Unity, Ecumenicity, and Difference in the Augustana Synod

by Derek R. Nelson

Buried beneath the headlines about human sexuality at the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America's most recent churchwide assembly in August 2009 was a little-heralded full communion agreement between the ELCA and the United Methodist Church. This was the sixth such bi-lateral agreement between the ELCA and an ecumenical partner (the others are the Presbyterian Church USA, the Episcopal Church, the United Church of Christ, the Moravian Church, and the Reformed Church in America), and the first such agreement for the United Methodist Church. This is a significant moment in the life of the Lutheran and Methodist communions, since no other country has seen such an agreement between a Lutheran and a Methodist church body, even though both are certainly regarded as international Christian churches.[1] Further, while this is arguable, the full communion agreement with the United Methodist Church marks the greatest reach, doctrinally speaking, for the ELCA to date. Co-operation in significant ways has long been a feature of Lutheran-Reformed and Lutheran-Episcopal life in the United States. But such mutual ministry as we may now see between the United Methodist Church and the ELCA would have been unthinkable to most in the days of the Augustana Synod. For example, even the otherwise ecumenically minded pioneer pastor Lars Paul Esbjörn refused assistance from the Methodist church in America after his immigration.[2] He rebuked them for "the stain on its Christian name" brought by its toleration of slaveholders in their ranks, and had few kind words to say about the church in general.[3]

The following essay is not concerned chiefly with the history of how the full-communion agreement with the United Methodist Church became possible, given the view of so many members of the Augustana Synod (and many other Lutheran church bodies) toward Methodism, nor is it a critique of that agreement from the perspective

of the theology of the Augustana Synod. Instead, the purpose is to honor the legacy of the Augustana Synod by taking a careful look at its ecumenical program, commitments, and guiding principles. By examining elements in Augustana's communal life such as their view toward other Christian denominations, their approach to intra-Lutheran relationships, their liturgical life in worship, and their ecumenical ecclesiology, I hope to show that the Augustana Synod's ecumenical vision has much to say to twenty-first-century Lutheran theology. In brief, the synod was a) open to learning about itself and the gospel by relating to other church bodies, b) willing to co-operate, when appropriate, with other church bodies in mutual ministry, c) cautious about entering too hastily into pulpit and altar fellowship with non-Lutheran churches, but d) able to see in other church bodies partial but real expressions of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church.

In the course of this exercise in historical theology, it will become clear that the future ecumenical work of the ELCA and other Lutheran bodies can find a way forward by attending to some of these Augustana principles. The essay concludes with some thoughts regarding ways in which future Lutheran ecumenical work might benefit conceptually from Augustana's guiding principles and ecumenical praxis.

The Augustana Synod's Relations with Other Non-Lutheran Churches

We begin our look at the ecumenical approach of the Augustana Synod by noting interactions it had with several other church bodies, missionary societies, and organizations, specifically the Episcopal Church, the American Home Missionary Society (a Reformed group), and also its participation in national and international ecumenical organizations. Our eye will be on discerning what kinds of principles enlivened and dampened ecumenical zeal in the Augustana Synod, and how its views on church unity developed over time.

The relation of the Augustana church to the Episcopal church in America is a fascinating and complicated story. As is well known, the first Swedish immigrants to the United States settled in the region

of the Delaware River Valley around the year 1638. Several congregations were formed, in the settlement called New Sweden, and the community seemed to thrive for a time. But the Church of Sweden consistently neglected to send pastors for the renewal of the congregations' ministries, and so they eventually found themselves without leadership. The increasing use of English in liturgy and in the Swedish immigrants' homes left them desirous of a new form for worship. They found a ready partner able and willing to supply these needs in the Episcopal church. At least as early as 1742 Lutheran congregations in New Sweden were using the Book of Common Prayer in their worship and in 1789 the King of Sweden officially withdrew his support of the settlement. The churches there eventually folded into the Episcopal church in the last part of the eighteenth and early part of the nineteenth century.[4]

The next chapter in relations with the Episcopal church, after the formation of the Augustana Synod, was alternately friendly and strained. A Swedish-born immigrant to the United States named Gustaf Unonius became convinced that the similarity between the episcopal structure of the Church of Sweden and the Church of England was sufficient to ensure that Swedish immigrants to America should become members of Episcopal congregations. Unonius frequently traveled throughout the Midwest to locations with large numbers of recent immigrants. He urged them to join with him in building Swedish congregations of the American Protestant Episcopal Church. This kind of missionary activity was deeply troubling to early leaders of the Augustana Synod, particularly T.N. Hasselquist and Lars Paul Esbjörn. They felt as though Unonius would and did undo much of the work in setting up Lutheran congregations that they and other future Augustana leaders had done. When Unonius returned to Sweden in 1858, a successor was appointed, and several decades of strained relations between the Episcopal church in America and the Augustana Synod ensued, as each church sought to welcome the waves of Swedish immigrants to the new land, and to enfold them into their particular church.[5] This strife led Augustana pastors to say some harsh things about Anglicanism. For example, Esbjörn called apostolic succession and the episcopate "all the abominations of Pusey."[6] When later the

Episcopal Church in America proposed having a bishop sent from Sweden whose salary would be paid by the Protestant Episcopal Church as a first step toward closer relations, Augustana president Hasselquist was appalled. He wrote,

> It would be a cause of great concern to us if the church of the fatherland should wish to help us by seeking to send us a bishop in an attempt to build a bridge between us and the Episcopal Church. We would, of course, be forced to consider such an act as hostile and to undertake to battle against such a bishop with all our might; his diocese would undoubtedly be very small.[7]

Later efforts at imposing a kind of episcopal structure on the Augustana Synod were likewise met with resentment and opposition. The Swedish Archbishop von Scheele, when visiting the U.S. in 1893, and Archbishop Söderblom in 1923, both gently suggested the development of the office of bishop in the Augustana Synod. Both suggestions were firmly rebuffed. In 1930 Söderblom touched off controversy bordering on outrage when he offered to President Brandelle a gold pectoral cross, symbolic of the episcopacy of Sweden, which he could wear and pass along to his apostolic successors.

Given such an inauspicious, nearly inimical, start to their relationship with the Protestant Episcopal Church with their characteristic theological emphases, the fact that when the Episcopal Church issued an invitation to ecumenical dialogue to all the Lutheran bodies in 1934 and *only* the Augustana Synod accepted is remarkable, and speaks to the strength of the ecumenical impetus of Augustana. The results of those conversations were not particularly momentous, when considered from the outside, as they did not produce any kind of visible change in the workings of the two churches, and in fact no further discussions were ever even held between the two. And yet the ecumenical spirit of Augustana was made plain. The topics discussed at these 1935 meetings were Scripture, sacraments, communion, creeds, and the historic episcopate. Substantial overlap was found on the first four of those areas. The conversation grew more heated, however, when discussing the question of bishops. The Episcopal representatives attempted several times to articulate a theological or practical superiority of an episcopally organized church. Augustana repeatedly demurred.

Summarizing the Lutheran position, one Augustana representative said,

> Where you have the preaching of the Word, the Church that results from the preaching of the Word will produce its own form of organization, and where there is unity of faith there will be unity of love, but to insist that there must be one form or organization, I think that is something we could not accept. . . The unity must come from within—not from without. And the external organization doesn't safeguard this unity. . .We recognize any Church as Church which preaches the gospel. We don't question the validity of the orders of any Church. Some of us don't understand why the Episcopal Church. . . questions the validity of other Churches, when we don't question the validity of the Episcopal Church.[8]

This same theme, that of affirming the validity of another church body while asserting the right to define the Lutheran church in a different way, animated Lars Paul Esbjörn. Esbjörn was the first Swedish pastor to follow the wave of immigrants to the Midwest in the middle third of the nineteenth century. When he emigrated from Sweden his well-meaning friends had pledged to support him, but this money soon ran out. Needing a source of funding, Esbjörn turned to the jointly Presbyterian and Congregational American Home Missionary Society. He did not wish to convert from his Lutheran background, and so sought assistance from the AHMS precisely *as* a Lutheran, though the agency was Reformed. Esbjörn later described his experience in these terms:

> Ready to give to one and all a reason for the hope that is in me, I related my own spiritual experiences and the chief points of our Lutheran doctrine. Although the Association did not approve of them all, especially our teaching about the sacraments, election, and the possibility of the elect falling from grace, nevertheless, we agreed that I should "preach the gospel and administer the sacraments, and observe church practice, ceremonies and discipline as an Evangelical Lutheran servant of Christ."[9]

The AHMS offered Esbjörn a stipend and he set to work ministering in and around central Illinois. He soon ran into difficulty, however, with some of the requirements the AHMS had made. As a pastor of the Church of Sweden, Esbjörn was accustomed to communing all those who had been confirmed in the faith. But the

AHMS insisted that a person give evidence of having been re-born before being admitted to membership in the church and receiving the sacrament. This pained Esbjörn greatly. It was more than simply respect for a signed contract that made him adhere to the stipulations of the support the AHMS offered, however. There was also present a nascent ecumenical understanding that the Presbyterian and Congregationalist churches had legitimate reasons for insisting on full conversion before communing, though he as a Lutheran pastor did not come to the same conclusion. Shortly after his dispute with Unonius became public, however, Esbjörn became known to many Lutheran leaders (such as William Passavant and William Reynolds) who were able fundraisers, and Esbjörn soon found himself with enough capital to dissociate from his sponsoring agency.

Not all of Augustana's early leaders were as open to ecumenism as was Esbjörn. In fact, one of the other founding fathers of the Synod, Eric Norelius, was profoundly against such strategies for mission. He actually uses the word "unionistic" in relation to Esbjörn. Of him and others like him Norelius scornfully wrote, "They believed it was possible to cooperate with others of a different confessional standpoint in a synod created for churchly functions."[10] Norelius speaks of the episode of Esbjörn and the AHMS as a source of embarrassment soon to be forgotten. Though he was certainly one of the great luminaries of the Augustana Synod, Norelius was not altogether in line with the rest of the synod when it came to ecumenism. He was deeply distrustful of such relationships, sensing the danger of a diffusion of identity in trying to "fit in" with one's neighbors. Norelius had the character of a watchdog who wanted to secure the well being and stability of the fragile synod first and foremost, and consequently had little time for potentially distracting ecumenical endeavors. When as synod president in 1911 he received an invitation from Robert Gardiner to send a representative to a forthcoming conference on Faith and Order (which was to become part of the World Council of Churches), Norelius brusquely declined. He thought that such an approach to church unity was "futile, and no union at all."[11]

In marked contrast to Norelius' uneasiness with ecumenism (and perhaps more in keeping with the theological spirit of the rest of the

Augustana Synod),[12] Augustana president, G.A. Brandelle, accepted a similar invitation to attend the ecumenical Life and Work conference in Stockholm fifteen years later, and in fact would give a major speech at the conference. Over the course of the next three decades, Augustana became increasingly involved with the ecumenical movement on the wider stage. Delegates were sent to the constituting conventions of the World Council of Churches and the National Council of Churches. Objecting to the loose doctrinal basis of the Federal Council of Churches Augustana did not join that group, which had been formed in 1908, but did participate in certain of its social relief programs as it saw fit, and when they were consistent with the Lutheran social ethic.

The lessons one can take from these Episcopalian, Reformed, and international episodes in Augustana's history are twofold. First, we note that total doctrinal agreement was, from Augustana's perspective, not necessary to justify mutual ministry and even fuller forms of visible unity. That the Episcopalians required ascription to the historic episcopate frustrated Augustana's leaders, who were anxious to work together in cooperation despite remaining theological emphases and even differences. Second, conversation with the Episcopal and Reformed churches strengthened Augustana's understandings of themselves and of the gospel. The polity of Augustana had always been synodical, patterned in its own constitution after the constitution of the Northern Illinois Synod.[13] But the ethos of the synod issued in very strong appreciation for the national church body in a way quite oppositional to congregationalism. While Augustana resented the implication that it must have an episcopal structure in order to be fully the church, its affirmation of episcopal polity as an acceptable *adiaphoron* led to a greater appreciation of the non-local expression of the church, which in turn fueled the ecumenical impulses of the synod.

The above observations have been made in relation to Augustana's workings with non-Lutheran churches and mission structures. But one could make many of the same points about Augustana's approach to intra-Lutheran ecumenical relations. The synod was alive with fervor for visible Lutheran unity during the whole of its existence. It is no coincidence that the final chapter of G. Everett Arden's

excellent history of the Augustana Synod is entitled "Destiny Fulfilled."[14] Arden was, like very many of his fellows in the synod, of the opinion that the goal of the Augustana church ought to be, in a way, to work toward its own non-existence. As there is one Lord, there ought to be one church, and having one Lutheran church could be a meaningful stop on that road. The role of Augustana in the formation of the LCA, and then the ELCA, however, is a story that has been told many times before, by those better equipped to tell it than I am.[15] Let it be enough to say that Augustana stood nearly alone in the pan-Lutheran field in finding a basis for church fellowship not necessarily in total doctrinal agreement, nor in sufficiently blurring lines of distinction between different church groups, nor in moving away from the confessional traditions of the Lutheran church. From the point of view of Augustana and its leaders, a church should express deeply and without reservation its core identity in relation to its ecumenical or ministerial partners. Only then can genuine unity *be discovered*. Ecumenical conversations and mutual ministry do not forge unity, but rather find it.[16]

Ecumenicity and Catholicity of Worship

The Augustana ethos in worship is a result of a confluence of two streams in the heritage of its early members, each of which has import for considering the ecumenicity of the synod. There is, in the first place, a kind of gentle pietism which takes seriously human emotion, senses and affections. Many early leaders, and many more early members, of the Augustana Synod were significantly shaped by the pietistic movements that swept central Europe in the early part of the eighteenth century, and spread northward to Scandinavia soon thereafter. Although pietism is usually thought of primarily in its theological and ethical expressions, a certain sensibility of worship also permeated the movements. Many Lutheran commentators have deplored this sensibility, finding it one-sidedly subjective or revivalist. Jeremiah Ohl, for example, alleges that Pietist influences in worship saw "all fixed forms and churchly order as a detriment to spiritual life, and a hindrance to its expression."[17] Frank Senn complains that when Pietism influenced worship, "the old objective church hymns,

which celebrated the saving acts of God in Christ, were set aside in favor of hymns that concentrated on the conditions of the soul." Hymnals began to be "arranged according to the theological order of salvation rather than the liturgical calendar and church year. New melodies, better suited to the emotional character of Pietist hymn texts, replaced the old chorales."[18]

But these charges of hyper-subjectivity and disdain for conventional forms are inaccurate with respect to the Augustana experience. This is because of the second influence mentioned above. Mediating the pietistic influence in worship was an extremely strong respect for the historic liturgical worship of the church, particularly as the form of that worship came to members of the Augustana Synod through the liturgies of the Church of Sweden.[19] As the Reformation took root in Sweden, the pace of change was less frantic. More distant from Rome and less vulnerable to controversy and threat than was Luther's Saxony, Swedish church leaders were able to institute theological, cultural and liturgical reform gradually and with greater thought given to which of the traditions of the church ought to be maintained and which were accretions inimical to the gospel.[20]

Thus the liturgy which the Church of Sweden developed, and which was inherited and adapted by the Augustana Synod, had elements of continuity with longstanding traditions in the Latin rite.[21] While it is true, for example, that it was not until 1942 that the Church of Sweden reintroduced a Eucharistic prayer into its standard liturgy (these were cast away when the abuses of the canon of the mass led to its excision during the Reformation), the kind of ethos that appreciated such ancient custom and could work toward its recovery also animated Augustana. Let one incident from early in the days of the synod make the point. When dissent broke out between Norwegians and Swedes over the usage of a formula for the distribution of communion, the synod eventually resolved: "That while the Synod unalterably defends the Christian liberty according to the confession of the Lutheran Church on the basis of the word of God, it yet considers uniformity in Church usages and ceremonies useful; that it does not approve of the tendency to discard Church customs inherited from the fathers in favor of new ones of Reformed origin."[22] Here the heritage from "the fathers" did not mean earlier

Lutherans in America, but rather the strongly ecumenical worship service developed in the line of Olavus Petri, Laurentius Petri and Laurentius Andreae.[23]

It would be going too far to say that the liturgical sensibilities of the Augustana group somehow "won out" in the development of worship in American Lutheranism. But it is at least true that the liturgical renewal that issued in the Service Book and Hymnal (1958) and the Lutheran Book of Worship (1978) had a decidedly ecumenical bent, and this emphasis on regaining a tradition common to groups other than Lutherans was deeply held in Augustana circles. As the Church of Sweden held in high regard the treasures of the church's liturgical worship, so too did Augustana, and eventually more Lutherans in America came to view the ecumenicity of worship as a mandate and gift.

Ecumenical Ecclesiology

We have observed the principles of ecumenicity governing Augustana's relations with other churches, in Augustana's corporate worship, and now we move to a look at ecumenical commitments in the theology of the synod. I will cite here just two examples, drawing from C.E. Lindberg's dogmatic theology and from Conrad Bergendoff's ecclesiological writings. The polity of Augustana was, from its very beginnings, synodical. That is, rather than having an episcopal structure such as the Church of Sweden, where oversight was rendered by a bishop, institutional leadership in the Augustana Synod rested chiefly in an assembly which met periodically, and in its deputy, the synod's president. But we must note that this was really an inheritance from the Northern Illinois Synod, after whose constitution Augustana's own constitution was fashioned. As Swedes in America became less pietistic and more ecumenical, they began to appreciate more the episcopal structure of their home church, and the synod's president began to function more as a bishop. No one form of the church and its oversight was prescribed as divinely mandated, so the synod was free to organize itself how it chose, and that same freedom also allowed them to view churches with very different organizational patterns as legitimate.

But the recognition of other churches as legitimate sites of the Christian ministry (following the *satis est* clause of the Augsburg Confession, Art. VII) did not mean that Lutheran distinctiveness, nor confessional subscription, needed to be downplayed. On the contrary, as Martin Englund well noted,

> Our polity in regard to sister synods may at times have been characterized by an uncouthness peculiar to the Viking blood, but beneath this uncouthness ran the deep and steady irenic undercurrent of "peace, not pieces." Even in our relations to other Protestant communions we strive to be irenic, though uncompromising in doctrinal questions and unionistic movements, and the bitter controversies that raged at times and the equally bitter words that fell are mere incidents in the Synod's history. But our love for peace has rendered us cautious as to a false peace – a "peace when there is no peace."[24]

Two principles are evident here. First, it is clear that every effort would be made to recognize in another church body the essence of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church. But secondly, such recognition need not imply that uniformity would prevail, nor that recognizing the presence in another church of the true essence of the Christian church would mean that the churches ought to merge institutionally.

We now look briefly at two individuals whose theology both typified and shaped the Augustana Synod. Conrad Emil Lindberg taught theology at Augustana Seminary for four decades. His particular view of Lutheranism, one marked by a strong reliance on the theological expressions of Lutheran scholasticism and confessional orthodoxy, would shape generations of Augustana pastors. His views on the church and its unity are well worth examining, therefore, as we seek to understand the ecumenical ethos of the Augustana Synod. Far from being controversial, Lindberg defines the church as "the communion of saints, in which the Word of God is taught in its purity and the Sacraments are administered in accordance with the institution of Christ."[25] He goes on to indicate that this church has many forms, and that one must not attempt to find the one, true, visible church whose membership is only composed of "saints." Since *each* form of the one true church will have both believers and unbelievers, or those who benefit from the means of grace and those

who do not, the believer must labor to discern in any church he meets the essence of the church within it.

Lindberg writes, "Inasmuch as the definition of the Church states that it is the communion of saints in which the Word of God is taught in its purity and the Sacraments are administered according to the institution of Christ, the question may arise as to whether a church exists in case the Word of God in its entirety is not taught in its purity and the Sacraments are not rightly understood and administered."[26] And he answers his own question by tentatively affirming the validity of other forms of the one true church. "The Lutheran Church does not claim that she alone is the Church of Christ on earth, but she does assert that the true Church ought to be such that within her the Word of God be purely preached and the Sacraments administered according to the institution of Christ."[27] Later he explains that the Lutheran Church "does not, however, assume an exclusive attitude and sit in judgment upon others."[28] Lindberg's discussion of the marks of the church, its unity, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity, also show his concern to develop an ecclesiology that is faithful to the Lutheran Confessions, but can recognize the essence of the church in many other particular church bodies.[29]

Perhaps no single person embodies both the history and the ethos of Augustana more than C. E. Lindberg's successor, Conrad Bergendoff.[30] Born in 1895 in Nebraska to a Swedish immigrant father ordained in the Augustana Synod, Conrad himself was ordained a pastor in 1921, and earned graduate degrees in theology and history. Over the course of his 102 years, he served as college and seminary president, parish pastor, professor, dean, and consummate churchman, to say nothing of his prolific literary output. The number of task forces and committees on which he served is prodigious. One of his chief contributions to the life of Augustana, however, was the quiet and effective way he shaped the ecumenical voice of the synod into words and deeds that built visible church unity in the U.S. and abroad. A very brief look at his ecumenical work, and then one at his more theological writings on the nature of the church, will illumine our understanding of Augustana ecumenicity.

Bergendoff's ecumenical commitment was inspired by a 1923 visit to his church in Chicago by the Swedish Archbishop Nathan Söderblom.[31] Bergendoff later spent a year as Söderblom's assistant and studied at the Universities of Lund, Uppsala, and Berlin, which served as Bergendoff's introduction to the world ecumenical scene. Bergendoff had been present at the negotiations leading to the formation of the United Lutheran Church in 1918, and agreed with the decision of Augustana not to join the merger at that time. His opposition, like that of the synod, was not because he was anti-unity in Lutheran circles. Rather, he felt that the approach of the constituting members, especially the General Synod and the General Council, was not sufficiently rigorous with respect to the confessional basis of the new church body. The benefits of merger (or, for that matter, ecumenism) should not be purchased at the cost of theological laxity.

Bergendoff was Augustana's delegate to the founding meeting of the Lutheran World Federation in Lund in 1947, and participated in the International Lutheran-Reformed dialogues that led to the landmark Leuenberg Agreement. In 1937 Bergendoff was named one of the representatives of Augustana to the second convention of Soderblom's Life and Work movement, in Oxford and Edinburgh.[32] Although he had decided to attend the conference simply because of his own interest, while en route he persuaded Augustana president Bersell to make him an official representative, thus committing the Synod formally to the mission of the global ecumenical movement.[33] Bergendoff was a delegate to the constituting convention of the National Council of Churches in the U.S. in 1950.

In intra-Lutheran circles, Bergendoff was an official Augustana representative to the American Lutheran conference, placing him between the conservative Missouri Synod Lutherans and the more liberal ULCA church with its centers of power in the Eastern U.S. Bergendoff was one of the architects of a merger with the ULCA, but not until he and his colleagues in Augustana felt the time was right. He served on the commission that negotiated the formation of the Lutheran Church in America (one of the direct predecessor bodies of the current ELCA). One of the benefits of waiting to join with the ULCA in 1962 was to strengthen the confessional witness

of the LCA beyond the weaker confessional basis of the ULCA. What all this committee work and ecumenical dialogue amounted to is significant. With the possible exception of its presidents, Bergendoff was the most visible and well-known member of the synod. That "one of them" was a person of such personal magnitude, and was traveling in the highest ecclesiastical circles of the time, meant very much to the people of Augustana. Further, Bergendoff was able to bring a distinctive theological emphasis of Augustana's ecclesiology to bear on the discussions.

As a scholar Bergendoff did much to introduce current theology from Europe to his students and colleagues at Augustana and into the wider American scene. Bergendoff had studied with the likes of Gustav Aulén, Anders Nygren, and Einar Billing. These theologians had an approach to modernity that was at once embracing and critical, and had helped free Luther from the clutches of a narrow confessionalism by building on the spirit of the Luther Renaissance.[34]

In Bergendoff's own constructive theological work, the doctrine of the church was a frequent topic of exploration. His preferred metaphor for the church was the "body of Christ" because of its emphasis on oneness in reality with Christ as the head. It is because of the *fact* of unity in the one church that exists on earth that we ought to seek ecclesiastical rapprochement. The unity of the church is a function of its apostolicity, holiness, and catholicity. Bergendoff writes,

> Were we to judge the mass of material which has been produced on the topic of church unity we might charge that much of it is superficial because it treats only of unity… It is my conviction that this is a futile approach to the problem… In short, the only unity worth considering is the unity not merely of the Church as a structure, but of the character of the Church as holy, catholic, and apostolic.[35]

Thus participants in ecumenical discussion are not to be asked to give anything up in their faith, or to reduce it to a common denominator. Instead, "I claim each of us must add something to a faith which is defective in holiness, in apostolic truth, and the fullness of Christ. Our unity will increase in the measure that we grow in these qualities. That is the direction in which unity lies."[36] Every ecumenical encounter is a chance to challenge the partner, and to be challenged by the partner, to greater truth.[37]

Claiming the Inheritance

This brings us back to the place where we started – wondering about the ecumenical logic at work in the recent full communion arrangement between the ELCA and the United Methodists. The Augustana insight into ecumenical affairs was that certain conditions had to be met before "altar and pulpit" fellowship would be possible. First, a pressing need for ministry had to be demonstrated. The intra-Lutheran ecumenical motor, from Augustana's perspective, was powered by the sense that a more unified Lutheran church in the United States could do work in service of the gospel that fragmented bodies could not. Second, the doctrinal, liturgical, and ecclesial sensibilities and emphases of the ecumenical partner were seen as clarifying the self-understanding of Augustana as a Christian church and its understanding of the gospel. It was not because the Augustana Synod supposedly exhibited all the characteristics of the "one true church" and therefore owed it to other church bodies to reform them. Instead it understood itself as a legitimate, though partial, expression of the one church which comprised the churches. And this view of the ecumenical situation is substantially different from the present trajectory of ecumenism in the ELCA.

In highlighting the ecumenical charism that Augustana offers the contemporary church, I call on one who might seem like an unlikely interlocutor for this conversation - Thomas Aquinas. In his discussion of the human soul Thomas inquires whether the soul was in each "part" of the human body. To help understand the relationship between part and whole, Thomas distinguished three kinds of wholes: *totum integrale*, *totum universale*, and *totum potestativum*.[38] The first is an integral whole. This refers to a whole made up of parts which are constituents of the whole, but do not contain within themselves the essence of the whole. Most of our world is made up of these kinds of wholes – cars, houses, towns, human bodies, and the like. Cars are made up of pistons, doors, tires, axles, and so on. This is not a particularly helpful ecumenical model to follow; we would not want to envision the church as having a Catholic frame, a Lutheran wheel, an Episcopalian paint job, a Baptist motor, because then the essence of the whole is not in any of its parts. Another kind

of whole is the universal whole. This is the homogenous whole. Carbon dioxide is carbon dioxide, no matter where it is found. Part of the world's carbon dioxide is in my lungs right now, part is in the stratosphere, part is buried beneath the earth's surface. Along the lines of this model, we could conceive of each part of the whole Christian church as essentially the same as every other part. This is not the kind of part/whole framework we want, either, for it pretends that each part of the whole Christian church is saying and doing the same thing, deep down.

But all the different churches are not all saying the same thing. The Augustana witness to ecumenism helps us to realize that it is acceptable for Lutherans, Catholics, Presbyterians, and Episcopalians to be genuinely different. The Augustana model seems to have much in common with Thomas' third option: the potentiated whole. The potentiated whole envisions the essence of the whole actually being located in each part that makes up the whole. However, the essence is fully present only when the parts are brought together. Thomas' example here is the human soul itself, which has three distinct functions, the vegetative, the sensitive, and the intellective. It is the same, whole human soul which performs each of the functions, but its total power is not active in each function. In "sensing," the vegetative and intellective functions are inactive. In thinking, the vegetative and sensitive functions are inactive. In order for the soul to reach its full power, the parts, which are distinct in expression and use but one in essence, must come together.

Thomas' understanding of the *totum potestativum* is basically the ecumenical ecclesiology of the Augustana Synod. The essence of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church could be seen in any of a number of Christian bodies, and the denominational embodiment of that essence is to be honored on account of the essence present in it. But the full power of the whole is not present in each part, nor in any part. One part might function with greater evangelical fervor than another; one might exhibit a more effective polity for a certain time and place; one part might organize social ministries more effectively than another. Each of the parts needs the others to achieve its full power, and for the power of the unified whole to be expressed.

One of the central and most durable and thought-provoking contributions to evangelical theology made by the Augustana Evangelical Lutheran Church has surely been this particular understanding of what the catholicity of the church consists in. The ecumenical vision that undergirds such universality and the mandate for the visible unity of the church it enjoins has been our theme. The hey-day of the ecumenical movement is very likely behind us. The accomplishments, both conceptual and practical, that have come from it are numerous and bracing. Co-operation in ministry exists today to a degree once unthinkable among the churches in America. Genuine efforts are made to understand the construal of the gospel developed by once-rival contestants for "the true church." Many recent ecumenical conversations have been guided by the principle that each part of the one whole church in some sense *needs* another part in order to be more fully itself, and to witness more fully to the truth of the gospel. One thinks, for example, of the 1997 "Formula of Agreement" between the ELCA and several Reformed church bodies. One very divisive issue for these groups historically has been the mode of the presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper. Were different views of the presence necessarily opposed to each other? Many of the background documents to this text and the text of the Formula of Agreement itself note how Lutheran and Reformed doctrinal construals were actually *complementary*.[39] Lutherans had traditionally emphasized the objective presence of Christ in the elements of bread and wine. Reformed theology had emphasized the subjective presence of Christ in the act of consuming the elements of bread and wine. Each tradition needed the other to remind itself of a kind of shortsightedness in its own doctrinal statements, and each was better off by remaining in relationship with the conversation partner. The same could be said of Lutheran-Catholic dialogue. Lutheran participants in those conversations have noted how vulnerable Lutheran theological anthropologies are to antinomianism. Persistent dialogue with Catholics helps to avoid that. Conversely, Catholic participants have noted how prone to Pelagianism Catholic theological anthropologies can be, and how remaining in dialogue with Lutherans diminishes the threat.[40]

A full-scale examination of the recent ELCA-United Methodist ecumenical arrangement is clearly far outside the bounds of this essay, but perhaps a few concluding words about it will be enough to show how the Augustana insights into ecumenicity and unity could make a difference in the future life of the churches.[41] In contrast to the approach favored by Augustana, and the approach hinted at above in discussing Thomas' *totum potestativum* and the Lutheran-Reformed and Lutheran-Roman Catholic dialogues, the ELCA-United Methodist document functions essentially as a piece of "convergence" ecumenism.[42] Its method is essentially to make joint statements wherever possible about the unified understanding of the gospel and its implications shared by both churches. But when historically "hot-button" issues between the churches are discussed, the strategy is to downplay their significance and to construe them in a way that blunts their divisive potential. Whether "perfection" is possible in this life, whether Lutherans can speak of a prevenient grace, the nature of Christ's Eucharistic presence – these potentially divisive topics are emphasized as "not being church dividing." Paragraphs 27 and 30 of the document outline a vision of perfectibility of human life held by the UMC that is incompatible with the Lutheran understanding of baptism. Paragraphs 30 and 31 purport to show how these incompatible views of human moral abilities are actually "gifts" from one church to the other, but the effect is simply to say that the differences between the churches are not finally divisive. One other locus in the document, paragraph 50, notes how the ELCA can become more fully itself in its relation to the UMC by learning from "the Methodist testimony and service as a "public" church and their passion for justice." But there is no sustained reflection in the document about how being in full altar and pulpit fellowship helps either ecumenical partner to grow in catholicity, holiness, apostolicity, or fullness.[43]

As I hope the foregoing essay has shown, one concrete way that the witness of Augustana can speak to the church of the present day is in its compelling vision of an ecumenical possibility that resists purchasing unity at the expense of a particular church's identity. The way forward for visible church unity between Lutherans and their ecumenical partners need not be to blur the differences that make

Lutherans Lutheran, Methodists Methodist, or Catholics Catholic. Rather, each church body could recognize in its partners the essence of the church, and then begin to understand remaining differences as mutually enriching particular expressions of the one gospel that animates all churchly existence.

NOTES

1. This statement must be carefully conditioned. The seven Methodist churches in Europe, on the basis of a document called "Joint Declaration of Church Fellowship," joined the Leuenberg Community of Protestant Churches. But this is a coalition of many different Protestant churches, including virtually all of the major Reformation denominations and even pre-Reformation groups like the Czech Brethren and the Waldensians.

2. Maria Erling and Mark Granquist, *The Augustana Story: Shaping Lutheran Identity in North America* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2008), 11.

3. Conrad Bergendoff, "Ecumenical Experiences," in Emmer Engberg et al., eds., *Centennial Essays* (Rock Island, IL: Augustana Book Concern, 1960), 91. See also Sam Rönnegård, *Prairie Shepherd: Lars Paul Esbjörn and the Beginnings of the Augustana Synod* (Rock Island, Il: Augustana Book Concern, 1956), 102.

4. L. DeAne Lagerquist has a concise summary of the New Sweden period in *The Lutherans* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1999), 26-30.

5. The best introduction to this chapter in Augustana's life is Mark W. Granquist, "The Augustana Synod and the Episcopal Church," in *Lutheran Quarterly* 1 (2000): 173-92. For an interpretation of a related issue, see Todd W. Nichol, "The Augustana Synod and Episcopacy," in *Lutheran Quarterly* 3 (1989): 141-68.

6. Quoted in Granquist, "The Augustana Synod and the Episcopal Church," 180.

7. Letter of T. N. Hasselquist to C. A. Torén, 18 March 1871, in Westin, ed., *Emigrantarna och Kyrkan,* 297-29, quoted in Nichol, "The Augustana Church and the Episcopacy," 147.

8. *Record of a Conference Between the Commission of Comity of the Evangelical Lutheran Augustana Synod and the Sub-committee of the Joint Commission for Conference on Church Unity of the Protestant Episcopal Church Held at Evanston, Illinois, December 3-4, 1935* (Evanston, Illinois: Seabury-Western Theological Seminary, 1936), 37. Quoted in Nichol, "The Augustana Synod and Episcopacy," 158.

9. Letter to Swedish Missionary Society, 1850. Quoted in G. Everett Arden, *Augustana Heritage,* 32.

10. Erik Norelius, *De Svenska Lutherska Församlingarnar och Svenskarnes Historia i Amerika* (Rock Island, IL: Augustana Book Concern, 1890), 792.

11. Quoted in Arden, *Augustana Heritage,* 303.

12. In a letter to ULCA President F.H. Knubel in 1924, Brandelle noted that he predicted very little opposition in the synod to his attendance at the ecumenical conference.

13. A.D. Mattson makes the argument that Augustana developed a progressively stronger understanding of the national church, one that would have been very comfortable with the term "bishop" were it not for the Roman Catholic connotations of the word.

Mattson, *The Polity of the Augustana Synod* (Rock Island, IL: Augustana Book Concern, 1952), 289-91.

14. G. Everett Arden, *Augustana Heritage: A History of the Augustana Lutheran Church* (Rock Island, IL: Augustana Book Concern, 1963), 379-413.

15. Some of the best places to find this story told are, "Augustana's Ecumenical Vision," in Granquist and Erling, *The Augustana Story*, 291-300, Richard Koenig, "The New Lutheran Church: The Gift of Augustana," in *Christian Century* 104:19 [June 1988], 555-558, Johannes Knudsen, *The Formation of the Lutheran Church in America* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978) and W. Kent Gilbert, *Commitment to Unity: A History of the Lutheran Church in America* (Philadelphia: Fortress. 1988).

16. This is best shown in an excellent study of the ecumenicity of the Augustana Synod, Hugo Söderström, *Confession and Cooperation: The Policy of the Augustana Synod in Confessional Matters and the Synod's Relations with Other Churches up to the Beginning of the Twentieth Century* (Lund: CWK Gleerup Bokförlag, 1973).

17. Jeremiah Ohl, "The Liturgical Deterioration of the of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries," *in Memoirs of the Lutheran Liturgical Association IV* (1901-1902), 71.

18. Frank C. Senn, *Christian Liturgy: Evangelical and Catholic* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1997), 498.

19. See Arland Hultgren's thorough and insightful essay on that particular topic in another article of this journal.

20. On this point, reference must be made to Conrad Bergendoff, *Olavus Petri and the Ecclesiastical Transformation in Sweden* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1965).

21. See Luther Reed, *The Lutheran Liturgy* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959).

22. SM, 1863, p. 16; quoted in Oscar N. Olson, *The Augustana Lutheran Church in America,* 1860-1910 (Davenport, IA: Arcade Letter and Office Service, 1948), 69-70.

23. For an in-depth look at the difficulties in Sweden and elsewhere in Scandinavia in maintaining catholic tradition in an evangelical church, see Frank C. Senn, *Christian Liturgy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 397-447.

24. Martin J. Englund, "Church Polity of the Augustana Synod," in *The Augustana Synod: A Brief Review of Its History, 1860-1910* (Rock Island, IL: Augustana Book Concern, 1910), 49.

25. Conrad Emil Lindberg, *Christian Dogmatics and Notes on the History of Dogma* (Rock Island, IL: Augustana Book Concern, 1922), 367.

26. Ibid., 369.

27. Ibid., 369.

28. Ibid., 369-70.

29. Ibid., 372-3. Lindberg makes the same point in his book, *Apologetics: Or Evidence for Christian Belief* (Rock Island, IL: Augustana Book Concern, 1917), 114-6.

30. Bergendoff had a truly fascinating life. To read more about it, see Mark A. Granquist, "Conrad J.I. Bergendoff, 1895-1997" in *Lutheran Quarterly* 19 (2005): 169-84.

31. One brief introduction to Söderblom and his import for ecumenism in the 21st century can be found in Derek R. Nelson, "Encountering the World's Religions: Nathan Söderblom and the Concept of Revelation," *Dialog* 46:4 [2007], 362-70.

32. Bergendoff recollects this experience in the essay "Retrospect and Prospect," in *The Lutheran Quarterly* 26 (1974): 377ff.

33. Granquist makes this point in "Conrad J.I. Bergendoff, 1895-1997," 173.

34. Gerald Christianson perceptively notes that it was a strange and counterintuitive combination of strong conservative elements (confessional emphasis, liturgical structures, and a sense of community) and liberal ones (ecumenism, social justice, and the historical-critical method) which helped Bergendoff and his colleagues revitalize Augustana Seminary in the 1930's. Gerald Christianson, "The Making of a Modern Seminary: Augustana Seminary in the 1930's," http://www.augustanaheritage.org/christianson_on_augustana_seminary.pdf, accessed September 14, 2009.

35. Conrad Bergendoff, *The One Holy Catholic Apostolic Church* (Rock Island, IL: Augustana Book Concern, 1954), 81-2.

36. Ibid., 86.

37. Bergendoff notes, for example, "The Augustana Synod expressly emphasized its adherence to the Confessions when it entered into fellowship with the Synod of Northern Illinois and the General Synod. The Augustana men were not happy over the prevailing looseness of doctrine in these groups, but used the opportunity to witness to their position." Bergendoff, "Ecumenical Experiences," 99. He implies that the same thing could be said of Augustana's entry into the General Council.

38. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* Ia.77.1.ad primum. He makes the same point with slightly different terminology in Ia.76.8.

39. On this point, reference must be made to the excellent work of Michael Root and Gabriel Fackre, *Affirmations and Admonitions: Lutheran Decisions and Dialogue with Reformed, Episcopal, and Roman Catholic Churches* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

40. For examples of this kind of approach, see William G. Rusch, ed., *Justification and the Future of the Ecumenical Movement* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2003).

41. The proposal was called "Confessing Faith Together," and is available at http://www.elca.org/~/media/Files/Who%20We%20Are/Ecumenical%20and%20Inter%20Religious%20Relations/Confessing_Faith_Together.ashx

42. A critique along similar lines of the problems of convergence ecumenism can be found in an essay by a well-known "Son of Augustana," George A. Lindbeck, "The Unity We Seek: Setting the Agenda for Ecumenism," in *The Christian Century,* 121:15 (August 9, 2005): 28-31.

43. I am grateful for a discussion of this document with my colleagues on the Northwest Pennsylvania Synod of the ELCA's Ecumenical Affairs Committee.