

Summer 2012

# A Slow Disaster and a Proposal for Reform

Mark A. Granquist  
mgranquist001@luthersem.edu

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## Recommended Citation

Granquist, Mark A., "A Slow Disaster and a Proposal for Reform" (2012). *Faculty Publications*. 37.  
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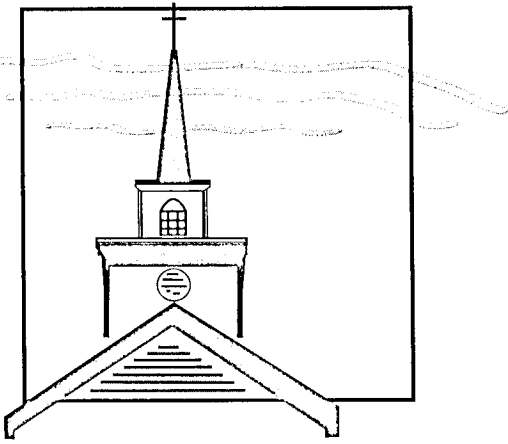
## Published Citation

Granquist, Mark Alan. "A Slow Disaster and a Proposal for Reform." *Lutheran Forum* 46, no. 2 (2012): 23–26.

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## A SLOW DISASTER AND A PROPOSAL FOR REFORM

*Mark A. Granquist*



Disasters come in two different forms. There are fast disasters, like tornadoes and hurricanes, that hit and do their damage quickly; when they are over, people crawl out of the wreckage and start to rebuild. But there are also slow disasters, ones that do their damage incrementally over the course of months or even years. Events such as drought or famines slowly sap the life out of a region, one painful day after another. With a slow disaster, one might not see the magnitude of the disaster right away and might even be able to keep dreaming that the disaster will soon be over.

The 2009 ELCA church-wide assembly vote on sexuality has produced the loss of hundreds of congregations, hundreds of thousands of members, and millions of dollars of benevolence. Some hope that this recent period is a fast disaster, in which the ELCA takes a hit from its decision, gathers up the pieces, and moves forward from there. It might even be possible to “spin” all this as a positive in the long run, hoping that a leaner, more cohesive denomination will emerge from the wreckage. But what is going on in the ELCA is much more likely a slow disaster, stretching back over a decade, and likely to continue in some form for years to come.

Certainly the losses in the last few years have been dramatic. The ELCA lost 268,000 members from 2009 to 2010, and the 2011 figures are certain to be equally negative. One count of the congregations withdrawing from the ELCA since August 2009 stands currently at about 650, and the financial losses are in the range of about \$6 million a year. But to focus on these immediate losses, dramatic as they are, is to lose sight of the long-range implications of the problem, both historically and moving forward into the future. The losses to the ELCA began not in 2009 but go back

at least a decade to the late 1990s. The membership of the ELCA in 2000 was about 5.125 million members, which was roughly 100,000 less than when it was founded in 1988. Revenues for the national church were steady as well, at about \$69 million. By 2010, membership in the ELCA had dropped to 4.275 million and revenue to about \$52 million. The ELCA has lost almost one million members (roughly 20%) since 1988, the bulk of the loss coming in the last ten years. Although the 2011 figures are not yet available, from

the loss of congregations in 2010 it can reasonably be assumed that the membership loss in 2011 will be in the range of 250,000 additional members.

The most dramatic losses from the 2009 decision are probably past. The rate of congregations leaving the ELCA has slowed in recent months (although the loss of revenue shows little sign of abating). It might be tempting to believe that the damage is over, that things are beginning to stabilize,

and that the ELCA can begin to pick up the pieces and move forward from this point. Yet to do so would be a mistake, for in the longer view—the slow disaster view—the present decline of the ELCA will likely continue as it has for the last decade. The short-term perspective on the problem focuses solely on the loss of congregations and members since August 2009, so if this is slowing, then perhaps there is a glimmer of hope.

But this ignores the long-term view. The problem is much larger than the losses of the last two and a half years and bigger than the loss of 650 congregations. These indicators are really the proverbial “tip of the iceberg.” The process of taking a congregation out of the ELCA is difficult and laborious, and for every congregation that leaves there are probably many more that might want to leave but do

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not want to go through the trauma of a vote. The figures about the loss of members to the ELCA certainly hides a much larger number of those who have either dropped out from their local congregations or have moved into inactivity. By their very nature, these numbers take three to five years to show up in the statistics, as congregations slowly “clean up their books.” And it is impossible to know how many pastors and congregations have decided to remain nominally within the ELCA but to cut back or eliminate their benevolence support for synodical or churchwide organizations, which is likely to have a significant negative effect as well. The overall conclusion seems to be that the ELCA will continue to suffer sizable negative effects from the 2009 decision for the foreseeable future.

It is clear from the relative growth of the new Lutheran denominations, the Lutheran Congregations in Mission for Christ (founded in 2000) and the North American Lutheran Church (founded in 2010), that the recent losses in the ELCA have been substantially the vote of disaffected pastors, congregations, and members. By the spring of 2012, the LCMC has grown to consist of 770 congregations and nearly 350,000 members, and in one and a half years the NALC has gathered in 310 congregations and over 100,000 members. This means that around 450,000 members and a thousand congregations have left the ELCA over Called to Common Mission (1999) and the sexuality vote (2009), making this the largest schism in American Lutheranism history since the 1860s. The Seminex walkout and formation of the AELC in the 1970s pales in comparison; the AELC never reached more than about 100,000 members.

These figures contradict the suggestion that the primary causes of the recent decline in membership and giving are as a result of longterm structural and demographic factors. Such an analysis would usually point to the “graying” of ELCA congregations, the numerical declines of rural

areas (where many congregations are located), and the overall recent decline in church membership in the United States. Certainly these are factors contributing to decline in the ELCA (especially the first two), but such factors are probably only secondary, especially regarding ELCA losses since 2000. From 1988 to 2000, the ELCA lost only about 100,000 members (its membership actually increased in some years), but since 2000 has lost over 850,000

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members, and more than half of this loss can be related directly to the LCMC and NALC, not counting those who simply fell away from the ELCA as a result of their disaffection with its direction.

The problem with attributing the decline of the ELCA to structural, demographic, and economic trends is that it masks the true reasons for decline. If the bulk of the decline were due to structural factors, then one might simply suggest that this decline was inevitable and there really wasn't much to be done about it. In

some circles there is an almost passive resignation to the current situation and a belief that we will just have to adjust to a smaller, and hopefully leaner and more cohesive, denomination. The economic downturn cannot (we hope!) last forever, and after this brief period of steep decline the ship will right itself and we can continue on with the work to be done. How many times have you heard someone say something like this: “God does not call us to be successful but rather to be faithful”? In fact, among some this decline is actually a mark of the ELCA being faithful to God's calling; “taking a stand for justice is not popular,” they say.

Some suggest that the decisions of the past decade will, in fact, bear fruit in the future, as the ELCA partnership with The Episcopal Church and its new position on sexuality attract additional members. This is not likely. The ecumenical agreement with TEC, Called to Common Mission, is now about a dozen years old, and there is little or no evidence of any appreciable gain to the ELCA from this arrangement. Others believe that the new ELCA position on sexuality will gather in new members, attracted by its open stance. “Become a ‘Reconciling in Christ’ congregation, put a rainbow flag in your lawn, and you will grow,” this line of argument goes. But evidence from ELCA congregations that have already taken such a stance does not support this line of thinking either. In 2011, there were approximately 375 ELCA parishes (not including campus ministries) that had declared themselves RIC congregations. From 2003 to 2010, the average RIC congregation lost 12% of its membership, from a total of 153,000 members to 135,000 members. By comparison, the average non-RIC congregation in the ELCA lost only 8% of its members.

The reason for this long analysis of the recent past of the ELCA is to invalidate any sort of suggestion that the recent decline is some sort of a fast disaster from which we are likely to recover soon. I do not mean

to be unduly negative about the ELCA (of which I myself am a member and ordained pastor) but to analyze the situation honestly and now to suggest some positive directions for reform on the basis of American Lutheran history. The problem with the “back to business as usual” scenario is that reliance on it tends to undercut the need for real, radical, and permanent change in the ELCA. “We took a hit, and it’s over now, so we can continue on as we have.” This is the kind of denial in which our mainline Protestant cousins have been stuck for more than forty years. Rather, a true assessment of the current situation in the ELCA suggests that radical change is needed to put the denomination on a path toward recovery. And for this radical change we must look, strangely enough, to the history of Lutheranism in America.

But we must look further back in history than we usually do. Our historical imagination is usually limited to the scope of a generation or two. Contemporary young seminarians, for example, have no memory of a time when there was not an ELCA, and all they know of Lutheran worship and hymnody is the green *Lutheran Book of Worship*. Most of us cannot personally envision a time before the LCA or ALC and the red *Service Book and Hymnal*. The assumption tends to be that what we now know of American Lutheranism is really all there is.

But what if the past fifty or seventy-five years of American Lutheran history were, rather, an outlier, a deviation from the mean in American Lutheran history and that decisions in the recent past are contributing to our contemporary troubles? A historical analysis of those decisions and those mistakes might give us a vision of how to proceed in the future. And here we must look into the American Lutheran preoccupation with merger in the twentieth century and especially the kind of mergers that were produced.

The rage in mid-twentieth century America was centralization and large-scale organization and the efficiencies that these things were supposed to

provide. American business and government led the way in this, but the churches, especially mainline Protestant ones, were not far behind in emulating them. Denominations supposed that the centralization and standardization of their ministries would result in a greater ability to reach the peoples of America. Each congregation would be, in effect, a franchise of the national church, with a standard menu, consuming the materials supplied by the denomination. Merging together the ten or twelve major

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American Lutheran denominations into one would give American Lutheranism its rightful place in American religious culture and a commensurate influence—this was the vision, anyway.

But along the way to merger, the architects of these plans (good and thoughtful church leaders though they were) did not see the downsides and disruptions of their vision. Mergers are hard to accomplish, take inordinate amounts of time and energy, and disrupt the loyalties of ordinary people. As the organizations get larger, they become more layered, more

complex, and less nimble. As national church structures grew, the power of the intermediate judicatories—the synods, districts, and conferences—declined, though these were the bodies that had, in the past, been the principle power structure in American Lutheranism. Before 1930, most American Lutheran denominations had very little in the way of permanent staffs and bureaucracies; most of the work was handled on the local level or in yearly conventions.

Fast forward to the present day. Businesses and many other organizations in the United States figured out long ago that the centralized, standardized model no longer works very well. Big-box retail is dying and businesses are shedding layers of administration and centralization. Congregations have learned this, too. The standardized franchise model is dead and congregations have learned to appreciate their own diverse, local ways of expressing their Lutheran identities. This is not a shot at those who work faithfully, diligently, and committedly for the church on the national level. It is to say that, despite their efforts, the structure we now have is not working and needs to be dramatically changed. For the first 175 years of Lutheranism in North America there was no national organization, and for the next 150 years Lutherans had rather weak national structures. Perhaps to find our future we must look to our past.

So, to a proposal for radical change. Actually, it has much less to do with reforms at the national level and much more to do with changes on the regional or synodical level. The idea here is to shift away from synods or regional judicatories as standardized, subservient geographical entities, toward their rebirth as unique organizations unto themselves, with the national church as a federation of such synods. This is not so much a radical innovation as a return to the norm within American Lutheranism, a norm that worked very well for over three hundred years.

The standardized, geographical

synod that we have now is largely the creation of the twentieth-century push toward ecclesiastical centralization and standardization. Prior to that century, synods tended to have the real power and to have distinct “personalities.” They represented distinct theological and liturgical positions within the American Lutheran world. Most were geographically located, to be sure, but there were often several different synods on the same territory, representing different Lutheran options. And there were also “affiliational” synods built not so much on geographical proximity but on common bonds and commitments. These were synods to which the lay people had real commitment. They stood for something and represented clear, distinct choices for laypeople, pastors, and congregations. Additionally, they were not so locked into one single organization and could switch synods fairly easily when they wanted to.

Throughout the twentieth century there were some church leaders who expressed reservations about the rush toward merger and the centralization of power in a national ecclesiastical organization. These leaders called instead for national denominational structures to be federations of synods. These national organizations would coordinate, rather than dictate, the work of the synods. This federative model could be a fruitful possibility for the future of the ELCA, handing real and primary power back to

the synods. To work, the monopoly of geographical synods would have to disappear, since they lock people in. New synods could be organized along affiliational or theological lines to meet the needs of a diverse set of ELCA congregations. There could be high-church and low-church synods, conservative and liberal synods, traditional and contemporary synods.

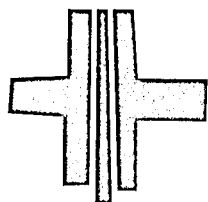
To make this work, pastors and congregations would need to be relatively free to switch synods if they wished to and to form (within reason) new synods to meet their needs. And these synods would need to have real power and a healthy degree of independence. For example, on the issue of gay pastors, each synod would have the right to allow, encourage, or forbid gay clergy as they saw fit. Some synods might wish to have bishops in the historic episcopate, while others might choose not to. Under such a plan, synods would have real and distinct power and clearly chosen identities. People, pastors, and congregations could develop genuine loyalty and commitment to the synod they were allowed to choose. Some synods would succeed and grow, others would wither and die. Either way, American Lutheranism would grow into the competitive challenges of the twenty-first century.

Some will object that this is a recipe for chaos, and it must be said that there might be, in the short run, some degree of chaos and messiness while such reforms were being instituted.

But fear of short term challenges is not a reason to avoid these reforms. Without them, the current problems will continue to work their inexorable way out. Allowing a diversity of synods also means maintaining the possibility of real fellowship among them, but without such a release valve, the result will be continued decline, as we have already seen.

During another period of theological and religious crisis, in the years after the resurrection of Christ, the Jewish leader Gamaliel was being pushed to take harsh action against the insurgent new believers in Jesus as the Messiah (Acts 5:34-39). Urging the council to caution, Gamaliel suggested that they leave the Christians alone, “because if this plan or undertaking is of human origin, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them.” Instead of imposing a single standard of Lutheranism on all ELCA synods, present and future, it would be wiser to allow synods a wider realm of diversity and practice and so to succeed or fail on the merits of their positions and the leading of the Holy Spirit. For three hundred years, under such a decentralized pattern, American Lutheranism grew and flourished. Returning to the same pattern, its future might be equally effective. *LF*

MARK A. GRANQUIST is Associate Professor of Church History at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota.



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