

HEARTBEATS Staying Connected 2/10/2023

Dear Friends in CHRIST,

The Lutheran Church in the United States is no longer a migrant church. That may seem a surprising statement if you are a Lutheran but don't think about yourself a migrant or a descendant of migrants. But this statement has two implications for us as Lutheran Christians. First, it tells us something of our history and where we come from as Lutherans. Second, it tells us about our potential future and suggests something about who we need to become. Let me talk about the first part here.

Did you know that there are more than forty Lutheran denominations in the United States? Besides the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, there are the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, the North American Lutheran Congregations, the Lutheran Congregations in Mission for Christ, the American Association of Lutheran Churches, and the Association of Free Lutheran Congregations just to name a few. Many of these are pretty small. But how did there get to be so many Lutheran groups in this country and why don't we all get together?

The answer to the first part of that question again has to do with being a migrant church. In the early days even before we were a country, Lutherans from Norway, Sweden, Finland, Denmark, and Germany migrated to America for a variety of reasons. And they settled in areas with other Lutherans who spoke the same language. That last part is important because if you spoke Norwegian, you didn't want to have to try to understand a service in, say, German, even if it was Lutheran. So, people formed congregations that spoke the same language. And these congregations formed synods, or assemblies of similar congregations, usually united around same language and culture. As time went along, their children and grandchildren, who were learning English in school and speaking it in their businesses and communities, wanted to have services in English, as well. But their parents and grandparents said, "Well, we've never done it that way before," and refused to change. So, these English-speakers formed new churches and that's why, when you're driving through towns in the Midwest, you might happen upon First English Lutheran Church, which was the first English-speaking church in that community.

But they also did pay attention to certain differences that caused them to split into more denominations. My grandfather was licensed to preach in Danish and was part of the Synod that were called the "happy Danes." They believed, among other things, that it was alright to drink and to dance. The "sad Danes" did not and so the two groups split.

Over time, many of these groups started looking more to what they had in common, most of all their common Lutheran faith. Danes and Norwegian synods in 1960 merged together to form the American Lutheran Church (ALC). In 1962, Swedish and Finnish groups formed the Lutheran Church in America (LCA). In 1974, a group of professors and students at a Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod seminary rebelled against their synod's prohibition of women serving as pastors and formed the American Association of Lutheran Churches (AALC) and a number of Missouri Synod congregations joined them. In 1987, congregations from these three synods, ALC, LCA, and AALC, merged together to form the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, our current Lutheran denomination. But as mergers happened, so did divisions as groups said, "We like some of that but not all of that. We're going to form our own groups that believes what we do." That's why some synods ordain women and

other do not; some congregations allow women to vote and other do not; some interpret the Bible more broadly while others insist on a literal reading, and so on.

During the history of Lutherans in America, another type of immigration took place as Lutherans from the East Coast and the Midwest immigrated to the West Coast. The growth in the aerospace and computer industries were primary attractors of this immigration. Those who moved formed Lutheran congregations in the west like St. Andrew Lutheran in Whittier.

Perhaps you can find yourself or your family history in this history of Lutheranism in the United States. As of 2014, there were about 11.5 million Lutherans in America. We all adhere to many of the teachings established by Martin Luther, Philip Melancthon, and other early Lutheran reformers, but we still differ on a lot of things that keep us from coming together. Nevertheless, we all share a common faith in the GOD of grace and proclaim this good news in our congregations, established by immigrants from outside this country and later within. But, as I said, we are no longer an immigrant church, and I will talk about what that means for us today at another time.

In CHRIST'S love,
Pastor Jeffrey