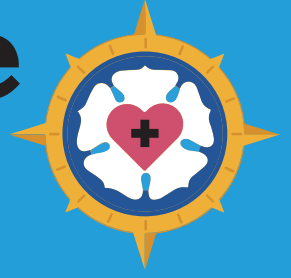


Treasuring the Treasure



Reflections on the 30th Anniversary of the International Lutheran Council

Wittenberg, Germany
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by Robert Bugbee

Dear Chairman Pohjola, dear Dr. Quill, Colleagues on the ILC Board of Directors, as well as Presidents and Bishops of member churches, treasured friends, whatever your particular titles might be!

The largest Protestant mainline church body in my country is known as the “United Church of Canada.” It came into existence nearly a century ago, after many meetings and negotiations among representatives of the former Methodist, Presbyterian, and Congregational churches. After all the negotiations and compromises were complete, leaders of the proposed new United Church approached the government of Canada to pass legislation concerning the transfer of property rights. So, I guess it would be somewhat accurate to say that this church was created by a vote of the Parliament of Canada on June 27, 1924. About a year later there was a celebratory service at a large public arena—normally used for ice hockey games—in downtown Toronto.

Another established mainline body, the Anglican Church of Canada, had a different sort of beginning. Its roots reached back to England when a king,

who had written very nasty things about Martin Luther in defence of the Roman Catholic Church, ended up breaking with Rome himself around 1534, largely because the Pope would not authorize the annulment of the king’s marriage.

When Lutheran Christians gather in Wittenberg, as we are doing this weekend, we start very naturally to ponder the beginnings of what became the Evangelical Lutheran Church. If you touch on that subject with many active Lutheran church members in a place like Canada—and I am sure this goes for other countries, too—they will recall all those Reformation Day special services at the end of October each year, pointing back to Luther’s publication of the 95 Theses in this very city. But in a real way, I am inclined to think that the conception of our Lutheran Church took place somewhere else. It did not come with the vote of a Parliament or Congress, nor by the decree of an unhappy king; in a very real way it began on the stone floor of a monastery cell, not here in Wittenberg, but down the road at Erfurt, where a monk writhed in agony over the question, “My sin, my sin... how can I get free from it?”

What followed in his case was not primarily negotiating meetings nor royal proclamations nor celebratory services in an arena. What followed was intense wrestling with the written Word of God in Scripture. And we've all read, I guess, how that agonized monk felt like heaven itself opened up before him when St. Paul's words in Romans 1 became clear that "*the Gospel... is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes... for in it [in that Gospel!] the righteousness of God is revealed*" (Romans 1:16-17 NASB).

Long ago I was part of a pastoral study group led by the late Dr. Kenneth Korby who told us that what made Martin Luther such an exceptionally potent leader was that he was both a deeply learned man but at the same time also a God-fearer. So, the struggles Luther endured on the floor of his Erfurt monastery cell were a personal, life-and-death matter. And the scholarship he applied to his Biblical studies which helped him wrestle his way through to clarity about the righteousness that comes *from* God as a gift, apprehended by faith in Jesus Christ, was not an academic exercise alone. Luther was not interested in shepherding a piece of religious legislation through a parliament and did not care much about winning an argument to make a name for himself. He was concerned about his own personal salvation. And, whether working as a preacher, as a lecturer at the University here, or as the author of books, essays, and pamphlets, he was persuaded that the Church must be devoted to the eternal salvation of people and must, above all, hold out the Biblical Gospel of Jesus Christ as the One Who brings God's righteousness to us.

So, when Luther finally did get around to composing his 95 Theses, there it is, in Thesis No. 62: "*The true treasure of the church is the most holy Gospel of the glory and grace of God.*" That is really

the heartbeat of Lutheran proclamation and church life. It needs to remain the heartbeat of what we preach and how we believe and live. It needs to remain the heartbeat, even though more than 500 years have passed since Luther's Reformation uncovered the treasure anew. It needs to remain the heartbeat among those who come after us for long as the world endures.

It is that foundational conviction which brought representatives of confessional Lutheran churches together in the North German city of Uelzen in 1952 to initiate a series of theological conferences that decades later morphed into the formal creation of the International Lutheran Council (ILC) after 1993. Though we mark this weekend the 30th Anniversary of the ILC, its roots reach a good bit farther back than that. I am grateful for this opportunity to trace the ILC's history with you briefly, and to offer a few reflections on where we are and where we still need to go.

In one sense what became the ILC had its roots in the hopes of confessional Lutherans after the Second World War. The defeat of the Third Reich caused great trauma, incredible humanitarian need, and resulted in a fundamental reordering of governmental structures here, resulting in the creation of two Germanies with different ideologies for 41 years beginning in 1949. Confessional Lutherans, notably in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, addressed themselves strongly to the humanitarian needs. They did so, not just in western, but also in eastern Germany, and not just in a way that assisted the small churches with which they stood in fellowship, but also to benefit others with whom they had had few ties in the past.

At the same time confessional Lutheran churches were hopeful that a churchly reordering might also take

place. Specifically, they yearned for the large territorial churches (the *Landeskirchen*) to find their way back to a stronger anchorage in the Lutheran confessions and to lay aside the more “unionistic” features of church life which existed in many of them since the mid-19th century. The well-documented theological conferences at Bad Boll involving representatives of territorial churches, the small German Lutheran free churches, and the Missouri Synod arose out of that hope. When the new Lutheran World Federation (LWF) was founded in 1947 at Lund, Sweden, a Missouri Synod observer was in attendance, and to the much larger 1952 LWF World Assembly in Hannover, Germany, the Synod sent a sizeable delegation. At the same time, the 1948 founding of the EKD (*Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland*), which regarded Reformed and Union theological expressions as valid alongside the historic Lutheran confessions, made clear that earlier hopes would not be fulfilled so that the paths of the LWF and the more strictly confessional Lutheran bodies would diverge.

Thus, immediately after the LWF assembly in Hannover, representatives of confessional Lutheran churches met nearby in Uelzen, about 160 in number. The gathering included free churches in the United States, Brazil, Germany, Finland, Denmark, England, and Australia, as well as the Missouri Synod and mission churches it had organized. The participants decided to recommend that their churches not join the LWF due to a lack of doctrinal unity in that federation, although they were open to investigate whether some sort of cooperative relationship with the LWF was possible.

The years following brought a repeated, if irregular, series of similar conferences. By 1963 the gathering at

Cambridge, England, began to title itself the “International Lutheran Theological Conference” and worked toward a more consistent schedule of meetings. The Conference repeatedly concluded that it could not recommend LWF membership to its participating churches. As the years passed, theological teachers from the ILC’s churches asked the Conference to take up the concern for pastoral training around the world, especially for church bodies lacking resources to organize it very formally. The Conference also felt that there was a need for more intensive activity between the gatherings themselves, so that some kind of regular staffing would be required.

This is why the ILC’s 1991 conference appointed an international continuation committee to propose a more lasting way forward. And so, in 1993 at Antigua, Guatemala, the ILC was proposed as a “Council,” a more permanent association of member church bodies, as opposed to an occasional meeting of their bishops and/or presidents. Dr. Edwin Lehman, then President of Lutheran Church–Canada, became the Council’s first Chairman, and the Council engaged Dr. Samuel Nafzger of the Missouri Synod to serve as its new “Executive Secretary.” Meanwhile the Association of Confessional Lutheran Seminaries (ACLS), which had been formed by the ILC when it was still a “Conference,” chose to be fully integrated into the ILC’s structure as a “Council.” Thus, in 1999, the new ILC Seminary Relations Committee replaced that former Association.

I have personally served on the ILC’s Executive Committee (now known more properly as its “Board of Directors”) since I was elected to the presidency of the Canadian church in 2008, so my own involvement only reaches back for 15 of the 30 years we celebrate today. As I review those 15 years, I want to make

make grateful mention of the influence of President Matthew Harrison of the Missouri Synod since his election in 2010 in encouraging the ILC to mature and increasingly to stand on its own feet. After an interim period following the retirement of Dr. Nafzger, President Harrison's church relations officer, Dr. Albert Collver, became the next ILC Executive Secretary. Within a few years, they were encouraging the ILC to become formally incorporated and recommended very competent legal counsel in the person of Heidi Abegg, an active Lutheran laywoman from the Washington, D.C. area. In 2016/2017 we were able to effect this incorporation in the United States and to formally enact a constitution and new set of bylaws. This set the stage for new categories of membership so that an increasing number of church bodies and individuals sympathetic to confessional Lutheran theology could find their way to us, even if they were unable to pursue full voting membership for various reasons.

The first ILC World Conference following incorporation took place in Antwerp, Belgium, in the fall of 2018; it included significant involvement and resources from Concordia Publishing House, which some time later sold its portion of ownership in Wittenberg's Old Latin School to the ILC. 2018 also was the point at which our nomenclature began to shift toward titles more in keeping with the new corporate identity. We began speaking less of an "Executive Committee" and more of a "Board of Directors," also less of an "Executive Secretary" and more of a "General Secretary." After Dr. Collver requested release from his duties in early 2019, we were led to our (now retiring) General Secretary, Dr. Timothy C. J. Quill, a longtime faculty member at Concordia Theological Seminary in Fort Wayne, Indiana. Dr. Quill took up the work with real energy and his very

winsome pastoral spirit. Before long, the decision was made to move the Council's headquarters to Fort Wayne, where it enjoys office space on the campus of the seminary. Dr. Quill promptly recruited active and able Lutheran laypeople to assist with administrative and financial functions. Those of you who have had the pleasure of working with Alison Blodgett in recent days here in Wittenberg will understand why we thank God for her role as ILC treasurer and administrator.

Also in those early years of Dr. Quill's leadership, the ILC moved to build financial capacity by calling Rev. Roger James, a theological educator then serving in the Philippines, to work fulltime in development. In addition to many personal contacts, Rev. James has presented extensively at professional conferences and began involving individual members of the Board of Directors in preaching and introducing our Council to Lutheran parishes just this past winter in the Chicago area... an effort which is to be repeated in other localities.

ILC communications have also made great strides in recent years. As a parish pastor in Canada in the 1990's and early 2000's I recall getting packages in the mail with multiple hard copies of the *ILC News* for distribution in our church. The publication was edited in South Africa and sent all over the world, involving the inevitable international postal delays, so that the news was frequently fairly limited and dated. In more recent times the ILC engaged Mathew Block to serve as its communications manager, and the Council's attractive website—known as www.ilcouncil.org—provides not only news stories and updates from the confessional Lutheran world, but resources and directories with contact information for member churches and affiliated seminaries. In addition, there are archival reports from ILC world

conferences in years gone by, as well as theological statements in response to developments in society and the church, about which I will comment later.

Just as Luther wanted the church to be concerned above all for the salvation of people, our Council has displayed a growing concern for the developing world, that it become familiar with and grounded in the saving Gospel of Jesus Christ. Although English retains its place as a global medium of communication due to the countless people who learn it as a second language, it may be startling to some to realize that the Spanish language has now outstripped English in terms of the number of people who speak it natively. On the ILC website one notices the significant number of member churches in Latin America. The Council in recent years expanded its offering of resources in Spanish, as well as providing organized translation efforts for Spanish-speakers at its regular World and Seminary conferences.

Nor is the Council's concern for the developing world confined to Latin America. Of the five ILC world areas, the one currently with the largest number of member churches is Africa. Many of these have come to us in more recent times. It is no secret that decisions made over the past decade or so in large Lutheran church bodies in places like western Europe and North America have not only caused them internal turmoil, especially with the departure from historic Christian teaching on Holy Marriage and human sexuality in general. Such decisions have badly strained relationships between those churches and some rapidly growing Lutheran churches, notably in Africa. A good number of the African churches have no history of ties to the ILC or its member churches but were planted by missionaries and mission societies with

roots in other segments of Lutheranism. It is also true that the normalization of same-gender relationships within some Lutheran churches in the West has marked a troubling change from the biblical understanding of human sexuality first brought to the Global South by Lutheran missionaries in times past.

Already at its 2009 World Conference in Seoul, South Korea, ILC member churches unanimously adopted the statement, *Same-Gender Relationships and the Church*, following the action earlier that year by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) to recognize sexually active, same-gender relationships as an acceptable way of life, both for laypersons and ordained ministers. In the years that followed, a number of African churches who had no previous connections with our Council began to "knock on the ILC's door," so to speak.

Our Council has sought to assist Lutheran churches in the developing world, not merely by publishing statements or sympathizing with their concerns, but by assisting them to grow their own leadership capacity. So, for example, this past March of 2023 saw an ILC-sponsored capacity building conference for pastors, evangelists and teachers of the Lake Tanganyika Diocese of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Tanzania. The Tanzanian church has not had ties with the ILC in the past, but this conference took place at the invitation of the diocesan Bishop Ambele Mwaipopo and sought to help provide a consciously Lutheran formation for workers in a segment of the Tanzanian church which had opened no less than 18 preaching points in the previous year, and which identifies pastoral training as its greatest need.

On the subject of pastoral and professional development, I wish to

highlight two other ILC initiatives of recent years. The “Lutheran Leadership Development Program” (LLDP), which has enrolled participants from a number of African churches, is carried out under the direction of Dr. Naomichi Masaki of Concordia Theological Seminary at Fort Wayne. African church leaders who in some cases had only minimal exposure to Lutheran confessional theology receive nurture through a series of intensive courses at various locations, including places like Luther’s Wittenberg. Systematic teaching on the means of grace and the Office of the Holy Ministry, Lutheran liturgics and hymnody, but also very pressing practical issues like stewardship and accountability, planning and task management are covered in classes where African church leaders also grow through interactions with their peers. Two cohorts of students have been graduated from this program so far in 2022 and 2023. If I am recalling correctly, Bishop John Donkoh of Ghana, who serves with us on the ILC Board of Directors, was among the first graduates of the LLDP last November.

Another important initiative of recent years has been the ILC accreditation agency for theological education. In developed countries like my own, accreditation agencies have existed for some time to ensure a certain level of theological scholarship, proper academic preparation of those who teach theology, as well as sound financial and business practices at a church’s educational institutions. In vast parts of the world, such systems have not yet been developed. Some time ago the ILC called Dr. Steven Schumacher, former theological educator in west Africa, to head up this effort fulltime. The goal is to raise educational standards in theological training programs, even in countries where a confessional Lutheran church

is not large or where there are limited financial resources. Not only will this strengthen the biblical Lutheran witness in such countries through pastors who are better educated, but those theological students who have special academic promise can be prepared to move into graduate programs in places where established seminaries offer them. The ultimate hope would be that such highly educated theologians can return to their homelands to provide an ever-stronger training for their countrymen and ultimately a lessened dependence on more advanced countries. This will be invaluable particularly in situations where political developments make the free movement of visiting foreign theologians into and out of a given country more difficult or even impossible.

This fall will mark ten years since four of us from the ILC met at the Vatican with Cardinal Kurt Koch of what was then called the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity. Although the Catholic Church has carried on formal dialogues with the Lutheran World Federation for decades, the result of our meeting was that the Roman Church was ready to initiate an informal dialogue series also with theologians of the ILC. The ILC appointed a dialogue team representing Germany, Canada, the United States, and Brazil under the leadership of Dr. Werner Klän, retired professor from the Oberursel Seminary. The *Final Report* of that first series was adopted just over a year ago at the ILC World Conference in Kisumu, Kenya, and our assembly expressed its desire to see this engagement continue. This fall we are in the organizing stage for a second series of meetings over the next several years, again with international representation on the Lutheran side headed up by Bishop Juhana Pohjola of Finland. The Roman delegation will also involve a bishop, most likely from

Germany. A formal announcement should come soon.

Another development still very much in the early stages is the matter of strategic planning on how the ILC might create a structured way to address humanitarian needs with acts of Christian mercy. Preliminary discussions on this possibility took place earlier this year. As Dr. Quill prepares to retire from the post of General Secretary, this will be one of the items on the “To Do” list he entrusts to his very worthy successor.

It is not possible in our limited time today to mention all the progress that testifies to the maturing within our Council, especially within the past 15 years. In passing, however, let me touch on one more: There was a statement last year adopted by the ILC World Conference in Kenya on the matter of internet-based celebrations of the Lord’s Supper. This challenge arose during the recent global COVID-19 pandemic. There are many places in the West where the availability of electronic technology in churches and in members’ private homes and the concern people had about public health, came together to lead some congregations to conclude that anything which can be done in person can be readily duplicated online. To be sure, already well over 90 years have passed since Lutherans in North America, for example, began to broadcast Christian preaching via radio. This surely had a legitimate role in transmitting the Gospel to isolated areas where a local church is not available (and, by the way, we have a good number of those in northern Canada), as well as to people in prisons, to shut-ins at home and in care facilities, also to unchurched people who will benefit from a Gospel witness. At the same time, it is undeniable that this blessing brought with it the temptation to substitute listening to a radio broadcast—or, in more recent

times, to a YouTube recording—for rooting oneself in a real, live, flesh-and-blood body of believers.

That temptation has been with us for some time. It went a step farther when people—and even some pastors—concluded that Christ’s Words of Institution could be just as well transmitted into your home on a computer, and where you, utilizing whatever bread and wine-like beverage you might have in the cupboard, could receive the Lord’s Supper via the internet. The implications of such a practice for pastoral care reach deeper than one might initially imagine: How can absolution and the absolving character of the Sacrament be responsibly administered when the pastor neither sees nor in some cases knows the recipients on the other end? And how are the recipients to live out the guidance, for example, of Hebrews 10:25 (ESV), “*not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near*”? In other words, is it responsible for churches to shape their members to focus on taking for themselves what they wish to receive, and to fail to shape them to build up their brothers and sisters by singing, praying, hearing and confessing with them in person? Even more central is the fact that the Lord Jesus, in instituting the Sacrament, spoke words, handed consecrated bread and wine to His disciples, who then ate, drank, and gave thanks while in the presence of one another. The ILC *Statement on Internet Communion* is a strong example, in my opinion, of the kind of guidance that benefits our member churches and their congregations, including church bodies of modest size which may not have an organized theological commission to help with such challenges. You can find the statement on the ILC website.

I wish at this point to conclude my listing of concrete developments, which have surely intensified in recent years, and come back to the fundamental matters I touched on at the beginning of my remarks. Quite frequently when one reads a news report on the ILC website, the story concludes with a statement to clarify things for online readers who may not know us. It generally goes something like this: *“The International Lutheran Council is a global association of confessional Lutheran church bodies which proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ on the basis of an unconditional commitment to Scripture and to the Lutheran Confessions.”*

At the start of my talk today I recalled the turmoil—and later the clarity—in Martin Luther’s heart and mind, which became the heartbeat of the evangelical Lutheran faith. He was concerned above all, I repeat, for the salvation of his soul. He devoted his life’s work toward the shaping of churches that, above all, would be concerned for the salvation of people’s souls; both for those already baptized into the church, and for those whom the church might still be able to reach.

And because of the clear witness of the New Testament that the Gospel of Jesus Christ, crucified in our place and raised from the dead for our justification, is the way God brings that salvation near to needy human beings, that Gospel became Luther’s obsession, one might say. It breathes through the pages of his Small Catechism, through his understanding of treasures like Holy Absolution (especially when compared to the Roman practice of Penance in his day), through the rationale he employed to reform the Mass, through the potent and earthy hymnody he placed into the hands of everyday people, so that they would come to know the Son of God not as an implacable judge demanding the

impossible from them, but as the heaven-sent Redeemer Who in love gave His life as a ransom for many.

Let me return to that self-introduction of the ILC I cited from many of those online news stories: *The International Lutheran Council is a global association of confessional Lutheran church bodies which proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ.* In other words, it will not do for us simply to make passing reference to “Gospel” in our church life, or to redefine it as some general form of acceptance which has the effect of saying “Yes” to anything and everything people wish to believe and do. Nor can it be our way to set aside the apostolic proclamation of repentance and forgiveness through the life, death, and resurrection of Christ in favour of focusing instead on climate change, on obscuring the Biblical distinctions between man- and womanhood, or on conforming the church’s primary message to ever-changing political and social agendas.

“We preach Christ Jesus as Lord,” said St. Paul (2 Corinthians 4:5 NASB). And of the apostles in the early church, we’re told “every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not stop teaching and preaching the good news of Jesus as the Christ” (Acts 5:42 NASB). Something has gone wrong in a Lutheran church where there is seemingly endless talk of concepts like love and acceptance and inclusivity, but where God’s people are not called to repent of their sin and to find their joy in the Christ Who gave His life to win their pardon and bring them to God.

I’ll quote it one more time: *The International Lutheran Council is a global association of confessional Lutheran church bodies which proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ on the basis of an unconditional commitment to Scripture and to the Lutheran Confessions.*

Luther's obsession with Christ and His saving Gospel grew out of his immersion in and wrestling with the Scriptures. So many of the church's weaknesses today, in rich countries and poor, in local congregations and entire church bodies, can be traced to a neglect of the Word. One can neglect it by the kind of destructive criticism that regards it just as the word of pious people about God which the church is free to set aside in favour of our more up-to-date goals. That is the cancer which is eating mainline Protestant Christendom alive throughout the western world. But one can also neglect the Word by saying all the right and proper things about it in church constitutions, and then failing to draw the church's life from it. This surely says something to pastors about how Holy Scripture needs to saturate and animate their preaching and teaching. It also speaks loudly to laypeople about living as readers and students of the Word all their lives through.

The commitment to Scripture in the ILC's member churches goes hand-in-hand with an unconditional commitment to the Lutheran Confessions. That is more than making passing reference to those confessions in a church constitution before quickly moving on to other things. It goes beyond implying that, "Well, yes, if we had lived in the 16th century and had been confronted with the situation that confronted the reformers, we would have answered as they did," so that the confessions become lovely heirlooms, but stay harmlessly stored away up in the attic somewhere.

May God in His mercy bless our Council, all its member churches and leaders, all its affiliated seminaries and their teachers, with an enduring commitment to His Christ, His Gospel, His written Word in Scripture, and the Lutheran confessions which reflect

the heartbeat of the Scriptures! This commitment will always be the most precious contribution we could ever make to the life of the neighbourhoods, towns, cities, and countries into which the God of salvation has placed us.

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