

Reclaiming Our Birthright ~ An Empty Place at the Table

Allan Grundahl and Gordon Jensen write their church...

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ;

Grace to you and peace from the one who walks with us and breaks the bread in our midst so that we can recognize the risen Christ (*Luke 24:13-35*)!

The scenario is all too familiar. The people of a congregation without a called pastor long for a regular, weekly celebration of the feast of our Lord. An interim ministry is perhaps not possible. The people are caught on the horns of a dilemma: they want to be faithful to the Lutheran tradition of weekly proclamation of the Word and the celebration of the Eucharist, given for the forgiveness of sins, and yet, there is no ordained pastor to preside over this important ministry. The normative practice for Lutherans is that no one should publicly teach, preach, or administer the sacraments without a proper or public call (*Augsburg Confession 14*) and that the sacraments be administered only by the ordained (*Augsburg Confession 5*). So what do we do when there is no ordained pastor available? This is the situation that many congregations face in the ELCIC, and it is a question that our bishops are facing with increasing regularity.

The simplest long term solution to this dilemma would be to increase the number of pastors in the ELCIC. Yet this option is somewhat idealistic in that it only reveals one side of the solution. It does not matter how many pastors are available if the congregations are not able to adequately support them spiritually and physically. Clearly, one of the goals or priorities of the church is to pray for, and recruit more suitable candidates for the ordained ministry, and to be wise stewards of our resources so that we can provide for ordained ministry.

In the meantime, there are many possible alternatives that the church might further explore. Some possible options to consider are:

- 1) *The provision of interim pastoral ministry by retired clergy or clergy from non-parish settings.* This has probably been the most common practice in the ELCIC up to this point in time. An interim minister generally provides, or arranges pastoral care for the congregation on an interim basis, while a congregation is in the call process. This option is fine as long as there are willing and available clergy in the vicinity of the vacant congregation.
- 2) *The development of new arrangements or parish alignments with neighbouring Lutheran or Anglican churches.* The first possibility (Lutherans with Lutherans) has always been an option. In times of shortages, pastors became "circuit riders." With this option, not all congregations would necessarily be able to celebrate Holy Communion weekly, but a ministry of Word and Sacrament would be available on a rotational basis. Parish realignments may provide the participating congregations with a regular ministry of Word and Sacrament by an ordained pastor. Parish re-alignments could also take place with an Anglican parish (Lutherans with Anglicans), since the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada and Anglican Church of Canada entered into full communion in 2001. Parish realignments with Anglicans would provide for the weekly celebration of the Eucharist, while also reminding us that the church, the Body of Christ, is greater than our own congregation or church affiliation. This option, however, is not always possible. Where it is possible, it should be seriously considered.

- 3) *The development of an alternative path to ordination.* This option, recently approved by Lutheran Church-Canada, would involve the ordination of a publicly-called member of a congregation to serve in that same congregation in a ministry of Word and Sacrament. The person ordained for ministry in that particular congregation would not be eligible for call to another congregation. This option raises some significant questions and implications. What are the respective roles of the congregational church and the wider church? If this option is taken to be a “fast-track” possibility, what does this say about the value of theological education? Would the seminaries be undermined in their work by such an approach? Would the creation of an alternative path to ordination lead to the development of a two-tiered clergy roster? Would this be desirable? This option would require a great deal of serious work to be fully acceptable.
- 4) *Licensing “lay professionals” in specific situations.* This option is a variation of the third proposal without benefit of ordination: a lay person is licensed by the bishop to provide a ministry of Word and Sacrament in a specific congregation. Again, this alternative may seem attractive, especially when a congregation is under financial constraints. However, such licensing deviates from the norm of the Augsburg Confession to which our church subscribes. Further, this practice is not widely accepted by other churches in which a ministry of Word and Sacrament is taken seriously.
- 5) *The development of a process and rite for the distribution of the sacrament to a congregation or parish in special situations.* Another option that the church needs to discuss is the possibility of a process in which the elements of the Holy Communion, celebrated at an earlier gathering of a congregation, are taken and distributed to another congregation that is without an ordained minister. A variation of this option has been adopted by the Church of England. This option is also not without problems. The *Formula of Concord: Solid Declaration* states that the reservation of the sacraments is not to be practised in Lutheran Congregations (7:14-15). It is understood that the sacrament does not exist apart from the word of promise spoken in the gathered community. What, then, distinguishes this practice from the distribution of sacrament to those in special circumstances, as already practised by the ELCIC? Simply that in the distribution of the sacrament to those in special circumstances, the sacrament is administered to those who are a part of the gathered congregation. In the case of a vacant congregation, this practice would be viable only if the vacant congregation became a part of the celebrating congregation or parish “family.”

At the present time, only the first two options have church-wide acceptance . If we are serious about a weekly feast of Word and Sacrament for the whole people of God, however, we need to consider alternatives, including those suggested above. We cannot do this on our own. It is important to work in partnership with the Anglican Church of Canada and with all others who take seriously a ministry of Word and Sacrament. It is hoped that the whole church will work at coming up with options that are acceptable to all, given their traditions and Eucharistic practices and teachings. In the meantime, there are people of God who are not able to be nourished at the table of the Lord. Too many tables are bare, wanting for the presence of a presiding minister.

We pray that God will provide labourers for the harvest (*Matthew 9:37-38*), and that the labourers will be adequately provided for (*1 Timothy 5:17-18*). We try to be faithful to our Scriptures and to the Lutheran Confessions, so that all are faithfully nourished in Word and Sacrament. We need that food. Often. We need it for our sake, and for the sake of our malnourished world, which seeks life, and life in all its fullness.

Yours in Christ,

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