

What we learned in writing a new history of the Augustana Synod

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First of all, I'd like to thank those who were involved in the process of completing this new history of the Augustana Synod. It was a major undertaking, and it took the work of many people to accomplish it, far more than just those of the authors, Maria Erling and myself. The genesis of this project came through Reuben Swanson and Donovan Palmquist, with a major contribution from Arland Hultgren and the AHA Publication Committee. We received a tremendous amount of support and careful reading from Arland Hultgren and David Lindberg, among many others, who read the drafts and commented on our materials. Susan Johnson at Augsburg Fortress was a vital contributor in turning the raw manuscript into a finished product, and her editorial and design colleagues produced a beautiful volume. Librarians and archivists, especially Elisabeth Wittman and Joel Thorson at the ELCA archives, were invaluable to our work. Our families were patient and forebearing while we pounded out page after page of work, and kept us sane in the meanwhile. And special thanks to the members of the Augustana Heritage Association, whose encouragement and financial support made this whole thing possible in the first place.

Writing a book is an large undertaking, and one that changes your view of the subject. I knew something of the Augustana Synod before I started this project, but I certainly know more now. One of the key questions, and something that guided our explorations and research along

the way was the question, “why?” Why a new history of the Augustana Synod? G. Everett Arden wrote a perfectly fine history 45 years ago-- the volume, Augustana Heritage. As the authors, initially we had to defend the idea of a new history, to others and to ourselves. This should not be just a re-write of Arden-- that story had been told, and told well. What then would this new book do that would justify the time and expense of a new history? We had to figure out how this new history would complement and extend the work of those writers of Augustana’s history who had worked before us; Eric Norelius, Oscar Olson, O.M. Norlie, Emeroy Johnson, Conrad Bergendoff, G. Everett Arden, and many others. So-- why a new history?

Most importantly, this history would be written at a new time and place, with a new perspective on the story of the Augustana Synod. While both Maria and I were born into Augustana, this church merged out of existence when we were both very young. Hence, we grew up hearing about Augustana, but not having really participated in it, except through our families. History is written individuals who are firmly located in a time and place, with the perspective that their finite situation affords. This perspective can be only partially transcended, so for us, writing 45 years after the end of the Augustana Synod, we have different perspectives and questions than those historians who went before us. The distance of years is important, as it often takes a good deal of time to see how the events of the past will actually settle in-- from the distance, an author can tell finally what was, and what was not really important. So it was important that this book be written through the eyes of a generation who had been greatly influenced by the Synod, but had not been direct participants in its life.

The distance of almost half a century from the end of the Synod also affords a way to judge the life of the Augustana Synod through the history of its successor denominations, the

Lutheran Church in America and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. In light of recent American Lutheran history, the Augustana Synod at times seems very distant, while at other times the roots of what we have now can be clearly seen in the past. Its fascinating to speculate, for example, what might have been-- especially what might have been if there had been no merger, or some other kind of merger.

One bit of distance that separates us from Arden, for example, revolves around the question of merger itself. Arden, and many other of the historians of American Lutheranism who were writing in the early 1960s, were active and partisan participants in the merger negotiations of that era. That doesn't mean that they were biased, at least no more so than any other historians. But they saw the history, and wrote the history of their denomination from the standpoint of their experiences in the merger proceedings. The last chapter of Arden's history, for example, is entitled "Destiny Fulfilled" -- clearly this was the way in which he shaped and viewed the history of the Synod itself. In his eyes, it was the destiny of the Augustana Synod to merge itself out of existence-- that was its goal. Many of these Lutheran denominational histories were written for just that reason, to explain and justify the mergers that were happening, and to comfort those who were losing "their church."

From the perspective of many years and further mergers, it is clear that mergers were not necessarily inevitable, nor were they uniformly beneficial. There may well have been alternate futures and alternate alignments that could have taken place-- the destiny of the Augustana Synod was not inexorably toward the LCA and ELCA-- there could have been other possibilities. Also, we have come to see that mergers are messy and complicated things, and that for all that is gained in a merger, there is often much that is lost. One does not wish to romanticize the past,

but there was much that was good in the ethos of the Augustana Synod that was lost in successively larger denominations.

Another reason for a new history of the Augustana Synod is that is a chance to ask new questions, and lift up new groups of people. Historians today look at religious denominations in new ways, and look at new groups of people within the denomination. Arden's volume is concerned especially with the institutional growth of the Synod, and with those leaders who dominated its life; he mentions almost everyone who ever served on a board or commission of the Synod. This is very handy; and I have nearly worn out my copy of Augustana Heritage through constant use and reference. But there was more to the Synod than this; we tried to balance the institutional history with the story of those who were not a part of Augustana's inner circle-- women, youth, laymen, those who were critical of the Synod or found themselves as outsiders. We wanted to look at the bonds of communication and family that kept the Synod together, and the regional identities that added so much variety to the Synod's life. By focusing on these elements, we hope that we have expanded the story of Augustana.

One more reason to write a new history. For many years this kind of denominational history has been the poor cousin of American religious history. Denominational histories were viewed as being triumphalistic and self-congratulatory-- the "inspiring story of how a small band of pioneers built their church in the American wilderness" -- and so on and so forth. No doubt many are like this. We wanted to write the story of Augustana in a way that it would be informed by the larger history of religion in America. We hope it will be a model of critical and informative denominational history, and would add to the general understanding of American religious life. Time will tell if we are successful in this, but we hope that our efforts will inform

both those who knew and loved the Augustana Synod, and those who have never really known much about it.

Now, as to what we learned in writing this new history of the Augustana Synod. Here I want to be rather cautious-- I'm in an a bit of an awkward position here, because there are probably things I learned about Augustana doing this research that are well known to the rest of you! I always was one of the last persons to catch on to things, so if these "new discoveries" are old hat to the rest of you, please bear with me! What you can do is to see through the eyes of Maria and myself what stands out as a distinction to historians who were not personally involved in the life of Augustana.

The first thing that stands out in my mind is the complexity of Augustana's history-- it was not simple, and there are multiple story lines that run through it. The Synod actually reformulated itself any number of times, in a succession of changes that each started a new avenue of growth and direction. In breaking away from the Synod of Northern Illinois in 1860, in the split with the Norwegians in 1870, in the messy divorce from the Covenant and Free Churches in the 1880s, in the language transition of the 1920s, and in the formation of denominational machinery in the 1940s and 1950, the Synod reinvented itself each time. And each of these changes meant a new direction and new identity, and roads not taken, or those who mourned the lost of a past vision. There are lines of the Synod that involved difficult and fractious internal strife, as well as those lines in which the Synod moved outside of itself to undertake new ministries and new opportunities. There always seemed to be a group that was straining or pulling in one direction or another, giving the Synod a more complex identity.

A second discovery involves the question of success-- who successful was the Synod

itself. The answer to this depends on how you want to define success. In one way, the Synod was very successful-- it was the largest single institution in the Swedish-American immigrant community, starting thousands of congregations, along with many successful social service and educational institutions, home and foreign missions. It trained thousands of pastors and gained hundreds of thousands of members. In this way it was successful. And yet, there are always questions, here. Why didn't it grow larger? What about those who were lost? The Synod itself never gained as members the majority of Swedish immigrants to America-- at the height of Swedish-America in the 1920s, it consisted of only about 17 or 18 percent of the first- and second-generation Swedish Americans. Allowing for a larger "sphere of influence" beyond formal membership of perhaps 50 percent, it means that many Swedish-Americans had nothing at all to do with Augustana. There were other Lutheran denominations that did better with their immigrant community, but then they didn't have to deal with Swedes! The question of success, then, comes down to one's measurements and expectations.

Was there a particular Augustana ethos or self-definition that made it unique? Many people have said so, and I would not wish to contradict them. Some have pointed to theological contributions or a stress on one kind of ministry or another-- certainly Augustana was a leader in some areas, although not in others. There were distinctive kinds of piety within the Synod, though the elements of these pieties can be seen in other groups, too. Some suggest that Augustana had a distinctive "churchly" loyalty - a sense of a common heritage and mission, and commitment to a sense of Church beyond that of the congregation. This is extremely hard to measure or quantify, however, and as I read in the history of the Synod, I found deep internal conflict as well as deep loyalties to the Synod. You might expect this of outsiders-- those who

were dissidents, or on the margins of the Synod. But I was surprised to find that even those who were consummate insiders in the Synod often themselves felt disaffected from the rest of the Church. Certainly most of us have a love/hate relation with the institutions in our lives, and these Augustana leaders were no different from us.

The third discovery I'd highlight is the degree to which Augustana was, even from the beginning, a deeply American institution. American society and religious forms were transformative of the Swedish immigrants, not only at their arrival in the United States, but even before this-- the influence of Anglo-American religious forms and ideas on the Pietistic awakening in nineteenth century Sweden is astonishing to me. Those who founded the Augustana Synod intended, right from the beginning, to make it an American institution. The splits from the General Synod, the Norwegians, and the Covenant, along with the mass immigration of Swedes, retarded this a bit in the late nineteenth century, but even then the influence of American religion was overwhelming. The Augustana Synod was proud of its Swedish roots, but it was an American church, and never really envisioned as a copy of the Church of Sweden. I would say that it was more concerned with its Lutheran identity than it was with its Swedish identity. The Synod was also very important as a "laboratory" of sorts for turning the immigrants into Americans; in the organization of the Synod and its operation, the immigrants learned how to "operate" as Americans, practicing American organization and democracy.

A fourth thing that impressed me very much was the degree of regionalism within the Synod, especially on the Conference level. I had known, of course, of the fabled rivalry between Illinois and Minnesota, although I have lived most of my life in those two states, and can't see

what the big fuss is all about. Of course, this was a big rivalry, but by no means the only one. New England had a different immigration history, and that meant that its congregations had a different feel to them. The rivalry between Kansas and Nebraska within the Synod was very bit as spirited as Minnesota and Illinois. The Iowa conference seemed to make great positions for itself by refereeing between Minnesota and Illinois-- the master of this was President P.O. Bersell. Augustana had a different "flavor" in Texas and Florida, and the rapid expansion of Augustana on the West Coast brought a whole new perspective to the Synod, especially after World War II. I could go on, and include Canada and the rest, but you get the point. Regional affiliations were very important, and a crucial part of Synodical life.

My last observation is one that is tinged with a bit of melancholy, and hopefully not too much romanticism. I have come to believe, now more than ever, that there was something very good that existed in the Augustana Synod, a spirit and a sensibility that was lost in the two rounds of merger that succeeded it. Although it was all too human and fallible at many points in its existence, there was a certain sense of identity in Augustana that is missing in the Lutheran synods and denominations of our own time. Its hard to tell what would have happened to Augustana and the other American Lutheran denominations if these mergers had never taken place, but it is easy to see from a study of Augustana's history that there was a sense of identity that grew in that denomination over the course of 100 years, a sense of identity and purpose that American Lutheranism has lost and not yet regained. Perhaps the study of Augustana's history can point us in the direction of such an identity.

Thank you, once again, both for the opportunity to write this history, and to talk with you about it-- it has been a real pleasure and honor to have undertaken this task.