

Missouri Synod / Seminex / Bethel Church In Crisis (Part II – Conclusion)

Colleagues,

Today's posting concludes Arthur Beckman's research project on the consequences of the Missouri Synod Controversy of the 1970s for his own congregation in St. Louis. Arthur had a 46-year career in industrial and construction sales and marketing. Now retired, he is studying theology to get his credentials as a Parish Ministry Associate (PMA) in the Central States Synod of the ELCA. Today's posting, and the one for last Thursday too, represent a research project Art did this spring term in the PMA program. His e-address is <babeckman@juno.com>Peace & Joy!

The ThTh desk

Beckman Part II. Conclusion

On January 21st [1974] approximately 400 Concordia students met to discuss a moratorium on all classes "until such time as the Seminary Board of Control officially and publicly declares which members of the faculty, if any, are to be considered as false teachers and what Scriptural and Confessional principles, if any, have been violated." Later that same day the faculty majority approved resolutions expressing pride and support for the students and considering itself suspended with Dr. Tietjen. On January 22 the faculty majority (46 faculty and Staff) sent

a letter to Preus condemning the board's actions and challenging him to clear the faculty or dismiss them for cause. Bethel Church wrote a letter of encouragement to the students.

On January 25th the students began "Operation Outreach" wherein they would travel across the country to bring "truth" of what was going on at Concordia Seminary. Preus countered with a 32 page letter dated January 28 to all pastors, teachers, congregational officers, and lay delegates to the New Orleans giving his side of the controversy. Included with the letter was Appendix 6; an unsigned letter purported to be from some 30 seminary students complaining about various harassments by Tietjen and the faculty. No student could be found who "signed" the letter or helped in the writing, and 19 "conservative students wrote a letter refuting the charges." Pastor Alfred Buls of Bethel Church brought to the faculty majority's attention a letter, signed by over 100 St. Louis area pastors, in support of their actions which was read on Sunday January 28.

After four weeks of fruitless non-negotiations, letters written to Preus without answers, purported "deals" offered, meetings that accomplished nothing, charges the students were being "used," and "restatement of Synod positions," the board acted. On February 18th the Board of Control issued a "Document of Dismissal" demanding that "certain members the faculty" agree in writing by 12 noon February 18, 1974 to "resume their functions on February 19th " or their contracts would be terminated as of January 18, 1974. The faculty majority agreed not to respond and began firming up plans for a "seminary in exile."

Acting on faith that God would somehow provide, the faculty majority assumed they were "fired" at 12 noon on February 18, 1974. They had no paychecks, pension plans were paid through

March and it was hoped some arrangement could be made on medical insurance. ELIM (the funding entity) had only \$10,000.00, but a campaign was afoot to raise an additional \$150,000.00. Like Luther, the faculty majority did not want to leave the Missouri Synod and they envisioned the seminary in exile (Seminex) as not a new institution, but as Concordia Seminary in exile. The plan was to work with Eden Seminary and St. Louis University School of Divinity for office space, library and classrooms. Students would be placed as vicars [the term now is "interns"] and pastoral candidates in Missouri Synod Churches per a vote by the Council of Presidents on February 8, 1974. The faculty majority would continue all the programs in which students were enrolled and it was hoped that Concordia Seminary would issue degrees.

Since October 1973 John Damm, academic dean, David Yagow, Concordia Seminary registrar, and Jeanette Bauermeister, Bethel member and Damm's administrative assistant, had been working on plans to work with other seminaries to continue the education of the Concordia students. In November a meeting was held with three local seminaries to confirm their willingness to help and two agreed, but Kenrick Seminary [of the Roman Catholic archdiocese of St. Louis] backed out. Other options were considered and rejected for various reasons and no help was forthcoming from any other Missouri Synod Schools. In January Damm met with the president of the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, a Lutheran Church of America seminary, to discuss issuing of degrees. On February 4 the final agreements were made with St. Louis University and Eden Seminary for completing the education of the students, subject to approval of their respective presidents. Final approval came at 11:15 A.M. [on Feb. 19] as the students were voting their approval of a seminary in exile.

The Concordia students meeting started at 8:30 AM on Feb. 19th

with discussions and questions on vicarages, student housing, accreditation, ministerial certification and more. The questions were answered and Damm read a document outlining the details of the proposed seminary in exile. He explained again some of the background leading up to the firing of the professors and the plans that had been made to continue the students' education. He promised that their degrees would be from an accredited university, hopefully Concordia Seminary, stressing again the faculty majority's hopes for reconciliation. A letter of support for the students from St. Phillip's Lutheran Church, a black congregation, was read. At 11:15 AM the students voted to "resume our theological education in exile, trusting in the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ."

Shortly after the vote the students, faculty majority and many staff members marched out of the fieldhouse carrying white crosses. The procession was led by a crucifix and all were singing "The Church's One Foundation." The crosses, each with an individual's name, were planted in the quadrangle as the students and faculty marched toward the seminary gate. "The seminary was turned into a cemetery." The students boarded up the entrance to Concordia Seminary with large wood frames on which was written EXILED. Across the street John Damm was waiting with a representative of Eden Seminary and the St. Louis University School of Divinity.

On February 20th Seminex began functioning at St. Louis University and Eden Seminary. The offices were at St. Louis U. along with the beginnings of a library of borrowed books while Eden supplied some classrooms and student housing. Some students continued to live in Concordia housing after the seminary figured out that empty rooms generated no income. Registration of almost 400 students for the Seminex spring quarter took place on March 10. The University made the Chapel

in DuBorg hall available and Seminex students met there to pray about the future.

Public, church and secular outrage made Concordia Seminary relent on evicting the professors [from seminary-owned housing] and the deadline was extended from February 28th to March 28th. A large apartment building was made available on a "pay whatever you can afford" basis. Volunteer groups from Bethel and other local churches cleaned and painted apartments for the professors and their families. ELIM was strictly a fund raising organization, not a church, although that is what the Missouri Synod called it when they started to "kick out" individuals and churches that "belonged" to ELIM. The professors missed only one monthly check and ELIM paid off the loans some had with the Synod for their off-campus homes. Bethel called several of the professors to positions on our staff to keep them on the Missouri Synod Clergy Roster and keep insurance and pensions in force.

About this time Bethel attempted to have a meeting or forum to discuss the goings-on at the Seminary. Dr. Scharlemann, the brother-in-law of Ed Schroeder and of George Hoyer, all Bethel members, agreed to present the seminary's side, but it was a very short meeting. The Bethel members were so upset with what was going on that they could not control themselves and the meeting had to be called off. Dr. Scharlemann had to be escorted from the church for his own safety. He never came back and along with two other professors of the "faculty-minority" transferred their membership from Bethel to other congregations. In March Bethel voted to modify their mission budget and give 50% to Missouri and 50% to ELIM. Two families left.

The placement of vicars and graduates was a major concern of the Seminex faculty and students. The Council of Presidents (of

Synod Districts) worked out a compromise in March 1974 for Seminex second-year students to be placed in Missouri Synod churches [for internships] but the graduates were another matter. Many compromises were attempted, but by graduation time nothing had been worked out. The Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago, an LCA school, agreed to issue degrees of Master of Divinity to the Seminex graduates. Graduation took place on May 24, 1974 in the quadrangle of Washington University. In June, Preus warned the Synod presidents not to place graduates, but by August about 75% had been placed and by the end of 1974 virtually all had been placed. 446 students registered for the 1974 fall term. By the end of 1975 another 75% of that year's graduates had been placed.

There were many calls for reconciliation at the July 1975 Missouri Synod Convention in Anaheim CA, but the 60% Preus majority adopted "courses that required capitulation." 130 of the 131 Preus-approved candidates won election, and the convention reaffirmed Preus' "Statement of Scripture and Confessional Principles." "It urged congregations that had received Seminex graduates to conform to Synod's bylaws or face expulsion." The convention moved Concordia Theological Seminary at Springfield, IL to Fort Wayne, Indiana, and closed the Concordia Senior College, a major supplier of Seminex students. They censured eight district presidents who had authorized ordination of Seminex graduates and threatened them with expulsion.

In August 1974 Seminex had moved to the second floor of a building at 306 North Grand "to relieve serious overcrowding at St. Louis University." A year later they moved again to the University Club Building at 607 North Grand. Jeanette Bauermeister, a Bethel member along with her husband, Rev, Dr. Paul Bauermeister, a psychologist in private practice and part-time Seminary instructor, was in charge of the move. She had

lots of help from Bethel members including Dr. Charles Ford, a St. Louis University Professor of Mathematics and a Dietrich Bonhoeffer scholar. The new location provided office, chapel, library and classroom space. The Seminex Guild, including Bethel members Neva Merzlok, Chairperson and Ruth Scheurmann, treasurer, helped supply furniture, library equipment and more.

On April 2, 1976 the president of the English District (a non-geographical district of the Missouri Synod that had once been a synod of its own) was removed from office by Preus for ordaining Seminex graduates. The district voted to return to its earlier independent status as the "English Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church." On April 14 the Coordinating Council of ELIM voted to form a new church, The Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches (AELC). In September Bethel voted (95 for, 11 against and 7 abstaining) to become an independent congregation in the AELC. Ten families left Bethel, most of them among the big givers. By December 250 churches had formed five synods in the new church. In January 1977, ten more Bethel families transferred out, but five new families transferred in.

Funding and placing graduates were always problems for Seminex, and 1977 added the problem of declining enrollment. Even with declining enrollment the 250 churches in the AELC were not sufficient to guarantee placement of all graduates. Some, including my son-in-law, were assigned to Missouri Synod churches. He went to a small, 40-member church in southern New Jersey where the Missouri Synod mail continued to be addressed to "Pastoral Vacancy." In the fall of '77 talks were initiated about Seminex serving the American Lutheran Church (ALC) and Lutheran Church of America (LCA) churches, but did not get very far. In April 1978 the AELC created a task force to discuss ways of working with the ALC and LCA who were already talking [about merger]. "A Call for Lutheran Unity" was approved by the AELC and LCA conventions but the ALC would only agree to

include the AELC in the ongoing talks.

In September 1979 Bethel received a letter from the Missouri Synod terminating its membership in the Synod effective August 22, 1979. About that time Paul Bauermeister received his letter of expulsion after twenty years as a rostered clergy with no meetings or prior notice. The Synod / Seminex conflict really tore the St. Louis community apart. Church congregations were divided and families split. The situation seemed more than dumb; seminarians that graduated prior to January 1974 were seen as fully qualified for the ministry. Those who were taught the same subjects by the same professors and graduated later were deemed not qualified by the synod. No charges were ever brought against individual faculty members; it was no wonder that people were confused.

A Committee on Lutheran Union with seven members each from the ALC and LCA and two members from the AELC had its first meeting on January 21-23, 1979 in New York City.(2-302) The committee met several times during 1979 and 1980 and came up with four organizational options which were to be discussed at the various conventions in 1980. More discussions were held during the early and mid 80's. In the summer of 1979 representatives of Seminex (now called Christ Seminary-Seminex), the ALC's Wartburg Theological Seminary (WTS) and LSTC met in Chicago and agreed to work together in a Doctor of Ministry program. WTS more or less dropped out of further meetings but there was talk in the ALC about a new seminary in Texas. In June of 1980 the president of LSTC officially asked Seminex to consider moving to the LSTC campus.

On January 29,1982 the presidents and deans of WTS, LSTC and Seminex met in Chicago and agreed that a major portion of Seminex resources would be united with LSTC and the remainder shared with other Lutheran seminaries. The agreement did not

sit well with all the Seminex professors, particularly Ed Schroeder and Bob Bertram and some students. A forum was held at Bethel to discuss leaving some professors in St. Louis, but the majority was for deployment to Chicago, California and Texas. By the summer of '82 it was decided who would go where, and only Ed Schroeder remained in St. Louis.

With the deployment of Seminex in 1983, Bethel lost ten professors and Jeanette and Paul Bauermeister. Carl Graesser, Ev Kalin and George Hoyer went to California, and John Constable went to Austin, Texas. Ed Krentz, Fred Danker, Bob Conrad, Kurt Hendel, Ralph Klein and Dave Deppe went to Chicago. Carl Volz had earlier taken a position with Luther Seminary in Minneapolis. Bill Danker retired but later joined the LSTC faculty. Norm Habel went to Australia. Bill Krato, Al Fuerbringer and Herb Mayer retired and stayed at Bethel. Along with losing assistant pastors and Bible study instructors, Bethel lost ten active wives and Bethel School lost several students. It was a time for reflection at Bethel.

During the ten years of controversy Bethel lost about 75 members and a sizable portion of our contributions to Missouri Synod churches. Most of these were old time Bethel members who wanted the congregation to stay as they remembered and didn't particularly like the changes that were taking place. The members who were left, including some old timers and the new members who joined, some from Missouri Synod churches, were a great bunch. They made adjustments and continued to move on. Pastor Buls said: "it was a real joy to be a pastor there."

The Lutheran High School Association [a St. Louis consortium of Missouri Synod congregations] told Bethel we could still be a member and pay dues, but not vote and our students would be considered "non-Lutheran" as far as tuition payments were concerned. This obviously was not acceptable to Bethel and much

discussion followed. As I recall, we never did get to vote, but our students were allowed to pay the reduced Lutheran tuition. That was just one of many situations we had to face while trying to figure out what, if anything, we had changed in our doctrine.

In January '77 the congregation had voted to have contributions to synods designated by individual givers to resolve the problem of determining where the church should send the money. By November 1979 contributions were 8% behind pledges and in November 1982 we were still behind in contributions. In January 1982 Bethel had 668 baptized members, by January 1984 that number had dropped to 641. In September 1983 there were 100 students in Bethel School, down from the normal 115.

A task force was put together to study the effect on Bethel when the 10 Seminex families left. Several adult Bible classes were devoted to the subject, including a review of the mission of the church. A report was published outlining the activities that were going on and listing suggestions and ideas for new activities. A program was initiated to contact inactive members of the congregation and find new people who could fill in for the people who had left. Programs were initiated for every-member visit and training people to witness to the community. Bethel was determined to make the professors' leaving an opportunity for looking for new sources of skill from people within the congregation.

"The bitter battle in the Synod was a terrible negative witness, the very opposite of what God would want, but throughout this adversity the members of Bethel congregation served faithfully and God has done some great things through them. I am always amazed as I think back on Bethel, what a very special group of people this was." (E-mail from Al Buls)

EPILOGUE

Pastor Buls retired from the ministry later in 1983, because of “burn out” and no small wonder after going through all that. The American Lutheran Church, the Lutheran Church of America and the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches became the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (ELCA) on January 1, 1988 and Bethel joined the new church immediately.

REFERENCES

- 1. “No Room in the Brotherhood”, Fred Danker*
- 2. “Memoirs in Exile”, John H. Teitjen*
- 3. “A History of Lutheranism”, Eric Gritsch*
- 4. “The Lutherans”, Lagerquist*
- 5. “Together Into The Future” Bethel Task Force Report, July 1983*
- 6. Interview with Rev. Jeanette and Dr. Paul Bauermeister*
- 7. Interview with Ed Schroeder*
- 8. Phone and e-mail – Al Buls, former Bethel Pastor*
- 9. Interview with Rev. Bill Yancey, Seminex Grad, Current Pastor at Bethel*
- 10. Interview with Charles Ford, former member of Bethel, Professor at St. Louis U.*