

Anglican-Lutheran Society Conference 2014

**‘Fear Not Little Flock’
The Vocation of Minority Churches Today**

Session Two : Divided Communities

A Tale of two Cities:

An exploration into the vocation of minority churches in today’s world

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This is the text of a lecture delivered at the international conference of the Anglican-Lutheran Society at the Ordass Lajos Lutheran Centre, Révfülöp, Lake Balaton, Hungary, which took place between 12-16 September 2014. The author is a retired pastor in the Lutheran Church in Great Britain (LCiGB), but any views expressed in the text are his, and are not necessarily those of the LCiGB. If there are any mistakes in the paper, he is happy to have them pointed out to him.

Foreword

It is an honour to have been invited to make this presentation here at the international conference of the Anglican-Lutheran Society, and it is a particular pleasure to be making the presentation here in Hungary. I was ordained into the ministry of the Lutheran Church on Reformation Day – 31 October – in 1970, and the minister who presided at my ordination was the pastor of the Hungarian Lutheran Congregation in London, the Very Rev’d Robert

Pátkai. Because of this, and because of other contacts going back more than fifty years, I feel a particular affinity with the Lutheran Church in Hungary, and this presentation is intended as a tribute to that church, and especially to Dean Pátkai, who is an example of long-standing pastoral faithfulness and service.

Introduction

Before coming to the main part of this paper, I want us to remind ourselves of the title and theme for our days together here on the shores of Lake Balaton. The title that was chosen for our conference, “Fear not little flock”, is taken from some words of Jesus recorded in the twelfth chapter of the Gospel of Luke; but it is, in fact, only the first half of those words, because Jesus goes on to say, “for it is the Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom” (Luke 12: 32). These words are set into a longer passage in which Jesus urges his disciples not to be overly concerned with food, and drink, and clothing for themselves, but to be concerned with the welfare of others. The words of our title are words of promise and comfort, and they are words which point us to what is most important in the life of every Christian community: at the heart of that life is the promise of the great treasure of our faith, the good news of the kingdom of God, made flesh in Jesus of Nazareth. It is this on which our minds should be focused, for, says Jesus, “... where your treasure is, there will your heart be also”, and, as Martin Luther put it in Thesis 62 of the *Ninety-five Theses*, “The true treasure of the church is the most holy gospel of the glory and grace of God”. (LW.Vol.31, p.31.)

The title of our conference goes on to talk of “the Vocation of Minority Churches Today”, and the words of Jesus that we have just referred to are particularly relevant here, because Jesus refers to his disciples as a “little flock”, and what he goes on to promise them is not necessarily that they will become a bigger flock, but that the Father’s kingdom will be theirs. The task of the communities of Jesus’ disciples is to be witnesses to that kingdom, as it was demonstrated in the work of Jesus, God’s Word to the world. But that work, although it carries with it the promise of the kingdom, also involves taking up the cross and risking suffering and rejection.

A Tale of Two Cities

I want to explore our theme by looking at two cities, which, at first sight, could not be more different. They are separated from each other by nearly two thousand miles, and by two thousand years. The cities are Jerusalem, which is one of the home-towns of our faith, and Nottingham, which is, by chance, my own hometown. What I want to do is look at both cities from the point of view of the Christian communities there, and explore their similarities and differences.

Jerusalem

The first city to visit is Jerusalem, but not the sadly divided city of today, with its tensions between different peoples and different faiths: our visit to Jerusalem is a visit requiring time travel back to the Roman year of 781 A.U.C. (“since the founding of the city”), or, in our way of reckoning, the year 29 or 30. We are visiting a tiny community, a “little flock” of Jews whom their fellow-Jews probably considered to be sectaries or heretics. These followers of “the Way” were disciples of Jesus of Nazareth, and the core of their community consisted of men and women who had followed him for almost three years as he went around the northern province of Galilee, preaching, teaching, and healing. Slowly, and hesitantly, and with much misunderstanding, they had come to believe that this Jesus was the promised Messiah, and, as they came south to Jerusalem, their hopes grew that he would deliver God’s people from their oppressors.

But, as we know, that had not happened. Jesus had, indeed, entered Jerusalem in triumph on the first day of the week of the Passover, but by the time the Passover actually arrived, he had been betrayed by one of his own followers, arrested and tried, tortured and crucified. The men and women who made up this tiny community had been traumatised by what they had seen happen. They had hidden behind closed doors, for fear of the Jews – and, of course, the Romans. But a great miracle had happened, and they no longer seemed afraid; indeed, they were now preaching quite openly that Jesus of Nazareth had risen from the dead, that he truly was God’s chosen one, and that people should repent of their sins, be baptised, and believe in him, God’s anointed one.

These events are described in the books written by Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, and in Luke's second book, which describes the things done by Jesus' disciples during the next thirty years, or so. In this book, "The Acts of the Apostles", we get an insight into what the community life of these people was like. It may have been romanticised, but we get a tantalising glimpse of their life together, of some of the stresses and strains that they faced – for though we might, in retrospect, call them saints, they were also very certainly sinners, and there were lots of things they needed to work out with fear and trembling. One central question was to do with racial and religious purity: was the message of Jesus for all men and women, irrespective of nationality or faith, or did you have to be, or become, Jewish, before you could be admitted to their fellowship? Some answered one way, others answered differently, but this was a crucial question as the first Christians struggled to understand what their vocation was.

Let us look at three descriptions of life in this community, beginning with Acts 2: 42-47, which describes not a blueprint but the essential ingredients in the life of this community. We are told that the people met constantly to hear the apostles preach; that they sold their goods, pooled the money they received for them, and held everything in common; that they prayed, both in their own fellowship and in the Temple; that they broke bread together and shared meals in each other's homes. What we need to be aware of is that this was an *active* community – all the verbs used are *active* verbs. These followers of the way of Jesus meet, the apostles teach, the people hear, they share their goods, they break bread, they join in common meals, and they pray and praise. But these things, which they do in common, only constitute part of what they do: these are the *internal* things, but there are *external* things as well: they preach openly about Jesus, and they continue his ministry of healing the sick in body and mind. They have been given a great gift of believing that Jesus was God's gift to the world (John 3: 16-17): within their fellowship they explore what this means by listening to the teaching of the apostles – Jesus' closest followers – and they want to share that gift with others.

And their community grew, but as it grew so the believers faced some problems. Acts 6: 1-6 describes an early rumbling of trouble, with jealousy between believers of Aramaic-speaking and Greek-speaking backgrounds; a little jealousy between the faithful, requiring an organisational solution. The apostles exercise a service of teaching within the community,

and it is on this that they believe they should focus, so they assert that “it is not reasonable that we should leave the word of God in order to serve tables.” (Acts 6: 2) The solution that they arrive at is to appoint people specifically set aside for a ministry of practical service, so that, alongside the twelve apostles, we now have the seven deacons. What we need to notice here, though, is that although the ministry of the deacons is not a teaching ministry, they do share in the common task of all believers in witnessing to the Gospel, and that the first man to be martyred for the new faith is Stephen, one of “the Seven”.

The third passage to consider is Acts 15: 1-31. This describes an assembly in Jerusalem which had to face up to the serious question of what to do with the many non-Jewish converts who are beginning to believe in Jesus: specifically, should they be required to become Jews first, which, for the men, would involve being circumcised. By this time, we have moved a long way from the first tiny community in Jerusalem: the message of Jesus has been preached in Galilee and Samaria, and further north, in Damascus; it has probably been taken to Ethiopia; and through the teaching of the converted rabbi, Paul, it has resulted in fledgling communities in Asia Minor and beyond. After much discussion, the assembly comes to a decision *not* to require Gentiles to be circumcised – though it is clear from elsewhere that making this decision did not satisfy everyone, and it did not mean that the problem went away.

These three glimpses into the life of the first Christian communities are intended to remind us of an enduring truth about the Christian church: its congregations are not idealised communities, but are communities which have to face problems which can either be *organisational* (how to best serve the Greek-speaking widows), or *theological*, (what to do with converts), but which are first and foremost spiritual problems. It was a worshipping community.

Nottingham

Let us turn now to the second of our two cities and return to our own day and age. Nottingham is a city with a population just over 305,000, but it is at the centre of an extensive conurbation of around 750,000. The city’s history goes back 1400 years, and it boasts an ancient castle, and a beautiful mediaeval parish church. Although there are a few

modern architectural monstrosities, Nottingham has suffered less than most British cities, and its civic architecture is some of the best in the country. It has been the home of a variety of light industries, including lace making, bicycle construction, pharmaceuticals, and cigarettes. To the north is what remains of the Nottinghamshire coalfield, while to the south and east lie acres of rich agricultural land. 125 miles north of London, and 30 miles south of Sheffield, it has excellent communications by rail and road in all directions.

Today, Nottingham is known to be home to around a hundred Lutherans, although there are almost certainly many more, including overseas workers the church has not been able to contact, and students in the two universities. There is an attractive modern church building, owned by a German-speaking congregation. This is situated about two miles from the city centre, and the congregation makes the building available for regular worship in English and Latvian, as well as German, with occasional services in Estonian, Finnish, and Polish.

Nottingham was not a traditional centre for Lutherans. Before the Second World War, Lutheran congregations (almost none of which used English) were to be found either in London, or in the big industrial cities of the North of England or Scotland, but in the years after 1945, no less than four Lutheran congregations were established in Nottingham: Estonian, German, Latvian, and Polish, and in the early 1950s there were three Lutheran pastors actually living in the city. It is difficult to say exactly how many members there were altogether, but there were probably around 1000. Today, the Estonian and Polish congregations have all but disappeared, and both the German-speaking and Latvian congregations consist mostly of elderly people. Both congregations only have a service once a month. But there is now, what there was not after the Second World War, a congregation that worships in English.

It was the German-speaking congregation which began a monthly service in English in 1964. With help from the Lutheran Council of Great Britain, an old Methodist Sunday School building had been purchased and completely rebuilt as a Lutheran church, and the pastor, Hans-Heinrich Seger, realised the need for worship in English to serve mixed-marriages, second generation children for whom English was now the mother tongue, and Lutherans who did not belong to the national language communities. Included in the latter were groups of American students from Luther College, Decorah, Iowa, which had set up an

overseas study programme linked to the University of Nottingham, and which purchased a house directly opposite the church for the students to live in. These monthly services continued until 2001, and they were regularly attended by 60-70 people, including the highlight of the year, which was a joint Advent-Christmas Service with the Scandinavian community, and which attracted around 150 people.

But circumstances change, and a succession of German-speaking pastors who recognised the value of the English-language work and were committed to it, gave way to pastors who did not have that same commitment – and, it has to be said, there were German-speaking lay people who were afraid that the English language might take over and do away with German. Without going into details, there was a very painful divorce which resulted in a separate English-speaking congregation known as “Trinity Lutheran Congregation”, and which now holds services twice a month: once a month a pastor comes to conduct the Lord’s Supper, and once a month a service is taken by an authorised lay minister. It would be wonderful if the congregation could have its own pastor to minister to its people, and seek out the many Lutheran students in the universities, but the only way that this could be done would be if the pastor already had another job, or was retired and in receipt of a pension. Why? Because there is no money to fund a full-time English-speaking pastor in the city: the average attendance at services is around 15, and the yearly collection amounts to only £1000 – out of which the congregation has to pay for hiring the church and paying the expenses of the visiting pastors, as well as other expenses.

What is characteristic of this congregation is its great faithfulness. People come from as far as 25 miles away, but they come regularly and as a congregation they show the marks of that early congregation in Jerusalem that we have already heard about. They gather together regularly, they listen to the apostolic message, they break bread and share wine together, they pray together, and, above all else, they demonstrate that they belong together by supporting each other in good times and in bad. In short, they are a Christian family, drawn from a wide variety of national backgrounds – American, English, Estonian, Finnish, German, Polish, Tanzanian, and sometimes others – but united by their common faith.

Of course, there will be plenty of people who will ask how it is possible to justify supporting the existence of such a tiny congregation: surely, the ecumenically correct approach would be for these people to worship in one of their local churches? Inter-church agreements such as Leunenberg, Meissen, and Porvoo mean that most of the barriers that hindered this have gone, so, why not disband the congregation and use the time and effort elsewhere? Why not? Because the members of the congregation do not want it; they have an identity they want to preserve.

The Vocation of minority Christian congregations

In the twenty centuries since the birth of the first community of followers of “the Way”, or, if you prefer it, since the birth of the first Christian congregation in Jerusalem, in or around the year 30 of the Common Era, the Christian Church has changed and developed so that today it would scarcely be recognised by those first Christians.

The first major difference between then and now is that the Christian church has, for centuries, been a *religio licita*, recognised, favourably or unfavourably, as a respectable part of society. Except in the most extreme cases of persecution, Christians have been able to worship openly, though sometimes they have been able to do little more than that, and any wider participation in society has been severely curtailed. But the recognition of respectability by society at large carries with it enormous dangers. The first Christian community was well aware that it was called to be both salt and light, witnessing to God’s love for a benighted world, whereas, today, Christian communities often compromise with the world around them.

The second major difference is that today the Christian church takes thousands of different forms. Among the myriad of churches and sects, we may draw a distinction between those that are “mainstream” or “orthodox”, and those that are “heterodox”. There are those, of course, who blame this apparent denial of Jesus’ prayer that his followers “might all be one” on Martin Luther, but, realistically, we know that this is not true: there were those in the New Testament who followed James, or Peter, or Paul, or Apollos, and there were Arians and Monophysites, Nestorians and Copts, Catholic and Orthodox, followers of the Celtic way, Waldensians, Hussites, and Lollards, long before Luther. Depending on where you

stand, Luther's very moderate call for reform was either hi-jacked, or perfected, or corrupted, by others. Since Luther's time, the church has continued to split, split, and split again.

The description of the first Christian congregation in Jerusalem, and the picture that we can piece together from the rest of the New Testament, shows us communities that were struggling to be faithful to the vocation given them by Jesus at the time of his ascension (Matthew 28: 16-20). With his authority, they were to preach throughout the whole world and make disciples; they were to baptise and teach these new disciples all that Jesus had commanded them; and they could do this is the sure certainty that he was with them always, even to the end of time. This, I would suggest, is the true meaning of 'the Real Presence'. These first Christian congregations preached; they listened to the apostolic teaching, shared the common life, broke bread and shared meals, and they prayed both privately and publicly; and they did all these things, knowing that when two or three of them gathered together, Jesus was in the midst of them (Matt. 18: 20). These are the marks of the church, and the Augsburg Confession sums them up very succinctly in articles VII, VIII, IX, X, XI, XII and XIV. The church is the assembly of believers where the apostolic Gospel is preached and taught in its purity by those who are duly authorised to do so, and where Baptism and the Lord's Supper are celebrated according to the Gospel; these are the things that make for unity – not conformity to a particular form of ceremonial. Of course, such a community includes both saints and sinners, wheat and tares, which is why the apostolic preaching and teaching includes both the proclamation of the good news and also a call to repentance – what Lutherans term the proper distinction between Law and Gospel.

But, very importantly, let us note that there are two things which are *not* marks of the church: size and organisation. Whether the assembly of believers consists of thousands gathered in a great cathedral, or a handful of people in their own version of the upper room, Christ is in the midst of them, and they share the common life together by listening, praying, breaking bread, and sharing meals together. Of course, any assembly that has a public face has, nowadays, to ensure that it conforms to the law of the land, but so long as things are done decently and in order (1 Cor. 14: 40), there is no laid down pattern for how this should be done – either episcopal, presbyterian, or congregational. The church is not

distinguished by its form of organisation, but by the fact that it actively bears witness to the marks of the church as best it can.

The people who made up the first congregation in Jerusalem were ordinary people, not highly trained theologians; several of them had been fishermen, one had been a tax-gatherer. It was only later, with the arrival of Paul, that we can add an educated rabbinic tent-maker to the list. The people who make up the Trinity Lutheran Congregation in Nottingham include teachers, civil servants, health workers, businessmen and women, senior citizens and babes-in-arms. *Ordinary* people, who are, at the same time, quite *extraordinary*, because, like the first Christians in Jerusalem, they are a unique people who have been claimed by Jesus as his own; they are his disciples; they share in his priesthood; their task is to bear witness to the glorious light which shines in the darkness. (1 Peter 2: 9). Ordained ministers – those who have been set aside to serve the community – have to remember the great mystery that these people, who can often be difficult, awkward, and occasionally even disagreeable, are a holy nation and a peculiar people who have received God's mercy. Each of the individual members of the community is *simul justus et peccator*: at one and the same time a saint and a sinner, and each member of the community is gifted and talented.

In the description of the first Jerusalem congregation that we see in Acts 2, we hear that the first Christians sold all that they had and pooled their resources: we could say that they shared in, in the proper sense of the word, a *common-wealth*. Few Christian communities today ask their members to sell all their goods and give to a common chest, though they do, of course, expect individuals and families to contribute to the common work of the community. But each Christian community is still a unique and distinct commonwealth, in which individuals share their individual gifts and talents for the well-being of all. St Paul gives us a beautiful picture of this in 1 Corinthians 12: the Holy Spirit has called men and women to faith, so that they can say that "Jesus is the Lord" (v.3), but they are each endowed with particular gifts – wise speech, putting the deepest knowledge into words, healing, miraculous powers, prophecy, and so on. The description of God's gifts to his people is summarised elsewhere by Paul in Romans 12: 3-8, where what is emphasised is that individuals are to *make use of* the gifts that they have been given. The Christian church is, in short, a *commonwealth of gifts*, where the community celebrates the gifts which are given to the community as a whole – the apostolic teaching, fellowship, baptism, the breaking of bread

and the sharing of meals, prayer and praise – and where each individual exercises his or her particular gifts for the good of all, both inside and outside the household of faith.

Though their historical situation is very different from that of the first congregation in Jerusalem, the vocation of minority Christian congregations today is exactly the same: it is to be faithful to Jesus' final words to his disciples: "Full authority in heaven and on earth has been committed to me. Go forth therefore and make all nations my disciples; baptise men everywhere in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, and teach them to observe all that I have commanded you", and they are to do this with Jesus' assurance that "I am with you always, to the end of time". (Matthew 28: 18-20).

Concluding Observations and Questions

Those of you who have listened patiently to this paper may be asking what its relevance is, because, after all, it does not seem to have said anything very practical. However, that is the whole point of the paper: it has dealt with the theme from the perspective of scripture and theology, and it has done so because it seems to me that unless we get the scriptural and theological thinking about the church right, then our witness in the world is going to be of little use. However, what I have said up to this point does raise some practical questions.

Firstly, let it be said quite clearly that Christian congregations are not businesses, though they may have to be organisations which make use of money; they are not corporations to be judged on how externally successful they seem to be (and, let's be honest, success is usually judged in terms of size); and they should not be hierarchical organisations in which people jostle for the best seats at the wedding-feast. Christian communities consist of people who share in God's great gift to the world in Jesus the Christ, and in his continuing presence among them, and who have been endowed, both communally and individually, with many differing and mutually supportive gifts from God's Spirit. The question that emerges from this observation is that of how we enable people in our congregations to use their gifts for the good of everyone in the community.

Secondly, a Christian congregation has a twofold responsibility: on the one hand, it has an *internal* responsibility, which is concerned with the building up of both corporate and

individual faith. This involves an exploration of the apostolic faith in its contemporary meaning, discovering, again and again, what it means to be a baptised believer who lives his or her life in the presence of Christ, and how we express this in prayer, praise, and mutual service, one to another. The congregation has also an *external* responsibility – that of sharing the good news of God’s love for the world with that world – in other words, with those who stand outside the household of faith. This is something which minority communities may find particularly difficult, because they do not have the resources to engage either in evangelism or in extensive diaconal work. How are tiny communities to preach the Gospel to the world around them?

Thirdly, how do minority churches deal with the whole question of the ministry of those who are set apart to preach, teach, and administer the sacraments? In the first Christian congregation in Jerusalem, the selling of individual possessions and the pooling of resources meant that the apostles could devote themselves to the Word; the subsequent appointment of “the Seven” meant that those same apostles could devote themselves almost exclusively to the Word. They lived in a simpler world which had no concept of National Insurance or the need for providing suitable housing or an adequate pension. Minority congregations, such as we have seen in Nottingham, do not have the resources to pay for a full time ordained minister and all that that implies. One answer might be to have what the Church of England calls “non-stipendiary ministers”, or “voluntary ministers”, or what Lutherans in Britain describe as a “tent-making” ministry. But it is not easy to balance the responsibilities which come with secular employment with the responsibilities of being a pastor; the only way that that can work is if we re-think the whole idea of ministry and re-discover the church as a community of shared talents – a Commonwealth of Gifts. Has the church’s ministry become over-professionalised, so that the gifts that have been given to non-ordained ministers are frequently overlooked or undervalued?

Fourthly, while it is true that established Lutheran Churches, such as the *Folkekirker* in the Nordic countries, or the *Landeskirchen* in Germany, are multi-cultural and multi-ethnic – simply because they provide pastoral service to everyone in their geographical parishes who belong to the church – Lutheran minority churches in Europe usually are not. While the Lutheran Church in Hungary has Slovak and German ministries alongside Hungarian, the church in Siebenburgen is German-speaking, and the predominant Lutheran church in Serbia

is Slovak-speaking; what characterises such churches is not just allegiance to the apostolic faith, but the preservation of a distinctive culture. This is true of the national-language Lutheran groups in Great Britain, but what characterises congregations such as Trinity in Nottingham is not only allegiance to the apostolic faith, but a recognition that ethnicity is one of the gifts to be shared with other people.

Fifthly, and finally, a major question: within Europe, in what used to be called Christendom: where are the Christian congregations which are *not* minorities? In a typical Church of England urban parish, with thousands of members, how many have congregations reaching three figures on a typical Sunday? What about typical urban parishes in Germany or the Nordic countries? Could those churches survive in their present form without support from the public purse?

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Finally, I will be the first to admit that I have written this paper from a distinctive background, that of being an ordained minister in a tiny minority multi-ethnic and multi-cultural Lutheran church in a country which often assumes that being Lutheran must be synonymous with being German (or just, plain foreign), or, quite frequently, assuming some connection with the late Dr Martin Luther King! What I have said today reflects my background in such a church in a western European nation in which Christianity has had, for centuries, a privileged position, and where Christians, for at least the last two centuries, have not had to suffer persecution. That experience is very different from that of some Christians in other parts of Europe or beyond, but each individual can only speak of what he or she knows. But our tiny congregations are Christian families which have survived, and are surviving, and which, diminutive as they are, take comfort from Jesus' words, "Fear not, little flock; for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." (Luke 12: 32.)

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How we enable people in our congregations to use their gifts for the good of everyone in the community?

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