

A Book Review: Dean Lueking, “Through Their Eyes. A People’s View of the Global Church”

Colleagues,

Dean Lueking’s face is on my graduation class photo (Concordia Seminary, 1954). We’ve continued to be “joined at the hip” ever since. Paul Ananth Tambyah came into Marie’s and my life in 2004 when the Evangelical Church in America [ELCA] sent us to work with the Lutheran Church of Singapore as Global Mission Volunteers. My spiffy title was “Theologian in Residence.” Every Monday morning was a seminar with pastors and church leaders. Every two weeks during our stint there we were farmed out to work in/with another congregation in the LCP. Paul crossed our path when his congregation asked for a Crossings workshop and we learned what a Lutheran theologian this medical doctor – Senior Consultant Infectious Diseases, Physician and Associate Professor of Medicine at the National University of Singapore and National University Hospital – was, and still is. That connection continues. [Even medically. When I came home from Singapore with some Asian bug, Paul was in on the consult at Barnes Hospital here in town as experts tried to isolate just what bug was bugging me. Paul gave them the laundry list to check for. I got better.] But it is Crossings that has Paul hooked. So much so that he not only showed up for a Crossings conference here in St. Louis, but he has also recruited several Asian Lutheran pastors to attend other Crossings gatherings. Irrepressible, he’s got three more lined up to come to our next conference in January. [You’d be blessed to be there too. The

lineup (see our homepage) is creme-de-la-creme.]

Paul doesn't confine his calling(s) to the hospital. lecture hall and the Lutheran Church of Singapore. He's a public figure in the life (and politics?) of his country, a city-state of 4 million people, with an area comparable to that of metropolitan St. Louis. I got over 21K references when I googled his name. Check this URL for one sample: <http://www.temasekreview.com/2011/08/08/paul-tambyah-ten-thousand-people-speaking-up-cannot-be-ignored/>

For more about Dean Lueking, read what Paul says below.

Peace and joy!

Ed Schroeder

Dean Lueking. THROUGH THEIR EYES. A PEOPLE'S VIEW OF THE GLOBAL CHURCH, Chicago: Tyra Books. 472 pp. [Purchase info at the end of the review]

Nearly a year ago, Ed Schroeder wrote to me to ask me to write a book review of Dean Lueking's book "Through Their Eyes" which is ambitiously subtitled, "A people's view of the global church." I could not resist the offer. I had met Rev. Lueking briefly when he came to Singapore and had enjoyed his presentation to Lutheran ministers and lay people at our own church. I did not know at the time that he was on a global journey that would take him around the world and result in this fascinating masterpiece. Ed has demonstrated a remarkable amount of patience in allowing me to take this long to complete the review but I see where he came from in asking a fifth-generation Christian living in Singapore in the middle of Southeast Asia to review a manuscript on global Christianity by a distinguished Lutheran churchman

from suburban Chicago. This is more than a manuscript, however, it is a collection of stories, of testimonials, to the grace of an unchanging God in an ever-changing world.

Lueking begins where it all began, most appropriately in Bethlehem. This is, however, not the Christmas card Bethlehem of neat roofs, pretty sheep and shepherds and solitary stars over pastoral scenes of family bliss. It is the reality of Bethlehem in the here and now, a city that is under military occupation, in what his first interviewees describe as an "open air prison" where a Christian Arab was told that "he could die at the side of the road" by the border guard when his wife tried to take him to the hospital for his heart attack. Naturally, Lueking asks, "How does one continue to live under such conditions of injustice and humiliation?" The answer comes from two veteran Palestinian Lutheran clergymen, Rev. Mitri Raheb and Bishop Munib Younan, who try to bring about reconciliation between the occupying Israeli forces and the Christian and Muslim Palestinians who have been living together for centuries. The answer is in the incarnational life of Christ in these embattled believers who trust in the Promise Giver even as they strive not to repay evil with evil but rather bear witness to the Good News that continues to go from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth.

He moves on to Africa, and for some reason (probably logistic) concentrates on the eastern part of that vast continent – Kenya, Tanzania and Ethiopia, as well as the island of Madagascar (not the cartoon jungle!). Kenya is covered by the remarkable story of a single individual, a young man, a 6 foot 7 refugee from South Sudan who makes contact with the Uhuru Lutheran Church and is supported by Rev. Lueking's River Forest Church through Pharmacy school under the mentorship of a Kenyan Lutheran leader. By the time of the Luekings' second visit to Kenya, this young man has graduated and is returning to South Sudan to work in an NGO to help others in a similar position to himself. This

is another of the strengths of this book: it provides practical examples with names and faces of how congregations in the wealthier parts of the Kingdom of God can make a huge difference in the lives of individuals living in the two-thirds world. Ethiopia is more comprehensively covered with stories from the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus (EECMY), one of the fastest-growing Lutheran churches in the world. Pastor Geneti Wayessa talks about the “Ethiopian Bonhoeffer” Gudina Tumsa, the theologian who died for his faith under the brutal dictatorship of the 1970s. Many Ethiopian seminarians, both men and women, have their say as they are challenged by Lueking on issues such as polygamy or living on a \$100-a-month pastor’s stipend. Itaffa Gobena, the EECMY President, rounds up the Ethiopian tales with his own story – one which is typical of the Ethiopians and in fact, of so many fast-growing church movements throughout Asia and Africa: growing up nominally Christian, having a “charismatic experience” with healing or speaking in tongues or some other visible manifestation of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, persevering through persecution from the Marxists to leading growing ministries, 100% indigenous. Lueking recounts these stories non-judgmentally, not attempting to dissect the theology which has torn apart many congregations nor unquestioningly embracing this rejection of tradition for the demonstrative and visible form of religion. This comes up again in his discussions with a church leader in Tanzania who describes “the African cultural” response to a homosexual parishioner in violent terms that would be unacceptable in even the most “conservative” parts of the United States. This dispassionate reporting of “international perspectives” is a little disconcerting at first, but on second reading, it is probably the only way to be true to the individuals through whose eyes Lueking seeks to view the Christian world. Inevitably, AIDS and poverty appear in Tanzania as Lueking spends time with a missionary and with a Lutheran orphanage.

Here, we acknowledge, as the church in Africa has grown through “signs and wonders” and becomes increasingly self-supporting and indigenous, there are still huge needs from the twin plagues of disease and economic devastation that demand far more than the resources of a young and growing church can provide. However, the “formula” for church growth in Africa is more than just pioneering missionaries followed by charismatic renewals. The solid church growth he describes is exemplified by hundreds of “shepherds,” people like Germaine Baolava, a lay woman in Madagascar who trains for three years for the ministry of word, healing (both physical and spiritual) prayer and care for the marginalized.

Moving on to Eastern Europe and Russia, Lueking finds seminarians in Russia who come from all across the vast former empire and share the challenges of being Lutheran and Russian. He finds Slovak teachers in Lutheran schools and Lithuanian lay leaders who all shared the horrors of living through persecution during the Communist era and the challenges of freedom including nationalism, economics and all the attendant changes that the new era brought.

Moving closer to the heart of Luther-land, Lueking prefaces his sojourn in Western Europe with the common American tourist comment about beautiful and empty churches. In spite of this, Lueking finds hope as he describes the Berlin city mission and a Lutheran nunnery in Darmstadt, among other innovative ministries of the church in Germany. In Denmark, he quotes a Danish church leader, Kaj Bollmann, as saying “-Denmark may be viewed as the most secular place in Europe but don’t think of the church here as a lost cause; it is visible and working in a typically Danish way, modestly, without fanfare about itself.” Similar stories come from Norway where Lueking talks with the ordained minister who was twice Prime Minister of Norway; Sweden, where church attendances are hovering at around 2% of the population; and

Finland where in the words of Pastor Olli Valtonen, "Everybody loves the church but nobody goes there."

He moves next to Central America with a compelling narrative beginning with the defining point that Lutherans in Central America "bear the marks of Christ." In El Salvador, the Luekings dine with Medardo Gomez, who was confirmed by the legendary martyr Bishop Oscar Romero but became a Lutheran minister because of a family issue, who was persecuted for a Cross. They interact with Christian Chavarria, a former child soldier; Bishop Victoria Cortez, once a refugee, now a Lutheran Bishop; a person living with AIDS in Costa Rica; as well as many other Lutheran lay people and ministers whose faith had kept them going through the tumultuous 1980s and 1990s.

In Peru and Bolivia, he meets the church responding to poverty, indigenous cultures, the aftermath of dictatorship (and the trauma of Sep.11, 1973 in Chile) [Allende assassination. Ed]. Rev. Lueking interacts with both sides of a divided church in Chile, the faculty of the world's largest Lutheran University in Brazil with 156,000 students across 13 campuses, workers in ministries to the neediest in the slums of Brazil, and creative ministries in Argentina. Here the most intriguing observations are made – how can the church in Latin America relate to Catholicism even in its most Marian forms and to Pentecostalism which seems to be sweeping all before it?

He then crosses the globe to Asia, beginning in Japan, where a seminarian recognizes the preeminence of Jesus Christ while building bridges to Shinto practitioners, and he meets members of the tiny and aging Lutheran churches in Japan. He then moves to Korea where Christianity has gone from 0.5% of the population to more than 40% with mega-churches of both Pentecostal and Presbyterian varieties. The Lutheran church in Korea is small but reflective and recognizing its role in this complex modern

yet ancient society facing a nuclear armed brother nation across the demilitarized zone. Next stop is the world's most populous country, China. Here we discover the Concordia International School in Shanghai, tolerated by the Communist Chinese authorities. Conversations follow with seminarians who have gone on to ministry in both the prosperous coastal cities as well as the rural Chinese countryside. He visits the famous Tao Fong Shan centre in Hong Kong where a powerful Asian theology is being crafted in a setting which looks like one of the Shaolin temples of the kung fu movies. Taiwan, which is home to six different Lutheran denominations, gets a good overview too, including fascinating accounts of pastors with both traditional and unusual ministries (to mail order brides!). India has eleven Lutheran bodies and more than a billion people. Lueking visits a slum ministry, discusses church politics and gets a flavour of the diversity of the church and Christian life in South India.

His sojourn in Indonesia begins with the late Armencius Munthe who is no stranger to the Crossings Community. I had the privilege of sharing a room with Bishop Munthe at the Crossings Conference a couple of winters ago and visiting with him and his son at Trinity Theological College in Singapore. I can attest to the accuracy of Lueking's description of this lively, dynamic saint of Sumatra. In my own home church, the Lutheran Church of Singapore, Lueking was able to meet with both our former and current Bishops, who gave him good insights into some of the challenges and opportunities we face as a small church body in a fast changing and growing Southeast Asian country. Next door to us in Malaysia, Lueking again tells fascinating stories ranging from the Bishop to a Lutheran legislator, among others.

Finally in the last section of the book on Papua New Guinea and Australia, we get the tribespeople in colourful garb that used to characterize missionary journey reports of the past. Yet, these are treated with respect and engaged as they are, and

consequently the challenges they face of economic pressures, AIDS, crime and church conflict come through just as they would anywhere else. In Australia, at the tail end of the book, most appropriately, frank, heartfelt conversations are recorded with Australian Lutherans, men and women, seminarians, pastors and lay people. The realities of a changing and increasingly secular world are discussed with people who have been in the mission fields of both rural Papua New Guinea and ultramodern Australia. The message is the same: people are still in need of Good News whether they are people who have just left the stone age in Papua New Guinea or the family vineyard in South Australia, as the Madagascar Christians put it – every believer is a missionary as the field is so vast.

What is so special about this book? First off, I do not think that there is anything like it – a tale of the Lutheran Church around the world. It is not a book of facts and figures. It is a book of stories that are great reading. There are tales of heroism, tales of woe, tales of hope and tales of wonder. At the same time, these are stories about us, stories about people who believed in God and trusted Him with their lives, their families, their careers and their ministries. They are also stories about our conflicts with our neighbours – both Christian and non-Christian – as we struggle to witness in a secular society where economics and information overload dominate, or in pluralistic religious communities where Christians are an embattled minority. Within the church, we hear the stories that are so familiar about the “worship wars,” about the fact that the church cannot ignore the “signs and wonders” movement that has brought rapid growth but huge theological questions across Asia, Africa and Latin America. We also hear stories about Lutheran Christians across the world struggling with sexuality and the debates that accompany those issues. Lueking tells the stories like a storyteller, a bit like the great Studs Terkel of

Chicago. He does not pass judgment, although you get a hint of where his sympathies lie. At the same time, he provides quiet insights into how Christians from the richer world can give a little in partnership with the local churches in the poorest parts of the world and make a huge difference. He also shows how Christians from the richer world can learn lessons in faith from our brothers and sisters from across the globe. There are some minor errors such as describing the "Somoza regime in El Salvador" [it was in Nicaragua. Ed] and sometimes you wish that there was a pastoral commentary to some of the reports (in particular some of those from East Africa or Japan, for example). Otherwise, it is an excellent book and as someone living in the world described in the book, I wish that all American Lutherans would be able to see the Lutheran world "Through Our Eyes" nearly as well as Dean Lueking does.

[Purchase info: In order to keep the book price at \$25, Dean is doing much of the marketing of Through Their Eyes himself. The quickest way to get a copy is to send him a check for \$30 (\$5 extra covers postage and handling) to Dean Lueking, 829 Lathrop Ave, River Forest, IL 60305 with your name and address. You will have your own copy pronto. In addition, Dean is making a special offer for book discussion groups: Order a box of 12 copies at \$15.00 each (40% discount) and receive free shipping as well. Several pastoral friends have found such groups beneficial for broadening a global church awareness. For this offer, please send a check for \$180 (12 x \$15.00) to the above address.]