “Confessional Lutheranism in the Canadian Context.” It is a course on the history of the Lutheran Church in Canada. But I added “confessional” in the title for a reason: I got tired of the labels of liberal or conservative being applied to Lutherans. The problem with these terms is that they point to human-defined doctrinal positions, often cemented in place, as rigid as the rocks in the Cambrian Shield that cut a wide swath through Canada. Such labels also reduce churches to stereotypes, and they are not helpful in defining Lutherans. Searching for alternatives, I chose the term “confessional,” because it better captures what our encounter with the gospel drives us to do: to confess the crucified and risen Christ with Peter and all the apostles, who, when Christ Jesus asked them who they thought he was, declared: “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” This is “confessionalism” at its finest.

Unfortunately, “Confessional Lutheranism” does not have a positive connotation in many circles. More often, it has been used to describe a rigid, literal, and dogmatic approach from the last half of the sixteenth century. It described the Lutheran position in its conflicts with the Reformed and Roman Catholic churches in the “confessional battles” of that era. Unfortunately, Christ and the gospel were often squeezed out of the picture in these battles over orthodoxy.

It was Douglas John Hall, a United Church theologian, who helped me reclaim the helpful perspective on “Confessional Lutheranism.” In his three-volume systematic theology,<sup>3</sup> he made a distinction between professing the faith and confessing the faith. Professing the faith, he said, means correctly describing teachings or doctrines. This, for example, is an approach a professor would use in teaching a world religions course. One would want to be objective about each tradition, rather than constantly comparing them to a tradition deemed “superior.” “Confessing the faith,” however, involves a sense of ‘standing with’—to take a position that engages one’s whole being. To confess the faith is to echo Luther’s stance at the Diet of Worms, when pushed into a corner with no way out, allegedly said, “Here I stand I can do no other, so help me God.”<sup>4</sup> Confessional Lutheranism, then, in its most positive sense, is about discipleship, about trusting the

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<sup>3</sup> Douglas John Hall, *Thinking the Faith* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989); *Professing the Faith* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993); and finally, *Confessing the Faith* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996).

<sup>4</sup> “Proceedings at the Diet of Worms (1521),” LW 32:115; WA 7:838,9. These words are given in German in the Latin text upon which this translation is based. There is good evidence, however, that Luther actually said only: “May God help me!” Cf. *Deutsche Reichstagsakten, Vol. II: Deutsche Reichstagsakten unter Kaiser Karl V* (Gotha, 1896), 587.

Christ with our lives ... *for the sake of the gospel*. And that should be what governs our church: we are placed in the world for the sake of the gospel. So, I have come to appreciate the term, “Confessional Lutheranism,” because it is about a Lutheranism that places its priority on confessing the One who gives the gospel, the One in whom we believe, and not simply an identity based on a list of what doctrines we subscribe to. The term, “Confessional” is thus used in a relational, rather than doctrinal, sense.

This focus on a confessional Lutheranism concentrated on the gospel has formed the basis for every promising result that has come out of Lutheran free conferences in the North American context. When the driving purpose of a free conference was for the sake of the gospel, it opened doors to potential agreements among Lutherans. But when this central focus was missing, the conversations have been more difficult. We will now explore this further, as we turn to the history of Free Conferences, with their successes and challenges.

### **3. History and Purpose of Free Conferences**

All Lutheran churches would claim to be engaged in the proclamation of the gospel. It’s a part of our Lutheran DNA, woven into our calling. Yes, there have been times when we’ve been caught up in doctrinal disputes and have spent much time and energy ‘defending our territory.’ But Lutherans have generally tried to keep the proclamation of the gospel the centre of focus. And it is this commitment to the gospel, along with the desire to proclaim the gospel as effectively as possible, that has caused us, throughout our history in Canada, to look for opportunities to come together and seek consensus across the boundaries of our specific Lutheran church affiliations.

One of the most helpful ways of seeking consensus on the gospel have been free conferences. They have provided space for Lutherans to clarify what is the gospel in each time and place, reflecting our commitment for it to be historically rooted yet contextually engaged. Mark Menacher stated, “When Lutherans face serious issues that threaten their confessional or ecclesial identity, or when they seek to advance changes in relation to these or other cultural and social concerns, they often convene theologians, pastors, and church members regardless of synodical affiliation in free conferences.”<sup>5</sup> They create a forum for conversation.

Free conferences were first held in Germany, when groups of Lutherans rebelled against the forced union of the Lutheran and Reformed Churches by Kaiser Frederick Wilhelm III in 1830. This newly minted union church in Germany had modified, among other things, the Lutheran position on baptism and the Lord’s Supper. In response, a significant number of Lutherans chose to leave Germany rather than submit to what they considered a ‘watered down’ sacramental theology. They decided that their only course of action was to sail to North America and thus avoid becoming a part of the German Union Church. But no sooner had they arrived in North America

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<sup>5</sup> Mark D. Menacher, “Independent Lutheran Organizations,” in *Dictionary of Luther and the Lutheran Traditions*, ed. Timothy J. Wengert (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 361.

than they discovered that Samuel Simon Schmucker, the leader of the General Synod and President of Gettysburg Seminary, was advocating for similar revisions to the Augsburg Confession in order to make it more acceptable to the North American context.<sup>6</sup> Among other things, Schmucker wanted to remove the teaching of baptismal regeneration and the insistence on the real, bodily presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper. Most Lutherans, however, rejected these proposed revisions to the 1530 Unaltered Augsburg Confession, a document that had shaped their confessional stance for over three hundred years. As a result of Schmucker's proposal, a theological "civil war" broke out among the members of the General Synod, of which he was the head. The confessional identity of Lutheranism was being challenged and Lutheranism began to fragment.

Two responses to this challenge to Lutheranism developed. First, Lutheran leaders saw this as an ideal time to explore new possibilities, using free conferences as a way to explore the way forward in light of a common, agreed upon confessional identity, rooted in the Unaltered Augsburg Confession. Thus, shortly after the "American Recension of the Augsburg Confession" appeared, C.F.W. Walther, the president of the Missouri Synod, issued an open invitation in 1856 to "truly believing Lutherans" to attend a free conference to discuss the implications of Schmucker's proposal. In his invitation to this free conference, Walther wrote:

Our brothers in Germany, working apart in various state churches, have utilized free conferences, religious assemblies, etc., as a means toward the promotion of their unity in faith and confession. ... there is no way more fitting ... for awakened individuals within the various church bodies to strengthen and advance the church unity which has become apparent. ...

So we venture openly to inquire: Would not meetings, held at intervals, by such members of churches as call themselves Lutheran and acknowledge and confess without reservation that the Unaltered Augsburg Confession of 1530 is the pure and true statement of the doctrine of sacred Scripture and is also their own belief, promote and advance the efforts toward the final establishment of one single Evangelical Lutheran Church of America? We for our part would be ready with all our heart to take part in such a conference of truly believing Lutherans whenever and wherever such a conference would be held.<sup>7</sup>

Walther's pleas were successful. From 1856 to 1859, annual free conferences were held.

While these exploratory meetings were called free conferences, the term was somewhat misleading, since not everyone was invited. Walther insisted that all participants accept the *Unaltered Augsburg Confession* as the basis for participation. This automatically ruled out

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<sup>6</sup> In an article commonly referred to as the "*Definite Synodical Platform*," or the "*American Recension of the Augsburg Confession*," he proposed that five basic revisions to the Augsburg Confession were needed to adapt it to the North American context. Samuel Simon Schmucker, *Definite Platform, Doctrinal and Disciplinary for Evangelical Lutheran District Synods: Constructed in Accordance with the Principles of the General Synod* (Philadelphia: Miller & Burlock, 1855).

<sup>7</sup> Eric Lund and Mark Granquist, eds., *A Documentary History of Lutheranism*, vol. 2 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017), 151. From: Richard C. Wolf, ed., *Documents of Lutheran Unity in America* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1964), 107-8.

supporters of the 1540 *Variata* of the Augsburg Confession or Schmucker's version. To emphasize this commitment to the Unaltered Augsburg Confession, the first few free conferences focused on a study of its teachings. These free conferences, then, were literally a course on the Augsburg Confession, open to clergy and laity alike.

Walther's proposal for free conferences also had a number of surprises. Perhaps the most striking was his call for the formation of "one single Evangelical Lutheran Church of America." His desire for the formation of a unified Lutheran Church was taken seriously, and the first free conferences drew many participants from many different Lutheran synodical bodies. The free conferences supplied a venue for exploring their options. The advent of the American Civil War derailed progress, however.<sup>8</sup> Yet, shortly after the end of the civil war, the free conferences were revived, eventually leading to the formation of the Synodical Conference in 1872.<sup>9</sup>

The second approach to free conferences was the path eventually taken by disgruntled General Synod members. Also inspired by the free conferences of the 1850s, they hosted their own series of free conferences beginning in 1866. They explored the formation of a Lutheran church body based on acceptance of the Unaltered Augsburg Confession, with the proviso of working out all doctrinal or policy differences after such a merger was accomplished.<sup>10</sup> At the first of these free conferences, held a year after the American Civil War had ended, Charles Porterfield Krauth, the head of the newly established Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia and a fierce opponent of Schmucker, proposed the formation of a Lutheran body comprised of those who so desired it. However, representatives of the Missouri and Norwegian synods, who were invited to the table for discussions, felt that the formation of the council was premature, since in their minds, complete doctrinal agreement was first needed. Others questioned whether the other participants took the Augsburg Confession as seriously as they did themselves. Thus, the Missouri and Ohio Synods, joined by the Norwegian Synod, urged that further free conferences to work out all doctrinal differences prior to any sort of union.<sup>11</sup> Krauth impatiently responded to their concerns by stating,

In a free Conference we may discuss questions, but we decide nothing definitely, and bind nothing. In a general church organization these questions can be decided for those who are within it—and definitely so, so far as the decision does not oppress the conscience. All who can acknowledge each other as Lutherans in a free conference, can, with equally good conscience, unite in a general church organization of the Synods they thus acknowledge. The very fact of their being really and truly Lutherans should prevent them from continuing separate; it should bring them together in one united organized body. Even in a free conference there would have to be an acknowledgement of each other as Lutherans before

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<sup>8</sup> Mary Todd, *Authority Vested: A Story of Identity and Change in the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 88.

<sup>9</sup> E. Clifford Nelson, ed., *The Lutherans in North America*. Revised Edition (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 247-48; Todd, *Authority Vested*, 89.

<sup>10</sup> Nelson, *The Lutherans in North America*, 229, 247-48.

<sup>11</sup> Todd, *Authority Vested*, 89.

we came together.... Let those of us who are prepared, unite in an organization and invite our brethren ... to come to us for a free conference on the points not settled.<sup>12</sup>

In effect, Krauth proposed that the Lutheran churches begin cooperative work together at once, while continuing negotiations over matters not yet agreed upon.<sup>13</sup> Needless to say, the Missouri and Norwegian Synods did not agree to this proposal. But that did not stop Krauth. His call for unity attracted many Lutherans, and they quickly formed the General Council in November of 1867.<sup>14</sup> After the formation of the Synodical Conference in 1872, there were now three main Lutheran bodies in North America: The General Synod (1820), the General Council (1867), and the Synodical Conference (1872).

Not all free conferences had, as their primary agenda, the formation of a new Lutheran Church. Sometimes, the conferences focussed on healing old wounds. For example, a free conference was held in the fall of 1877 in an attempt to heal the rift between the General Synod and the General Council. This “free diet, as it was called,” was held in December of 1877 in Philadelphia, and was attended by 120 pastors and students, and about 50 laity, from a wide range of Lutheran churches. It was the first time the leaders of these two groups had met in conference since their split.<sup>15</sup> The “rules” for these free diets were similar to the original ground rules for the free conferences. The Unaltered Augsburg Confession was agreed to as the foundation document, and each person was to speak as an individual, and not for a church body or congregation. Nor was the purpose of the conference to impose “standards” or “decisions” upon church bodies. These principles supplied the foundation for good discussion, and in this case led to the formation of the United Lutheran Church in America (ULCA) in 1918.<sup>16</sup>

The free conference model was also proposed by Lutherans on the international level. For example, when the Lutheran World Convention met in Eisenach in 1923 to explore forming an international Lutheran body (which eventually became the Lutheran World Federation in 1947), the LC-MS called for “a ‘free conference’ model, rather than a legislative or policy making Convention, so that its decisions would not be binding. Others strongly supported [this] proposal “to give world Lutheranism an enduring voice.”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Adolph Spaeth, *Charles Porterfield Krauth*, Two Volumes (New York; Philadelphia: The Christian Literature Company; General Council Publication House, 1898–1909), 2:175.

<sup>13</sup> A similar approach was actually proposed by the ELCIC in 1999, when it invited the LC-C to join with an interim sharing of the eucharist as a first step, and then beginning to work through theological differences later. See ELCIC NC 99-35, Jubilee: In Christ Called to a New Beginning, Minutes, Seventh Biennial Convention, Evangelical Lutheran Church of Canada, Regina Saskatchewan, July 7-11, 1999 (Winnipeg: ELCIC, 1999), 38.

<sup>14</sup> Spaeth, *Krauth*, 2:183.

<sup>15</sup> Spaeth, *Krauth*, 324–325.

<sup>16</sup> Richard O. Johnson, “General Council of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in North America,” in *Dictionary of Luther and the Lutheran Traditions*, ed. Timothy J. Wengert (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 278.

<sup>17</sup> Eric W. Gritsch, *Fortress Introduction to Lutheranism* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 84.

Not all free conferences had as their agenda, discussions that might later be useful in merger negotiations or creating affiliated church bodies. Some free conferences discussed “difficult theological questions” especially in a world of increasing polarization in the church because of synodical positions taken. One series of free conferences, held between 1903–1907, wrestled with questions of conversion and predestination.<sup>18</sup> This topic was first raised in 1868 at a Northern District of the Missouri Synod, and then exploded into open debate in 1877, after a presentation by Walther at the Western District of the Missouri Synod.<sup>19</sup> The eventual result of these free, or intersynodical conferences, was that the Ohio and Iowa Synods, often at odds with one another, took one position and Missouri another. The free conferences served to clarify the differences in opinion among these bodies, rather than bring them together.

More recently, a series of free conferences facilitated open discussion in the ELCA about the document *Called to Common Mission* (1999), an accord with the Episcopal Church USA.<sup>20</sup> These conferences helped to inform its participants about the accord. In a similar vein, the *Luther Academy*, based in the United States, has also sponsored free conferences for many years, with the goal of fostering “Lutheran confessional identity and fidelity across Lutheran synods,”<sup>21</sup> without jurisdictional strictures. One of the greatest strengths of these free conferences has been to “create space for dialogue”—as all participants remind each other of their common commitment to the Gospel. These free conferences are “for the sake of the gospel.”

#### 4. Canadian Free Conferences

The examples of free conferences, to this point, have all involved Lutheran churches based in the United States. But it must not be forgotten that the Canadian Lutheran church also has a long history of free conferences. For example, Frank Malinsky, in his history of the LC-MS Ontario District, reported that:

A series of free conferences in Ontario between representatives of the Canada Synod and the Missouri Synod date back to 1872. In anticipation of the third of these conferences in 1892, the Canada Synod’s *Kirchenblatt* reported: “The differences in doctrine, as they are, are not of such a nature that they cannot be overcome by brotherly discussion” and added the proposal that joint pastoral conferences be held for doctrinal discussions, and that if unity were attained an independent synod would be organized to work in the interest of the Lutheran Church in Canada.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> James W. Richard, *The Confessional History of the Lutheran Church* (Philadelphia: Lutheran Publication Society, 1909), 620–621.

<sup>19</sup> Meuser, *The Formation of the American Lutheran Church*, 64,

<sup>20</sup> Menacher, “Independent Lutheran Organizations,” 361.

<sup>21</sup> Menacher, “Independent Lutheran Organizations,” 361.

<sup>22</sup> Frank Malinsky, *Grace and Blessing, A History of the Ontario District of the Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod*, (n.p., 1954), 45ff.).

A second significant Free Conference in Canada happened in 1944, when the Canada Lutheran Home Mission Conference was held in Saskatoon. One of the agenda items was to consider the organization of a Canadian Lutheran Council. As the document, *Affirmation and Appeal* noted, “Represented at this free conference were: The American Lutheran Church, Augustana Synod, Canada Synod (ULCA), Lutheran Free Church, Manitoba Synod (ULCA), Norwegian Lutheran Church, and United Danish Lutheran Church.”<sup>23</sup> The Canadian districts of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod participants were not formally represented at this free conference,<sup>24</sup> but they did have representation.

In that same year (1944), the first of a series of Free Conferences were held to discuss theological education in western Canada, and potential ways of cooperation between the two seminaries in Saskatoon, namely the Lutheran College and Seminary, which was primarily German and Swedish, and owned by the United Lutheran Church in America, and Luther Theological Seminary, which was primarily Norwegian and owned by the Evangelical Lutheran Church.<sup>25</sup> At the first of the free conferences, they debated about where a shared seminary building in Saskatoon would be located, how to finance the building, and ownership of new buildings. However, when the Canada District of the Evangelical Lutheran Church (CD-ELC) built its own seminary at 212 Wiggins Avenue in 1947, the final two free conferences focussed on other matters of mutual concern, including how to continue to share classes, given the distance between the schools. These conversations eventually paid off, when the two Saskatoon seminaries signed a Covenant of Cooperation in 1962, and they would finally merge in 1965 and open a new building on the campus of the University of Saskatchewan in 1968 under the name, Lutheran Theological Seminary.<sup>26</sup>

Free conferences provided a forum for discussing theological education in Western Canada. But free conferences were also a place where the merger of church bodies were considered in open dialogue. As Norm Threinen reports,

After a meeting of American Lutheran Conference in May, 1951 a free conference took place in December that year which included also the other two Lutheran bodies active in Canada: the U.L.C.A (now part of the L.C.A) and the Missouri Synod. The major topics discussed at that meeting were “What are our common grounds toward closer unity or a

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<sup>23</sup> *Affirmation and Appeal: Concerning Lutheran Altar and Pulpit Fellowship in Canada, A Statement of Consensus, adopted December 10, 1970* (Winnipeg: JCILR, 1970), 3, note 4).

<sup>24</sup> Threinen notes, “the Canada Home Mission Conference concluded there was unity of doctrine among the Lutheran bodies represented without doctrinal discussions having been held. The absence of such discussions on the conference agenda was probably one reason why the Missouri Synod did not officially participate in the proceedings; free conferences, as the Missouri Synod viewed them, were intended to discuss doctrinal matters.” Norman J. Threinen, *Fifty Years of Lutheran Convergence: The Canadian Case Study*, Lutheran Historical Conference Publication No. 3 (Dubuque: Wm. C. Brown Co. Publishers, 1983), 81.

<sup>25</sup> These free conferences were held in 1944, 1948, and 1950 in Saskatoon. See George Evenson, *Adventuring for Christ* (Calgary: Foothills Lutheran Press, 1974), 187; and John Judt. “The History of the Canada District of the American Lutheran Church,” B.D. Thesis (Saskatoon: Lutheran College and Seminary, 1946), 94-98.

<sup>26</sup> Evenson, *Adventuring in Christ*, 232-35.

merger of the Canadian Lutheran Churches?”, “What things constitute real or imaginary barriers to such a closer union or merger?”, and “What steps can be taken to cement closer ties and overcome present obstacles to a closer unity or a merger of the Canadian Lutheran Churches?”<sup>27</sup>

The Lutheran churches in Western Canada were quick to explore the possibilities for mergers, based on the enthusiasm for such a project expressed at the free conferences. A conversation held on a train ride between Regina and Saskatoon in May of 1953 led to the planning of the Free Conference entitled “*Today-Tomorrow*,” that was held in 1954.<sup>28</sup> More will be said about this free conference in the next webinar. However, I would note that the vision for a western Canadian Lutheran Church was expanded two years later, when representatives from Lutheran Church Canada joined in on what were called “Exploratory Conversations Looking Toward an Indigenous Lutheran Church in Canada,” at a 1956 meeting in Kitchener, Ontario. At this meeting, the tantalizing vision for Lutheran unity in Canada became nationwide and all-inclusive. The 1958 Winnipeg meeting, for instance, was attended by fifty-five representatives and observers. The agendas for these annual free, or exploratory, conferences displayed a wide range of presentations, covering both doctrinal and practical considerations involved in the possible establishment of one Lutheran Church in Canada.<sup>29</sup> When the 1959 conference was held (also in Winnipeg), “the participants decided that in view of the mergers soon to be consummated” [forming the ALC and the LCA in 1960 and 1962, respectively], a more realistic goal of “the establishment of pulpit and altar fellowship among all Lutherans” was more feasible.<sup>30</sup> Nevertheless, the annual free conferences continued.

The Canada District of the American Lutheran Church became an autonomous Lutheran Church in Canada in 1967 and took the name, Evangelical Lutheran Church of Canada (the ELCC). Soon after, in 1969, altar and pulpit fellowship was established between the LC-MS, on the one hand, and the ALC and the ELCC on the other. However, the LCA was not included in the altar and pulpit agreement. Thus, to complete the process in Canada and bring the LCA-CS into altar and pulpit fellowship agreement in Canada, the Joint Commission on Inter Lutheran Relationships (JCILR) met in 1969. The proceedings of this meeting were later “published and distributed [in] the brochure *Affirmation and Appeal*, dated December 10, 1970.”<sup>31</sup> While the end result was not Altar and Pulpit Fellowship, it did provide a foundation for later merger discussions and the

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<sup>27</sup> Norman J. Threinen, *Toward Union: Lutheran Merger Negotiations in Canada 1972-1978* (Winnipeg: Lutheran Council in Canada, 1979), 17.

<sup>28</sup> W.A. Mehlenbacher, “Rungs in the Ladder,” *Messages Given at the Canada Lutheran “Today-Tomorrow” Conference, Under the direction of the Canadian Lutheran Council* (Winnipeg: Canadian Lutheran Council, 1955), 3.

<sup>29</sup> *Affirmation and Appeal*, 4. See also “Exhibit A,” *Affirmation and Appeal*, 19. See also Evenson, *Adventuring for Christ*, 223.

<sup>30</sup> Evenson, *Adventuring for Christ*, 223-24.

<sup>31</sup> Evenson, *Adventuring for Christ*, 223-24.

eventual merger of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Canada (ELCC) and the Lutheran Church in America-Canada Section (LCA-CD) in 1986.

## **5. Benefits of Free Conferences for the Future**

When denominational bodies gather in convention for the business of their particular church, there is always a sense of “self-preservation.” The “default” mode for decision making, in these situations, is most often based on what decisions best guarantee the survival of their church body. While some may dismiss this approach for being too insular, especially in a multicultural and religiously diverse world, such an approach does have its benefit. Church networks and organizations provide a certain structural framework so that the church can actually be engaged in ministry “for the sake of the gospel.” But the tendency toward self-preservation can also cause the church to become so curved in on itself (*incurvatus se*), or what Luther called the original sin, that it can forget the purpose of the church—to proclaim the gospel, through word, sacrament and service, in the community and in the world. It is easy to slip into the mindset of asking, “what’s best for our church?” thus forgetting that the purpose of the church is, first and foremost, for the sake of the gospel. The question of “why” the church does something takes precedence over the question of “what” the church is doing. The church is to be outward looking, or, to use the language popular in Lutheran churches today, a diaconal church, engaged in service and ministry, not to itself, but to the world.

Free conferences provide some important advantages over institutional church meetings or conventions. First, free conferences are not caught up in ‘trying to survive.’ Rather, they are free to explore the ‘why,’ that is, the purpose of the church. This ‘why’ question invariably should lead Lutheran churches back to their stated purpose of proclaiming the gospel. That is the purpose for being a church. Second, free conferences provide engaged church members a vehicle by which they can move away from the responsibilities of representing the official position of the church bodies, and have open and frank conversations, while getting to know each other as people of God, rather than having only stereotypes of each other. As people get to know each other better, and discover their common commitments, they can better wrestle with and explore the best ways of understanding and engaging the world for the sake of the gospel.

In the past, free conferences often provided a forum for discussion, which led to Lutheran churches coming closer together. But free conferences may also cause Lutherans to explore the ways in which different churches might take a variety of approaches in proclaiming the gospel in their specific context. In a setting where conversations are held, rather than decisions made, there exists a freedom to try different approaches, while still respecting the commitment to the gospel by other Lutherans even when there is not total agreement on all doctrines, policies, or positions on a multitude of social issues facing our world.

## 6. Conclusion

Free conferences have been a staple in Lutheran circles in the United States and Canada for over a hundred and fifty years. But they are not unique to Lutherans. They sometimes go by different names. For example, in ecumenical circles, a distinction is made between “conversations” and “dialogue.” Conversations reflect the tradition of free conferences. Conversation allows participants to get to know each other better, laying the foundation for freely discussing the possible strengths and weaknesses, obstacles and opportunities that might come out of further, more formal conversations. Conversations have as their goal, as do truly free conferences, providing a venue in which people can freely explore their faith and its consequences, without having to be a representative of any particular synod or denomination, and without having to develop policies and motions that narrow down the options and directions a particular church may decide to formally embark upon. In a society where the polarization of positions among churches in general, and not just Lutheran churches, continues to increase, often leading to further isolation from each other, we need a forum in which we can talk about the issues that confront us in an open and respectful way. In short, I propose that we need to resurrect free conferences, not only among Lutherans, but among other denominations, and, indeed, people of other faiths, and people who do not relate to any religious tradition. But we need to talk, to get to know each other as people, not stereotypes.

The principles of free conferences today can also be useful in congregational and parish settings. In one of the parishes I had the privilege of serving as a pastor, before we began each and every church council meeting, to do the business of the church, we spent at least half an hour talking. We took the time to discuss what was happening in our community, and how we could proclaim the gospel in that time and place. This simple exercise, this “regularly occurring free conference” helped the congregation focus on what was the most important task as a congregation, namely proclaiming the gospel. This little exercise also shifted the focus away from getting caught up in the minutiae of whether the carpet runners should be blue or red, or whether we should use a wireless microphone or have fixed microphones on the pulpit, lectern, and altar. It also shaped how the council made decisions about how much ‘benevolence’ should be sent on to the synod office, and how much should be safe and secure in the bank. It is much more productive—and interesting—to explore what is best for the sake of the gospel. Free conferences, in whatever form they take—whether it be locally, in our synods or districts, or nationally—give people a chance to explore different perspectives about what to do for the sake of the gospel. This is, I would argue, confessional Lutheranism at its finest. The church is always at its best when it is driven by a focus on the gospel. It puts things into perspective and orders our priorities in a life-giving way.

I would humbly argue that the revival of the free conference tradition would be a most helpful step in helping Lutheran churches move away from their increasing, and even unconscious, tendency to further isolate themselves from each other in an attempt to survive. Opportunities are needed for honest conversation. Such conversations or free conferences today would focus on becoming comfortable with talking with each other once again about the centrality and focus of

the gospel of Jesus Christ, who breathes life into all people and all creation. We need to meet together, not so that we can push a hidden agenda for some sort of merger sometime in the future, as many of the earlier free conferences did. I don't think we are in that space anymore. Rather, what we need now, for the sake of the gospel, is to gather together to talk, discuss, and be inspired by the presence of the Spirit and by mutual conversation with one another, for the sake of the gospel. We need opportunities to reflect on the gospel which brings us together, and which the world needs to experience.