

Leaven in the Loaf or Axe at the Root of the Tree: Inclusivity in the Church as a Priority for Mission in the Augustana and Covenant Traditions

DAVID L. LINDBERG

Some thirty-seven years ago in May 1973, the Swedish Pioneer Historical Society held an all-Scandinavian conference in Minneapolis with the title “The Scandinavian Presence in America.” In the session on “The Church and Scandinavian Ethnicity,” the presenters were the then-retired college presidents Wesley Westerberg and Conrad Bergendoff. At that point in time, there had been almost ninety years of Covenant Church history in America, and it had been eleven years since the Augustana Synod had merged with other Lutheran bodies, closing shop after a hundred years of its own history.

My interest in looking at Westerberg’s and Bergendoff’s essays was to see what clues ethnicity might provide for decisions about mission strategy. I should also add, for purposes of transparency, that my understanding of mission includes not only foreign missions, but what we think of as home or inner missions, as well. At its most basic level, I also understand “mission” to include everything that an individual Christian or a group of Christians say and do that makes Christ’s love known in the world at large.

The religious leaders among the immigrants who had similar state church and missionary society experience in Sweden, however, developed different mission strategies in the Augustana and Covenant churches in America. Was this because one of these denominations was more inclusive in its mission strategy than the other? Or were both of them inclusive, but in different ways? Would an image for mission like “leaven in the loaf” and another like an “axe at the root of the trees” best describe the differences? What ultimate difference would such alternatives make? It reminds me of Professor Joseph Sittler’s answer to a graduating senior’s question about what

kind of first call to ordained ministry to consider. The choices were to accept a call to missionary service overseas or to accept an affluent suburban parish in an American suburb. “Don’t worry about it,” Sittler said, “God will forgive you either way.”

Among the Swedish immigrants who came to the Midwest in the last half of the nineteenth century, their first mission concern was to minister to the needs of each other. Most of them were poor, but they did their best to care for the sick, the widows, and the orphans among them. At the same time, they attempted to transplant the kinds of worship and piety they had known in Sweden. It was not an attempt to create a “New Sweden,” but an effective Swedish-American organization in a new and strange land. It was not all “sweetness and light,” of course.

They also brought with them two other things—hostility toward state church authorities in Sweden, and a religious activism associated with the revivals connected with Pietism and the Evangelical Awakening. Missionary societies, both in Sweden and in the United States, became “carriers of two mind-sets,” the dissenters, as well as those who still wanted to maintain church and ethnic traditions.¹ Westerberg noted that the Evangelical Covenant Church, more than any other free church group, brought to America the Swedish church tradition, coupled with an emphasis on individual conversion.

ETHNIC INCLUSIVITY

In his essay on “The Church and Scandinavian Ethnicity,” Westerberg combined the free-church traditions as a group. He pointed out that the Evangelical Free Church of America had emerged out of two associations, one Swedish and the other Norwegian-Danish. This, he said, had the amazing effect (my editorial adjective, not Westerberg’s) of minimizing the differences between Swedes and Norwegians and increasing the sentiment for merging the two groups in 1950.²

The Evangelical Covenant Church, however, did not merge with any other free church denomination, but it did intentionally begin work with African Americans, Latinos, and Korean Americans in the 1960s, so that by 2005 it had reached a significant level of diversity.

Gary Walter, during his tenure as executive minister of the Department of Church Growth and Evangelism in the Covenant Church, said that 20 percent of all existing Covenant churches were either “ethnic” or “multi-ethnic,” and that the Covenant was “the third most diverse Protestant denomination in the United States, and the most diverse among those of European origins.”³ Kurt Peterson sees the Covenant’s history of Pietism, immigration, and urban experience as preparing the way for ethnic diversity.⁴ What President David Nyvall called a “Free Church mind” could accommodate personal religious experience with its emphasis on conversion, compared to the “State Church mind,” which emphasized reason and the law.⁵

By way of comparison, ethnic inclusivity was elusive in early Augustana. In 1870, just ten years after the Swedes and the Norwegians had joined to form a new ethnically inclusive synod, they had an amicable separation. It happened in Paxton, Illinois, where the college and seminary had moved from Chicago. Perhaps the absence of Danes in the mix had something to do with it, but more likely it was due to the fact that the Swedes, who were the majority running the school, were not treating fairly the minority of a lone Norwegian professor and a few Norwegian students. It may also have been true that the growing desire in Norway for independence from Sweden was reflected in the immigrant community as well. In any event, Augustana’s ethnic exclusivity had become a hindrance to the growth of ecumenism. In 1919 Augustana was still not ready to join German Lutherans to form the United Lutheran Church, even though it had been cooperating with those German churches in foreign mission work, especially in India.

RELIGIOUS INCLUSIVITY

Aside from ethnic differences, the same religious issues that separated the emigrants before they left Sweden were reproduced in America. The participants in the New Evangelical movement in Sweden had difficulty relating to each other in the short-lived Evangelical Alliance of 1853.⁶ As Professor G. Everett Arden put it, “Separatism is usually the means by which common men [*sic*] take the business of religion into their own hands.”⁷ The Waldenströmian

controversy also had a negative effect on whatever inclusive outlook existed in Augustana in its formative period. In 1863 there had been some interest in calling Waldenström to come to America from Sweden to teach at Augustana Seminary. Apparently, he was not that interested in such a prospect or even in coming to visit America—a journey he postponed for some time.

During this same period, the immigrants who would eventually become part of the Mission Covenant Church began organizing congregations in Chicago and other communities in Illinois and Iowa. Following the pattern they had experienced in Sweden, they organized missionary societies. Efforts were made to include members of the early Augustana congregations in these societies as well, but disputes arose over whether all the members of the Augustana congregations were really Christians. As a matter of fact, some pastors, like Olof Olsson when he was a pastor in Lindsborg, Kansas, even tried to organize an Augustana congregation of “true believers.” Erling and Granquist have observed that “when someone with Olsson’s generous and free spirit would insist on staying with uninviting Lutheran Confessions, then perhaps even revival believers could stay moored to Lutheranism.”⁸ This kind of mixed-bag inclusiveness seemed to characterize the Augustana Synod, except where there were strong pietistic congregations.

In C. V. Bowman’s 1925 history of the Mission Covenant in America, he described the early Mission Friends as considering themselves Lutheran in faith and practice but not willing to join Lutheran congregations because the Lutherans did not distinguish between believers and unbelievers. In this, the Mission Friends considered Lutherans unscriptural, and they could not in good conscience unite with them.⁹

FOREIGN VERSUS HOME MISSIONS?

If we were to focus only on how foreign mission emphases began among the first Swedish immigrants that organized the Augustana and Evangelical Covenant Churches, the contrast is quite clear. The well-known story in the history of the Mission Friends is that two Swedish missionaries, on their way to Alaska in 1887, visited one of

the earliest Mission Friends meetings in America. Even though Alaska was not exactly foreign territory, since it had just been purchased by the United States, it certainly met the foreign mission criteria of a place where very few people had heard the gospel, and where no other missionaries had worked. Despite the fact that the new immigrants were themselves trying to cope with a new land and culture, they placed the foreign mission cause as a top priority. They first made a common cause with the missionaries from Sweden they had just met, but they soon formed their own Alaska mission with two mission stations there. This approach of seizing every foreign mission opportunity as it presented itself was to become a hallmark of Evangelical Covenant foreign mission activity. Bowman's Covenant missionary criteria included "a field peculiarly its own, a special duty to minister to the needs of the soul and not for better social conditions."¹⁰

Almost simultaneously with the first foreign mission decisions by the Mission Friends, the founders of the Augustana Synod voted to form a committee to collect money for mission work and to support anyone who volunteered for such work. Augustana, however, without any particular foreign mission field of its own, began to send money to missionary societies in Germany and Sweden and to publicize the cause of missions. Although the synod decided in 1866 to divide the mission funds that were being collected so that half would be used for foreign work and half for what we would call "home" missions, the mission committee was already focused on the immediate needs of the home missions.¹¹ Planting new congregations and establishing educational institutions for the masses of new Swedish immigrants completely overshadowed the foreign mission emphasis. Funds collected for foreign mission work that were not immediately spent were "loaned" to those who were organizing home mission work and never paid back. A new constitution, adopted in 1870, turned home mission work over to area conferences, but at synod meeting after synod meeting resolutions were made by delegates calling for a foreign mission initiative, to no avail. It took eighteen years before an Augustana missionary was commissioned for foreign work under the auspices of some other Lutheran body, and it was not until 1923, more than sixty years after the formation of the first mission committee, that separate boards of Foreign Missions and

Home Missions were organized. Professor Eric Wahlstrom at Augustana Seminary in Rock Island wrote that “it had been a sad mistake” that the Central Board of Missions had been given control over foreign mission activity.¹²

Rather than seeing this as a seemingly careless delay, however, perhaps home missions were necessary before foreign missions could be undertaken. I propose this theory on the grounds of the ultimate result. What Sydney Ahlstrom has called the “Augustana ethos” was a uniquely inclusive church fellowship. By including all pastors and a large number of lay leaders equally, they, in turn, were more likely to treat others in their communities in the same way.

AN AXE AT THE ROOT OF THE TREES

I believe that this theme is also the reason that Augustana’s emphasis on social justice was relatively unique among American Lutheran Church bodies. Leaders like President Oscar Benson and Professor A. D. Mattson emphasized the role of pastors becoming involved in every aspect of community life. Where there was prejudice and mistreatment of others by government or business, it was the church’s duty to become involved and unite with others to halt all abuses. I believe that this is also the reason that Augustana’s emphasis on social justice was unique among Lutheran Church bodies in North America.

LEAVEN IN THE LOAF

Conrad Bergendoff’s own life and ministry are examples of how a concern for foreign missions can include virtually every form of ministry. Caught up in the Student Volunteer Movement, within a few months of starting college Bergendoff was elected president of the Augustana Foreign Mission Society, which included both the college and seminary in Rock Island. Within a few years, he was raising thousands of dollars for foreign missions, and by the time he graduated he had to decide whether to become a foreign missionary himself or to become a graduate student. After studying briefly at the United Lutheran Church’s seminary in Philadelphia, he returned to

Augustana, convinced that the seminary in Philadelphia was too provincial.¹³ His goal for himself and for his students, when he eventually began teaching, was to be able to see beyond the local scene and to be involved in the world at large. Writing for the *Missionary Calendar* at the college, his mantra was “A student of Augustana who is not interested in missions is neither a true Christian nor a true student.”¹⁴

Fifty years later, in 1973, Bergendoff summarized Augustana’s influence on the larger church as follows: “(a) a strong liturgical interest, (b) a social consciousness which insists on the relevance of the gospel to current issues, (c) a doctrine of the ministry which stresses higher education of pastors, but at the same time allows for an active role of the laity, (d) and a pervasive ecumenical endeavor.” The closest he came to a more traditional emphasis on mission follows: “Issues of an earlier Pietism linger, but these often give way to a rising secularism, and still (e) an evangelistic strain pointed in the direction of an emphasis on distinctive Christian faith and life.” This “evangelistic strain,” coupled with an unusual degree of social consciousness and ecumenism, is what I understand Augustana’s sense of mission to have been.

By way of comparison and contrast, I would concur with a summary of the most prominent values of the founders of the Covenant Church as being theological freedom, congregational governance, biblical preaching, evangelical missionary zeal, and the importance of Christian conversion.¹⁵ To these should be added, I think, the Covenant Church’s unusual ability to include and develop new cultural and multicultural congregations. As Joseph Sittler said, “God will forgive us either way.”

ENDNOTES

1. Wesley Westerberg, “Ethnicity and the Free Church,” *Swedish Pioneer Historical Quarterly* 23 (Oct. 1973): 236.

2. *Ibid.*, 233.

3. Kurt Peterson, “Transforming the Covenant: The Emergence of Ethnic Diversity in a Swedish-American Denomination,” *Covenant Quarterly* 67 (February 2009): 13. A similar development in the Augustana Synod during the last decades of its existence has been noted by George Hall. He calls it the fulfill-

ment of Augustana's foreign mission hopes. See Hall, "The Beginnings Viewed a Century Later," in *The Missionary Spirit in the Augustana Church* (Rock Island, IL: Augustana Historical Society, 1984), 149-55.

4. Peterson, "Transforming the Covenant," 4.

5. *Ibid.*, 5.

6. Mark Granquist, "The Swedish Ethnic Denominations in the United States," unpublished Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1992, 181.

7. G. Everett Arden, *School of the Prophets: Background and History of Augustana Theological Seminary, 1860-1960* (Rock Island, IL: Augustana Book Concern, 1960), 57.

8. Maria Erling and Mark Granquist, *The Augustana Story: Shaping Lutheran Identity in North America* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2008), 44.

9. C. V. Bowman, *History of the Mission Covenant of America* (Chicago: Covenant Book Concern, 1925), 3.

10. *Ibid.*

11. Swan Hjalmar Swanson, *Foundation for Tomorrow: A Century of Progress in Augustana World Missions* (Minneapolis: Board of World Missions, 1940).

12. Arden, *School of the Prophets*, 14.

13. Byron Swanson, "The Making of the American Ecumenist: Conrad Bergendoff. A Study of Confessionalism and Ecumenism in Early 20th Century Lutheranism," unpublished Ph.D. diss., Princeton Theological Seminary, 1970.

14. *Missionary Calendar* 11 (1929), 88, published by the Augustana Foreign Missionary Society.

15. Peterson, "Transforming the Covenant," 5.