

Struggling to Establish a National Identity: The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada and its Archives

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Background to Lutheranism in Canada

Lutheranism in Canada has developed over the past 250 years, not as one church with strong Canadian roots, but rather as the product of sometimes unrelated events and, at other times, of conflict among competing denominational factions.

The earliest Lutheran congregations in Eastern Canada were established in the 18th century in Nova Scotia and Ontario, while the seeds of Lutheranism in the West were planted in the settlement period a hundred years later. Eastern Canadian Lutheranism had its roots in Germany and the eastern American synods. West of the Great Lakes, however, there were also Lutherans of many other national backgrounds — mainly from the Scandinavian countries. If there is one thread of continuity in the growth of Canadian Lutheranism, it is that, until very recent times, it was dominated by church bodies outside of Canada, primarily in the United States. Only in the last two decades can a Canadian Lutheran church, in its fullest sense, be said to exist.

While once there was a plethora of synodical and linguistic divisions among Lutherans in this country — upwards of twenty in the past century — now there are two major bodies. The Lutheran Church-Canada, autonomous wing of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, has 93,000 baptized members, mainly in Ontario and Western Canada. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada (ELCIC) has some 207,000 baptized members across the country, making it the third largest Protestant denomination in Canada.

From the earliest times, the Lutheran churches in Canada were dependent upon foreign assistance, particularly from the United States, both for the supply of missionary pastors and for steady financial support for Canadian missions. Although there were many advantages, one very negative consequence of that dependence was the importation of interdenominational rivalries and disputes from the American situation.¹ When in the twentieth century Lutherans in Canada began to explore areas of cooperation, the synodical divisions transplanted from outside were a great hindrance. Such a climate served only to keep congregational and synodical units in Canada small and financially precarious, rather than to foster the joining of meagre resources as had been done by the United Church of Canada. Even as late as 1945, the number of

Canadian Lutheran congregations dependent upon American church bodies for financial support ranged from 60 to 80 per cent.²

A very important step in the development of a Canadian Lutheran identity was the opening of seminaries in Canada. It was generally recognized that, if Canadian churches were to have a secure supply of pastors, those pastors would have to be trained here. Surprisingly, though, the first of these seminaries was not established until 1911. The Synods of Canada and Central Canada worked together towards opening the Waterloo Lutheran Seminary that year. The Saskatoon college of the Manitoba Synod began instructing seminarians in 1918. By 1939, the Norwegian Lutherans had also opened a seminary in Saskatoon. It was not long before the various synods in Western Canada began cooperative efforts in seminary education in Saskatoon, culminating with joint support of the new Lutheran Theological Seminary in 1965.

Another major step towards greater cooperation and dialogue was the establishment of the Canadian Lutheran Council in 1952, later reorganized as the Lutheran Council in Canada in 1967. These inter-Lutheran agencies gradually broke down many of the barriers that had previously been an obstacle to merger negotiations aiming at a Canadian Lutheran church.³ Lutheran mergers in the United States in the 1960s opened the possibility for further negotiations towards other mergers based, not on linguistic affinities, but on common theological ground. The Canada District of The American Lutheran Church became fully independent in 1967, taking the name The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Canada (ELCC). In the meantime, the three Canadian synods of the Lutheran Church in America formed the LCA-Canada Section in 1963.⁴ By 1972 these two bodies joined in preliminary merger negotiations with the Lutheran Church-Canada (Missouri Synod) aimed at a Canadian Lutheran merger. The Missouri Synod, always concerned about maintaining its confessional purity, later withdrew, but the ELCC and LCA-Canada Section continued their discussions, and in 1986 they joined to form the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada (ELCIC).

Attempts to Establish a Canadian Lutheran Archives

Given the strong linkage between Canadian Lutheranism and the churches in the United States, it is quite understandable that many of the records dealing with Canada are housed in American repositories. While we do not propose to discuss the Missouri Synod experience at any length, we must mention its eminently successful Concordia Historical Institute in St. Louis, where a much admired collection of Lutheran archives from all parts of North America has been gathered together. Districts of that Synod here in Canada have also been successful in gathering valuable materials relating to their territories. The Concordia Institute assiduously encourages and offers training to their district archivists — in contrast to many other Lutheran church bodies.

The records of bodies antecedent to the present Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada (ELCIC) are scattered throughout the eastern and mid-western United States. These are well described in two guides to American Lutheran historical records by Joel W. Lundeen and Helen M. Knubel.⁵

In Eastern Canada, Lutheran church bodies made no concerted effort to ensure preservation of their documentary heritage until after the turn of this century. The short-lived Synod of Central Canada (1909-1925) had an archivist almost from the beginning, while the Canada Synod (est. 1861) first appointed an archivist about 1922. The position

was entirely voluntary, usually filled by one of the pastors, who went no further than gathering together printed minutes and church magazines for preservation. Since the establishment of the Eastern Canada Synod, Lutheran Church in America (LCA), in 1962, Rev. Erich Schultz has served as archivist. Through a small budget (usually no more than a few hundred dollars) and his position as librarian of Waterloo Lutheran (now Wilfrid Laurier) University, he was able to bring together many of the records of the former Nova Scotia, Central Canada, and Canada Synods at the WLU Library. The collection contains minutes of the Synod and its predecessor bodies (1861-), minutes of the Executive Board, Conferences, auxiliaries, church papers, photographs, parish records of congregations no longer in existence, and microfilm masters of minutes, church papers, and some older parish records. In recent years, an oral history programme has been started. Unfortunately, very few personal papers of synod presidents and other church leaders have been deposited.

In Western Canada, efforts towards gathering Lutheran archives together have been less coordinated. The Synod of Western Canada (formerly Manitoba Synod), United Lutheran Church in America (ULCA), appointed Rev. Dr. Conrad Kleiner its archivist about 1947, the fiftieth anniversary of the establishment of the Synod. Besides writing a history of the Synod, Kleiner began the work of gathering historical records. In his report to the Synod convention of 1956, he wrote: "Your archivist is of the opinion that synod should find a permanent place for all the documents, books and magazines collected by him. Until now the so-called synodical archives has been housed in the study of the archivist."⁶

Upon formation of the LCA, the Synod of Western Canada (ULCA) underwent division into the Central Canada (Northwestern Ontario, Manitoba and Saskatchewan) and Western Canada (Alberta and British Columbia) Synods. Rev. Dr. Walter Freitag, a professor at the Lutheran Theological Seminary in Saskatoon, continued the lonely struggle to preserve the archives of western Lutheranism.

In 1974, the Central Canada Synod appointed D'Arcy Hande, an archivist on the staff of the Saskatchewan Archives Board, to gather together at the Lutheran Theological Seminary documentary materials relating to the Synod and its LCA antecedents in Western Canada. In the following eleven years, he assembled many of the early manuscripts and published minutes and proceedings of the synodical bodies and acquired personal papers such as those of Rev. Dr. Otto A. Olson, a prominent Lutheran leader in Western Canada, and Rev. Gustav Heimann, a missionary to postwar German immigrants. These records were used on a limited basis by academics and genealogists alike.

The Western Canada Synod, LCA, concluded an agreement in 1979 to deposit its local congregational records in the Provincial Archives of Alberta, while its synod office files would be transferred to the seminary in Saskatoon. The former Icelandic Synod had disappeared as a separate entity upon the formation of the LCA in 1962. Its records had scattered: some went to the University of Manitoba, where there is a chair of Icelandic Studies, while others remained at First Lutheran Church, Winnipeg (the unofficial headquarters of the Synod), and a few others found their way into the Central Canada Synod archives at Saskatoon.

The constitution of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Canada (ELCC), formed in 1967, made an archives the responsibility of the national president. In 1973, President

S.T. Jacobson asked Professor George Evenson of the Lutheran Theological Seminary to serve as his unofficial assistant archivist. Evenson undertook considerable research related to the official history of the ELCC and its antecedents, but when he re-entered parish ministry in Alberta the following year, that work ground to a halt. Nearly ten years later, in 1983, Dr. Jacobson solicited a report on the state of the ELCC records and archives, whose recommendations resulted in the establishment of a Committee on Records Management and Archives and the appointment of Jeannette Brandell as Assistant Archivist early in 1984.

Looking at the state of Lutheran archives in Canada in the late 1960s, one saw splintered and uncoordinated efforts among several church bodies. The Missouri Synod had three district archivists; the LCA had three synod archivists; the ELCC had no archivist responsible for its archives; the Lutheran Council in Canada had its own small archives; and several Lutheran educational institutions across the country had hopes for their own archives. Some of the individuals who were most involved in Lutheran archives and history were members of the Lutheran Historical Conference (LHC) in the United States; for example, Rev. Erich Schultz, archivist of the Eastern Canada Synod, LCA, served on the LHC board and commissions in the 1960s.

Early in the 1960s, the Canadian Lutheran Council (CLC) was already voicing the opinion that there should be a National Archives for the Lutheran Church in Canada. Dr. E.J. Treusch, executive director of the CLC, expressed the hope that there would be an archivist for this new agency on the staff of the Lutheran Council in Canada (LCIC), which was expected to take over the work of the CLC in 1967. Indeed, in 1970 the LCIC sponsored a conference of Canadian Lutheran archivists in Winnipeg. Dr. A.R. Suelflow, director of the Concordia Historical Institute in St. Louis, was the guest speaker. Participants identified several areas of concern, largely arising from the perception that archival efforts among the Lutheran church bodies lacked coordination. They expressed the need for more frequent contacts and proposed several initiatives, such as a bibliography of church historical writings, directories, union lists of archival holdings, and microfilming projects.⁷ Unfortunately, they established no mechanism for realizing these objectives, and the enthusiasm generated by the conference dissipated.⁸

Another attempt took place a few years later in response to an article by James Lambert which suggested that, in the absence of effective archival work in many religious institutions, publicly funded archives should step into the breach.⁹ D'Arcy Hande, then archivist of the Central Canada Synod, LCA, wrote to Lutheran archivists concerning the Lambert article and urged greater commitment by the church bodies towards their archival responsibilities. Encouraged by Rev. N.J. Threinen, secretary of the Joint Commission on Inter-Lutheran Relations (JCILR), Hande made his argument in a brief to the Commission in November 1976:

We cannot continue to evade the question. While we do, our historical records are scattering, deteriorating, and being lost through the forces of nature and to others more interested than we in collecting and preserving them The various denominational units, seminaries, and inter-Lutheran organizations absolutely must be more responsible in providing a realistic financial and moral commitment to this work. Otherwise, no proposals for an archival program can be considered practical and it would be better to hand over responsibility to a public depository as suggested by Mr. Lambert.¹⁰

The JCILR considered the brief and made the commitment to convene a meeting of Canadian Lutheran archivists and to provide \$1000 for related expenses. That meeting, which took place at Saskatoon in the autumn of 1977, decided to organize the Association of Lutheran Archivists and Historians in Canada (ALAHC) for the purpose of promoting awareness of archives and history in the church and developing "projects which would aid in the work of archivists or improve the usefulness of archival holdings for the church, the academic world, and the public at large."¹¹

One of the first issues to be addressed by the ALAHC was the fact that, in Western Canada, synodical bodies were small and unable to provide adequate care for their historical records. The Lutheran Theological Seminary in Saskatoon served as a focal point for the ELCC and the Western and Central Canada Synods of the LCA. In 1979, the ALAHC requested the seminary's Board of Governors to consider appointing a salaried archivist who could serve the Seminary and its supporting church bodies. The Board of Governors rejected this proposal, but stood behind its offer to provide storage space for those church bodies who chose to deposit their historical records on an individual basis.¹²

As the ELCC and LCA-Canada Section began negotiating a Canadian merger in the early 1980s, another opportunity arose for the ALAHC to influence the development of archives in the proposed new church (now the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada-ELCIC). Unfortunately, no consultation with the ALAHC took place when the Lutheran Merger Commission drafted the constitution of the ELCIC. The Lutheran Merger Commission did, however, solicit advice regarding the structure of an archives programme. D'Arcy Hande, Central Canada Synod Archivist, prepared a report and recommendations in 1984, endorsed by the ALAHC in 1985. The report deplored the low priority given archives by the Lutheran churches and strongly urged a higher level of financial commitment once the merger took place. The report's recommendations were as follows:

- 1 The ELCIC should appoint a permanent committee to oversee records management and archives;
- 2 A full archives programme with comprehensive guidelines should be drawn up;
- 3 Facilities for archives should be prepared, following the minimum requirements outlined by the Association of Canadian Archivists;
- 4 A professional archivist, familiar with archival principles and with the history and theology of Canadian Lutheranism, should be appointed;
- 5 A financial commitment of at least \$20,000 in 1986 [based on per capita support for archives in the United and Anglican churches] should be made;
- 6 Two archives repositories for the ELCIC should be designated, at the Lutheran Theological Seminary in Saskatoon and Wilfrid Laurier University in Waterloo.¹³

When the ELCIC began operation on 1 January 1986, only the last recommendation had been implemented, making possible the transfer of historical records from the offices of the merging church bodies to the designated repositories. The constitution of

the new church provided for the appointment of an archivist in each of its five synods, but designated no such officer for the national church. Instead, it placed responsibility for the church-wide archives under the National Secretary. Rev. L.C. Gilbertson, the new National Secretary of the ELCIC, called together an Archives Advisory Committee in September 1986. That meeting adopted a broad archives policy for the church, recommended a minimal budget of \$4000 to the national Church Council, and appointed two Assistant Archivists on an honorary basis — Rev. Erich Schultz in Waterloo and Mrs. Jeannette Brandell in Saskatoon. Unfortunately, the ELCIC has subsequently had to reduce the budget for archives by half, and the Advisory Committee has become dormant.

Conclusion

There are obviously more substantial reasons for the lack of recognition for archives in the Lutheran church than merely lack of numbers and resources. There has never been the cohesiveness in Canadian Lutheranism that is seen in other denominational groups. The primary reason for this is that Lutherans in Canada, over the past two centuries, have not developed as a national church. The north-south ties between Lutherans in the various regions of Canada and the parent church bodies in the United States have been much stronger, the dependence on American manpower and financial resources much greater, than any east-west ties that might have existed. While most Lutherans in Canada now wish to renounce that material dependence, psychologically they have yet to replace it with a truly Canadian Lutheran identity.

In a sense, Lutherans share with Canadian society at large a lack of understanding that group identity must be based on a common historical experience. In order to inculcate that identity, a committed effort towards researching our history and interpreting it to the community must begin. Presently courses on church history do exist in the Lutheran seminaries, but the actual research taking place is, if anything, declining. The impact of such organizations as the Association of Lutheran Archivists and Historians and the Canadian Lutheran Historical Association on the intellectual and political leaders of the churches has been marginal. The seminaries and the churches they serve have not yet accepted the message which their archivists and historians have been trying to promote. Lutherans in Canada should be aware that in 1984 theologian Dr. Martin Marty chided Lutherans in the United States for their neglect of their own history:

This situation would not be so bizarre did not Lutherans claim to be in love with tradition, to be conservative, to appreciate history . . . Why celebrate the idea of being history-minded without knowing history? Martin Luther made a great deal of the part history plays in faith. He wanted historians to be truthful, accurate and scrupulous as if they were writing the Word of God. In a way, he said, they were.¹⁴

There have been several attempts in the past two decades at raising the profile of archives among Canadian Lutheran church bodies. Strategies have been developed, but for lack of financial backing they have gone untested. The reluctance of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada to commit the modest annual contribution from each of its baptized members towards gathering, preserving, and making accessible for research the documentary record of its history is a sad commentary on its sense of priorities and its

perception of its own identity. One can only have faith that an awareness of the importance of the past will develop as the ELCIC finds its institutional bearings and acquires a sense of its place in Canadian society. In the meantime, the archives programme in the church is treading water, awaiting the greater priority it so desperately needs in order to be effective.

Notes

- * The authors wish to acknowledge with thanks the assistance of Rev. L.C. Gilbertson, National Secretary of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, and Mrs. Jeannette Brandell, ELCIC archivist at the Lutheran Theological Seminary in Saskatoon.
- 1 George O. Evenson, *Adventuring for Christ: The Story of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Canada* (Calgary, 1974), p. 13.
- 2 Valdimar J. Eylands, *Lutherans in Canada* (Winnipeg, 1945), p. 23.
- 3 See Norman J. Threinen, *Fifty Years of Lutheran Convergence: The Canadian Case-Study* (St. Louis, Missouri, 1983).
- 4 Evenson, p. 16.
- 5 Joel W. Lundeen, *Preserving Yesterday for Tomorrow: A Guide to the Archives of the Lutheran Church in America* (Chicago, 1977); Helen M. Knubel, ed., *An Introductory Guide to Lutheran Archives and Collections* (New York, 1981).
- 6 *The Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Western Canada: Minutes of the Forty-first Convention, July 3-6, 1956*, p. 87.
- 7 Archives of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada (AELCIC), Records of the Archivist, Central Canada Synod, Lutheran Church in America (LCA.29), "Conference of Lutheran Archivists, November 10-11th, 1970, Fort Garry Hotel, Winnipeg, Manitoba," pp. 12-14.
- 8 The Lutheran Council in Canada (LCIC) seems always to have had a strong awareness of the importance of archives. The most recent manifestation of that is its decision to have all its records from the 1950s onwards copied onto microfiche before it scaled down operations and moved its office from Winnipeg to Toronto. Now the LCIC archives are available for widespread and inexpensive distribution to interested researchers. The original records have been deposited in the Archives of the Eastern Synod, ELCIC. (*Lutheran Historical Conference Newsletter*, February 1989).
- 9 James Lambert, "Public Archives and Religious Records: Marriage Proposals," *Archivaria* 1 (Winter 1975-1976).
- 10 AELCIC, LCA.29, D'Arcy Hande, "Lutheran Archives in Canada: The Present Situation and Proposals for the Future," November 1976, p. 5.
- 11 The ALAHC changed its name to the Canadian Lutheran Historical Association in 1985, reflecting a general change in emphasis for the organization.
- 12 *For the Record* (newsletter of the Association of Lutheran Archivists and Historians in Canada), October 1979, p. 12.
- 13 AELCIC, Records of the President, Evangelical Lutheran Church of Canada (ELCC.D.X.3.4), D'Arcy Hande, "Archives and Records Management in the New Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada," June 1984, pp. 10-11.
- 14 M. Marty, "Lutherans Fall Short on History of Lutheranism," *Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly*, Fall 1984. Originally published in *AELC Foreword*, July 1984.