

## **Preparing Confessional Lutheran Pastors for an Ecumenical Age**

### **ECUMENICAL CHALLENGES**

#### **(Challenges to the Seminaries in Forming Lutheran Pastors Today)**

Ministerial formation of the Lutheran Pastors and the ecumenical challenges is the subject discussed in this paper. In our Lutheran Seminaries we follow the theology of Augsburg Confession in forming Lutheran Pastors. We believe that Pastors' office is from God. It is the holy and high calling from God. The ultimate aim of this divine call is to save the fallen creation through faith in the redeemer Christ. In the Augsburg Confession it is stated that for the obtaining of this saving faith the ministry of teaching the Gospel and administering the sacrament (Pastors' Office) was instituted. AC V, XXVIII. The office of the ministry, essentially, is the office of the Word. Thus our conception of the office of Pastor is based on God's Word and the Confessions of the Church. However, while preparing Pastors this way, it is good to listen the challenges of the ecumenical church bodies so that our Pastors could face the challenges effectively and work confidently for the betterment and growth of the Church. In this paper an attempt is made to identify the opportunities, the risk, threat and problems the neighboring ecumenical churches pose. Challenges are many, but the important challenges our theological seminaries face, while preparing ministerial candidates in accordance with the university syllabus and academic curricula are discussed. But such challenges of our Seminaries all over the world are not discussed elaborately. The ecumenical challenges the Lutheran Seminaries in India, particularly of India Evangelical Lutheran Church, the partner church of the LCMS are discussed as a sample so that other contexts could be understood easily and relatively.

'Ecumenism' is a term derived from the Greek 'OIKUMENE' which means 'the inhabited world'. The term is used to refer the consciously created unity among the different denominations of the Christian Church, among the different historic religious faiths, among all humans irrespective of their faiths, ideology or no faith, and the unity among the entire creation – visible and invisible. In this paper the term is used with the first meaning only, namely, the consciously created visible, organic unity among the different Christian denominations. As our Lutheran Church is not part of this organizational unity of the Episcopal and non-Episcopal church bodies it is helpful to know the challenges they pose, while preparing pastors for our church today. Without losing our Lutheran identity (whether 'borrowed' or original) we can bring to light the importance of the Augsburg Confession in forming pastors in the ecumenical scene also. The idea of complementarity contributed by the Lutheran and non-Lutheran church bodies, also needs to be emphasized.

## **Church Union Movement in South India**

During the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, particularly the Protestant Church bodies in South India started consulting each other so as to effectively witness Christ to the people of other faiths. The lack of solidarity among the Anglicans, Baptists, Lutherans, Presbyterians, Methodists and Congregationalists with their divergent views on non-essentials as well as customs and practices was very glaring at the time. So the missionaries of these different denominations came together periodically in conferences in the interest of their common work, namely, “Church planting evangelism”. A United Indian Christian Church unhampered by denominational differences was the felt need of the time in protecting the rights of the Indian Christians and in taking the life and saving message to the unreached people groups. During the World War II and Freedom Struggle, the Christians in India felt it necessary to be united if they were to be strong and to remain as an independent and truly Indian church. The ‘National Church of India’ founded by one Dr. S. Pulney Andy in 1885 was an attempt to overcome the ecclesiastical differences and thereby the sectarian (differences) nature of the Church. In 1897 the South Indian Missionary Association was formed to hold periodical missionary conferences at the provincial level. The participation of the 150 missionaries representing 45 different missionary organizations in 1900 under the banner of the South India Missionary Association held in Madras, was a clear sign of this will to cooperate in the Church Union Movement. Indian and Western church leaders, educationalists and Missionaries of different denominations addressed from a common platform and for a common cause. The World Missionary Conference that met at Edinburgh in 1910 emphasized the need for closer cooperation among the different missionary bodies and churches in the mission field. Not only in India but also in countries like China, Japan and East Africa great emphasis was laid on the need for united action.

In South India the Presbyterians and Congregationalists started negotiations since 1905. Disregarding the denominational differences and realizing their “essential oneness” of Christian faith they came together as a federal union and constituted body, namely the South India United Church (SIUC) on July 24, 1908. The formation of SIUC in India paved the way for their overseas mission partners such as the American Arcot Mission (AAM) (Dutch Reformed); United Free Church of Scotland Mission (UFCSM), the London Missionary Society (LMS) and the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) strengthening their amalgamation further. Withholding what is fundamentals for them like the historic episcopate, sacramental system etc., and extending a hearty toleration for the utmost variety and freedom, the Anglican Church joined the SIUC through the “Tranquebar Declaration” in 1919. The Methodist Church joined this scheme of union in 1929. Thus in this amalgamating project of church union the historical elements of Episcopalian and non-episcopalian nature gradually started dissolving. Discussions were seriously and continuously held in India and overseas

(Lambeth Conference - 1930) in order to achieve a real and just equilibrium relating to ecclesiastical questions like the historic episcopate and the parity of ministers, inter-communion and so on. On February 18, 1932 in the Wesleyan Synod Hall at Madras the Methodists, Presbyterians, Congregationalists and Anglicans celebrated Holy Communion together. Though the Lutherans participated in the consultations they did not sign, as the final stage of this union was celebrated in September 1947 in Madras and the World Council of Churches (WCC) was formed in 1948, believing that such organizational unity is desirable, valid and complete only when united on the basis of confessions and teachings. Clouds of suspicion and differences of opinion still remain among the members of the union on matters like the historic episcopate, role of women in ministry etc. However, the tremendous growth of the ecumenical church bodies uniting all their institutions together, the powerful influence they are able to make among the people of India and the Government, as well as the prestigious status and the self esteem of the members of this ecumenical church is a real challenge in forming Lutheran Pastors today. Besides the united Protestant churches the challenges of the Roman Catholics and the Pentecostals also are discussed here.

### 1. The Pentecostals (the Sectarians) and their display of “gifts”

The Pentecostals pose very strong challenges in the ecumenical scenario in forming Lutheran Pastors today. Pentecostals are the fastest growing church in many countries around the globe. Usually we the Lutheran Church equip the clergy and send them to the local congregations. But the Pentecostals, most of the time plant a congregation and make themselves pastors. Based on their claimed enlightenment and inner call, the Pentecostals display a certain strange dynamism in building a congregation in a relatively short period. They display a certain kind of Charismatic attraction and convince people at large. They are successful in mobilizing people and organizing them into a congregation. Healing has been a great attraction across the globe and although history. We train Pastors to pray for the sick – but after having blessed by the Pastors, sometimes even the Lutheran people go to the Pentecostals for healing. The claimed healing power of the Pentecostals, as well as the peoples testimonies of healing experiences continue to be a serious challenge in the forming of Lutheran Pastors in this ecumenical age.

### 2. The Power of the Holy Ministry

For an ordinary and average person of any age and culture experience is the criterion of faith. The claimed experience of the power of the Holy ministry by the self-styled Charismatic Christians has been a challenge in the ecumenical context in preparing Lutheran Pastors. Christian Ministry is indeed the life-saving and Holy Ministry. It affirms the forgiveness of sins; it assures God’s continued guidance; it assures comfort and peace in terms of distress, sickness and all other difficult

situations. But the charismatic leaders' claimed spiritual gifts is a challenge in forming Lutheran pastors today. The power of the holy ministry having been invested with them and brought under their control they claim that they could instantly and miraculously heal, bless or empower in a supernatural way at their will and as they plan.

Claimed visions of glory and heavens; claimed revelations of the end time; claimed gift to read the minds of others; claimed foretelling gifts; claimed gift to encounter the demons and the demon possessed (exorcism); healing power and so on convince the ordinary people that such personalities are extraordinary, holy and divine. It, of course, develop a kind of hero-worship and personality cult. However such leaders are successful in creating a large and powerful people group (devotees) to follow and they establish themselves as spiritual boss – friend, philosopher and guide in a very short time. Like men, women charismatic leaders are equally respected in most countries. Thus such charismatic lay including women leaders are a challenge in forming Lutheran Pastors today. We Lutherans, in general are clergy oriented, and clergy control community. Here we see the Christian community as gift oriented and people centred community. This is a challenge for Lutherans because experience is more important than understanding. When some have experienced healing, exorcism and so on through the power of the Holy ministry performed by a Christian person other than his/her own Pastor, then the power of the Holy ministry performed by his/her own Lutheran pastor is brought under suspicion evaluation. Power of Holy Ministry is true and our Lutheran pastors believe so. But, praying for a sick person or demon-possessed must be accompanied by the process of healing, exorcism, etc. This is a challenge in the ecumenical contexts.

### 3. Power of the Institutions, Development Projects and other Programs

In the ecumenical arena, the educational institutions, medical and other charitable facilities as well as economic development projects of different kinds, are challenging the growth of the Lutherans and at times and in certain regions threaten the very existence of Lutheran communities. Members join other denominations just so they can get admission for their children into that church body's institutions of higher education. In the context of India Evangelical Lutheran Church in the South West India, the Catholics and the Church of South India are more wealthy and well organized than the Lutherans. The way these Churches make their already wealthy people more wealthy, organized and strong through founding and administering mega economic projects creating job opportunities for their membership; running higher educational institutions and colleges as well as hospitals and charitable services which have been an attraction for many.

All agree that educational institutions serve as a powerful arm of the Church both in the development of church leadership and in evangelistic outreach. In our

IELC which is the first overseas partner church of the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod founded in 1895, the periodical and timely founding as well as upgrading of educational institutions was appropriate and sufficient till the 1950's. In this way about 100 schools came into existence. According to the earlier rate of growth of the educational institutions and as per the need of the Church the first Lutheran College, offering Bachelor and Masters level Degrees, might have been founded in the early 1960's itself. But somehow the idea did not come into effect till today. People in general put the blame on the Church's native leaders as well as the LCMS Missionaries of those period for not founding such institutions for the IELC membership. Lutheran Colleges and higher learning centres for the 111 years old IELC is a must. In South-West India between Kanyakumari and Trivandrum, where we have about 90% of the Nagercoil and Trivandrum Synod congregations of IELC, there are no Government colleges. All the existing colleges are owned and administered by different religious denominations like the Roman Catholic, C.S.I. and other non-Lutheran and non-Christian private managements like Caste Hindus and Muslims. Lutheran members suffer seriously in matters of admission into certain attractive and valuable courses as well as appointments in these colleges and other institutions. The number of sad stories narrating how IELC members join the other Christian denominations in order to secure admissions and appointments in these colleges are in the hike during the last 45 or 50 years. In this way the Lutheran congregations in this region are continuously suffering heavy loss in terms of educated youth, comparatively high salaried supporting members of the church, and of breathing fresh air. Every pastor in our region knows that Lutherans need colleges of their own for their living as 'honest Lutherans' and for further growth. In 2001, after seeing the ULBRA university during the First-World Seminaries' Conference of the ILC, the present writer inspired and motivated nearly sixty congregations to found a Lutheran College in South West India. With this goal the "Concordia Educational Trust" was registered in April 2002 and approached the LCMS for further guidance and the project support which is not yet materialized.

Recently in countries like India the pattern of the working of medical ministry has undergone a shift in emphasis from institutions to congregations. This shift of emphasis ultimately help transform the local congregations into healthy communities. Indeed, healing is integral to the life of the Church and of any human community. The CSI has an impressive network of hospitals, medical colleges and health centres within their 21 dioceses. The Roman Catholics healing ministry is much more powerful both through regular hospitals as well as through spiritual healing centres and Pastoral Counseling clinics. Healing ministry among the differently abled, physically challenged, mentally retarded, unemployed youths, among the street children, disowned, homeless and destitutes are the ecumenical challenges in forming Lutheran Pastors today. We also serve the underprivileged, handicapped and sick people through Lutheran hospitals, charitable institutions and development programs in all the three Synods and especially in Bombay Mission Circle.

However the colleges and higher learning centres; Economic development projects as well as healing and other social services that the neighboring church bodies are able to develop so nicely and perform service so effectively pose a threat and challenge for the Lutheran members as a whole. Lutheran Pastors need to be trained in such a way to face this challenge confidently.

#### 4. Episcopal Authority

Stable administration and influential leadership are needed for the well being and growth of the Church. In the ecumenical arena we see such situation in the church bodies where Episcopacy is accepted and practised. The Roman Catholics and the Orthodox all over and in the Indian context the Church of South India and Mar Thoma denominations enjoy such advantages. Our Lutheran churches relatively suffer much in terms of stability in administration and development. Moreover, historical root and connection with the early church could be traced and established easily under Episcopal system. For the popular mind Episcopal system could appear more authentic than the parliamentary and constitutional kind of leadership in the Church. Under the Episcopal system, a pastor of the local congregation is accepted and respected as the Chairman of the Pastorate, whereas in the Lutheran Church, a lay person is elected as the pastorate chairman and Pastor serves only as an advisory member. Under the Episcopal system the congregation as well as the general public respect the Bishop and expect of him greatly and nobly in his being, doing and achievements. The cathedra (Chair), the vestments, decisions and words under the Episcopal system, command high regard and sincere obedience. But all these under the non-Episcopal system that we inherit and practice is relatively very low. Hence, the Episcopal power exercised in the parallel church bodies in the ecumenical arena is a challenge we face while preparing Lutheran Pastors today.

#### 5. The higher academic qualification of the Ecumenical clergies

In the recent decades the literary rate, the educational standard and academic qualification of the general public and subsequently of the congregation members are considerably high. The clergy need to be well educated and properly qualified to deal with the ordinary people as well as the highly educated members of the congregation who are fluent in English, philosophy, general knowledge and spiritual formation. Not only handling their own congregation members, but maintaining healthy relationship with other clergies in the ecumenical arena, the Lutheran clergies need to be academically upgraded. In our context in India, our neighboring protestant church, the CSI resolved fifteen or more years ago not to ordain ministerial candidates if they do not earn the minimum of BD degree in theology. For joining the BD degree programme the minimum secular educational

qualification is a Bachelor Degree in any of the Arts and Science subjects. So also, most of the neighboring Seminaries the basic ministerial degree they offer is BD. They had stopped the earlier B.Th. programs more than a decade ago. However, in the Lutheran Church, we still ordain people with B.Th. and even less than B.Th. i.e., Seminary diploma. Our Concordia Theological Seminary in Nagercoil, India remains a B.Th. level institution even after making a history of 81 years. It is really a challenge in forming Lutheran Pastors in the ecumenical contexts. At this point I want to state that with the support and encouragement of the LCMS World Mission, the Concordia Theological Seminary, Nagercoil, India has applied for the upgradation to BD level which dream will come true, God willing by July 2007.

Our partner church seminaries need to be upgraded to the level of education required by our congregation and in the ecumenical contexts. Even in the village congregations there is a new awareness to have academically and theologically qualified pastors of their own. Many in the congregations today like to have their marriage solemnized, their children baptized and confirmed by a well educated, academically and theologically well qualified spiritually matured clergies who are fluent in language and highly respected by the general public.

#### 6. The Question of Ordination of women

In the ecumenical contexts, the neighboring churches offer their women also higher theological education. Some of the ecumenical church bodies ordain women also. But with regard to the question of ordaining women it is not a serious challenge in the ecumenical context, provided they be given proper theological education and orientation to carry out their assigned and commissioned duty as deaconesses and instructors. Some socially awakened men and women in our church also question the status of women now-a-days. But it has not become a serious challenge in the ecumenical context. Regarding the question of ordaining women, we Lutherans are actually with the 2/3 majority of the global church body, namely the Roman Catholics, the Orthodox and others.

#### 7. Liturgy, Literature and Celebrations

The Lutheran liturgy is historic, scriptural, meaningful, sweet to participate and most satisfying one to follow in worship. But proper training, appropriate musical and electronic equipments and choir or organized team of singers continued to be a serious challenge in many local Lutheran congregations. Some Lutheran congregations simply read the liturgy instead of chanting. This makes the worship dry. Whereas some of the non-Lutheran protestant churches who do not have historic liturgies, make their worship rich and joyful with sound and music. It is a challenge to equip and train Lutheran Pastors themselves good in music and liturgy. Producing Lutheran literature for Sunday School, VBS, Bible Study, etc. in small

number but in reasonable prices<sup>#</sup> is another challenge for Lutheran Pastors because, the ecumenical church bodies make in large quantity so that the price could be considerably low. We are grateful to the service of the Lutheran Heritage Foundation, the Concordia Publishing House and individuals like Rev. Lenard Galster in this regard.

### Respect for Lutheran Theology

Being a minority among the predominantly large and powerful clergies of the Catholics, Orthodox and other ecumenical church bodies, Lutheran clergies need to equip themselves sufficiently, with the proper understanding of the distinction between the Law and the Gospel; with a sincere commitment to the called ministry and in accordance with the ordination vow; and with a real heart for God's mission that all people be saved. It is a challenge for the Lutheran Seminaries in forming pastors for the Lutheran Church in the context of Ecumenism.

In partnership with the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod, in the ecumenical contexts, we cooperate with the neighboring Church bodies in externals like social, charitable, healing, educational and economic development programs. So also, we sit and hold theological discussions in conferences and seminars. In the normal situation we do not exchange pulpit and theological class hours. We accept the Baptism, and do not advocate re-baptism. We agree that TRUTH is much bigger for any one to exhaust. We do not claim that ours is the only saving doctrine. In humility we accept the neighboring church members as true Christians though we disagree with them in some matters. Our congregations generally practise an "Open Communion" approach toward Christian visitors during worship. We confidently invite all believing that we follow the life-saving doctrine. Fundamentally the greatest strength of our Lutheran pastoral training, both for our congregations and for our ecumenical relations, is our strong confessional and evangelical theological tradition. Most people remain Lutheran because they value this heritage for themselves and their children. Most other Christians value our presence in ecumenical events, because of our sound theology. Among non-Christians as well, even our Small Catechism is an effective evangelistic tool.

In the ecumenical context the respect for Lutheran theology is always on the hike. We are confident that we have 'a' true exposition of the Word of God. Everybody know that it is historic, systematic, scriptural, intellectually integrated

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<sup>#</sup> In 1992 a Sunday School Syllabus, having "God Source of Life" as the Central theme was developed in IELC. All the important topics of the Bible, the six parts of Luther's Small Catechism and selected topics from the history of Christianity are appropriately arranged to confirm the Church Year. But the Text book based on this standard-wise syllabus is not yet made available for the Sunday School students in their respective vernaculars – Tamil, Malayalam, Kannada, Hindi, Marathi, Telugu and so on.



yet simple and clear for average believer to understand. Moreover the Small Catechism which is the simplified expression of the apostolic tradition and the saving Gospel is appreciated by most Christians. As many of the ecumenical church bodies jump from one fraction of theology to another, like the “Liberation theology”, ‘Dalit theology’, ‘Feminist Theology’ and so on, every now and then, we the Lutherans around the globe are strong and stable since our faith rests on the clear and sound theological understanding of the Holy Scripture. This means, in the ecumenical context we can very confidently invite all, not only all Christians, but all humans and the whole creation to join in hand because we have ‘a’ true exposition of the saving doctrine of the Word.

Rev. Dr. Joshua Siromony  
Concordia Seminary  
Nagercoil 629 001  
Tamilnadu, India.