

Still Needed: A Confessional Movement

Robert W. Bertram

[Printed in "Viewpoint," Missouri in Perspective (August 2, 1976), 4.]

Will our new AELC be just another, separate denomination? Notice, it makes no provision for ALC and LCA Lutherans as members, let alone as leaders. Why not? The usual excuse is, They don't need a new denomination, so why should we meddle? Granted, if all we could invite them to were another denomination, we would indeed be meddling. For as denominations we do acknowledge each other's boundaries, even though as co-confessors we do not. But then is that what we most need, a new denomination – and then only we elite who graduate from LC-MS – a cozy Missouri Synod alumni association? If so, we need something else besides, we and all whose confession we share. We need a movement in which Lutherans (at least) can support one another's confessing without fear of meddling – something like ELIM.

Unlike ELIM, the AELC might not have room even for Missourians, only for ex- Missourians. You can hear it now: either belong to your old Missourians or belong to our AELC, but not both. If such either-or's are a mark of denominations, the church hardly needs another one. Whatever happened to the Mission Affirmation: "the Evangelical Lutheran Church is chiefly a confessional movement within the total body of Christ rather than a denomination emphasizing institutional barriers of separation?" What we need – in, with and under our existing denominations –

is a confessional movement for any Lutherans who have the heart for it. Including Missourians who stay? Right, including Missourians who stay ... and fight and maybe die and in the process witness.

Take the 200-plus congregations and agencies which have called Seminex pastors. (And the calls keep coming.) Almost all of these are in LC-MS and many of them will stay there. Or take the “moderate” delegates who stand up at district conventions against fierce odds and have no intention of buckling. Or the thousands who belong to ELIM just because they belong also to oppressive Missouri. Isn’t the confessional movement every bit as much theirs, and not as an alternative to their denominational membership but as their support in the midst of it? Are we so naïve as to think these sisters and brothers are all cop-outs who just cannot tear themselves away from mother Synod? Mightn’t at least some of them, clergy and lay, just have divine calls to the Missourians around them, calls which they are ready to suffer to the end? To live as a hassled minority with no driving need to be the party in power in order to be the church – that could be courage.

Are we to “leave them behind?” (That very rhetoric assumes they lag and we lead.) Do we merely stay in “fellowship” with them, though of course from the safe distance of our own separate AELC? Do we merely “let” them hold a second membership in AELC? Mightn’t some of us AELCers, in turn, deliberately hold a second membership with them in LC-MS so as to identify publicly with them in their encroaching persecution and, as Dan Berrigan put it, to share their jeopardy?

Still, there are other Missourians who simply must leave that denomination. I know, I belong to a dear congregation which has just voted to do that. But in transferring our congregation’s membership to AELC, we specified “not as a new and separate

denomination but as a transitional step toward ecumenically Lutheran mission and ministry.” Would that the AELC, if it must be a denomination, would do so by quickly subsuming itself (say, as a non-geographic subdivision) within the ALC or LCA or, better yet, within both at once. Those church bodies already provide the five denominational functions which AELC promises: pension plan, chaplain certification, and so on. Why should AELC, at tremendous cost in money and energy, now duplicate those programs? “A new and separate denomination?” No. A significant addition to existing denominations? Sure.

But not only denominations need organizing. So does the confessional movement. But how? For starters, how about ELIM, only this time strongly regional and intra-Lutheran?

Robert W. Bertram

July, 1976

[StillNeeded \(PDF\)](#)