

Minneapolis Area Synod 20th
Anniversary Banquet
St. Andrew Lutheran Church
Eden Prairie, MN
April 18, 2008

My assignment tonight is to deliver a scintillating, spell-binding address on the formation of the ELCA - and to do it in about five minutes. I have one word of advice: fasten your seat belts!

To understand the formation of the ELCA you have to go back at least a half century. In the 1950s all Lutherans were in ethnic enclaves. There were German Lutherans, and Norwegian Lutherans, and Danish Lutheran, and Finnish Lutherans and Swedish Lutherans, and on and on. It was very boring.

In 1960, for the first time, some Lutherans said, "Let's have some fun. Let's get together."
That's when the American Lutheran Church - the ALC -- was formed, bringing together Germans, Danes and, and of all things, Norwegians.

That prompted others to say, "That does look like fun. Let's get together, too." So, three years later the Lutheran Church in America - the LCA - was born. This time it was Germans, Danes, Finns and, of all things, Swedes.

Suddenly, there was so much enthusiasm for Lutheran merger that there was even talk that the Missouri Synod might join in the fun and games. That would mean a single 8 million member church.

Well, all that hope went down the tubes in 1970 when the Missouri Synod took off to the right and never came back. In reaction a small group - the AELC - broke from Missouri.

As we moved into the 1970s the question was whether three churches - ALC, LCA and AELC - should merge. In 1982 they met simultaneously at three locations to vote on whether to move toward one church - the AELC in Cleveland; the LCA in Louisville; the ALC in San Diego. Why San Diego? Well, there were some folks in the ALC who didn't like the idea of a merger. If the vote was favorable, being in San Diego would make it easy for them to board a ship and sail off to New Zealand or some distant land.

The three conventions were linked by telephone. First came word from Cleveland - the AELC, as expected, voted 100% in favor of merger. Then from Louisville - the LCA, as expected, approved the resolution by more than 94%. Would the ALC get the necessary 2/3 vote? When Bishop David Preus announced that the ALC vote was more than 90% in favor pandemonium broke out at all three sites. You had to be there to know how exciting it was.

Corinne and I were in Louisville. She grew up in the ALC, I in the LC A. She was in the visitors' section, I on the floor of delegates. When the announcement came from San Diego she rushed to the floor and embraced me. We wept. After 28 years of living together we were finally full married!

At those three conventions the three churches elected a representative group of 70 people to lay the groundwork for the new church. It was called the Commission for a New Lutheran Church - the CNLC. Over the next five years that Commission worked hard to develop all the documents needed for the new church. We agreed quickly and easily on most theological questions.

Three questions loomed large as we moved to the end of that process -

- Where should we locate the headquarters?
- What should be our name?
- And, who will be the BIG bishop?

The CNLC was deadlocked between Minneapolis and Chicago. So we compromised and chose Milwaukee. Whoa! Locate the headquarters in the city that made beer famous? No way! So we backtracked and opted for Chicago.

The name "Lutheran Church in the USA" seemed to be winning until the folks from the Caribbean said, "We don't live in the USA. Can't use that name." Someone stood up and said, "How about 'Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.'" That sounded good and that was it.

That brings us to the constituting convention twenty-one years ago this month. Nearly 1,000 delegates from the three churches converged on Columbus, Ohio. We had no trouble approving the governing documents for the new church.

The big question was, "Who will be our leaders, and, especially, who will be the BIG bishop - the presiding bishop?" Until early March that year it was speculated that either Martin Marty or H. George Anderson would be that person. That speculation got turned on its head when both of them announced that they would not be candidates.

In the guessing game that followed a number of names swirled about - David Preus, James Crumley, William Lazareth, Barbara Lundblad - or what-cha-may-call-em from the LC A in Minnesota. I wrote to a friend and said, "Reuben, I feel like Jonah - I want to run off to some distant land." But I didn't want to be swallowed by a whale, so I bided my time.

The Columbus convention opened with a dramatic moment when the three presiding bishops poured water from three flasks into a huge baptismal font. The governing documents were quickly adopted. Everything was proceeding smoothly - except the election of the presiding bishop. Over three days the process unfolded until I was elected by a substantial majority on the ninth and final ballot.

Corinne and I flew back to Minnesota and sold our home in three days. A week or so later we flew to Chicago and bought a condo. The new headquarters for the ELCA was an eleven story building with nothing in it. As the heads of divisions arrived a month or two later they were set up in a temporary building, with all of them in one large room. When a phone rang you could not tell for whom the bell was tolling. It was chaotic. Over the next several months the Lutheran Center took shape and by January 1, 1988, the birth date for the ELCA, we were somewhat settled in our new home.

On my first day in the office after the New Year I was handed a flier that a radical group from the East had slipped under the doors of the Lutheran Center building. It read:

...there will be war against the perversions of this new bishop who has consciously chosen the spirit of the pharisees and constitution over the spirit of Christ and Biblical example.

...Bishop Chilstrom...will not remain bishop when (we get) through with him. Bishop

Chilstrom's egotistical arrogance is evident in his unrepentant style.

....you have a sick, secular, phoney (sic) religious leader that can only drag the national church into the mire.

Welcome to the new church!

Well, we survived that and much more. At the end of the first fiscal year we learned that our financial forecasters had been far too optimistic. We fell almost \$18 million short of the budget estimate. Over the next two years we had to cut and cut and cut some more. But we made it.

And here we are, some twenty years later,

- a church where millions gather every Sunday to hear the Gospel is preached and the Sacraments administered in more than 10,000 congregations,
- a church that supports mission outreach in every corner of the country and, in our partnership with the Lutheran World Federation, in scores of nations around the world,
- a church with the largest social ministry network of any organization in the country,
- a church with vibrant seminaries and colleges and campus ministries,
- a church that remains determined to move out of those old enclaves and become more inclusive,
- a church that is not afraid to tackle complex social issues and make statements to guide us in our thinking and actions,
- and on and on and on.

I thank God for the privilege of having had a part in the formation of this church. And I thank God for all of you - for bishops like Mark Hanson and Craig Johnson, for pastors and lay workers like you in this Synod. And, above all, I thank God for lay leaders of our congregations, like all of you, who come from many walks of life, but share a common faith and common vision. Because of you, I feel confident that we have a bright future as the people of God in the ELCA.

That brings me, finally, to the Bible text I want to share. For years my favorite has been Romans 6:4: "*We were buried with (Christ) by baptism into his death, so that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we also might walk in newness of life.*"

Baptism, the death and resurrection of Christ, the new life we are given in him -with that as our common confession of faith, I have great hope for the future of the church that was formed 20 years ago.

Thanks be to God!

Herbert W. Chilstrom