

Anglican-Lutheran Society Conference

Turku, Finland, September 2009

Laura Lincoln is a member of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). She lives near Austin, Texas and has been involved in the ecumenical movement for the past thirty years. She has served as a professor of Christian Worship, a campus minister, and a director of religious education, most recently as a consultant and interim minister in her synod.

Her presentation to her group was entitled

Keeping Connected - United States

There are many things that I could talk about this morning with relation to the grass roots level of Keeping Connected in the United States; however, there are two topics that I think are timely and particularly important. The first is the need and challenge of continuing communication during difficult times; the second is clarity of message and identity.

Just a few weeks ago, the ELCA's church-wide assembly (our legislative and policy making body) voted on several issues: we are now in full communion with the United Methodist Church. This makes our fifth full communion partner (United Church of Christ; Presbyterian Church, USA; Episcopal Church, USA; Reformed Church of America; Moravian). This action was passed overwhelmingly and caused very little concern. Overshadowing this ecumenical advance was the vote on both a social statement on human sexuality, and the votes on recommendations which would allow gay and lesbian persons in monogamous, long-term relationships to serve on the roster of the ELCA. There was also passed a recommendation to develop a blessing service for these relationships.

Also this summer, the ECUSA passed a resolution to allow committed gay and lesbian persons to serve the church at all levels, thus lifting a moratorium on the consecration of gay bishops.

In June of 2008, the Presbyterian Church USA forwarded on such a resolution to its local presbyteries. It has yet to be ratified.

Despite the shared challenges facing our denominations, our full communion partners, we are not overtly talking about these things together. When feeling threatened, groups tend to turn in on themselves in a protectionist move. Their connections with outsiders

and past openness tend to wane. There is only so much energy leaders have, so it is spent internally. Unfortunately, we could actually gain support and hope from one another by taking a larger view.

There is always a controversy whether it is the introduction of a new hymnal, the ordination of women, the changing language of the liturgy, or now the inclusion of homosexual persons in rostered ministry. Talking and working with our full communion partners during both times of hope and energy as well as times of controversy and challenge is so important. It provides us with a larger canvas and a sense of proportion. It reminds us of history and survival in the midst of change.

Today our challenge in keeping connected comes in the midst of changing sensibilities about denominations and the influence of technology. Post denominationalism is a shift away from ethnic roots and identities which once defined denominational culture in the United States, towards using the church for services like day care and youth group that are convenient/needed/wanted. Ecumenism has worked in that the barriers between many denominations are much more porous, but the upshot is that theological identity is also shifting to accommodate an individualistic sensibility rather than one emphasizing collectivism and heritage/tradition. There is a blending happening in the “emerging church” movement wherein people are deliberately trying to set aside denominational labels and move into a focus on “the purpose driven church”, with its “lifestyle based on God's eternal purposes, not cultural values”.

- **Knowing** : You were planned for God's pleasure, so your first purpose is to offer true worship.
- **Relating** : You were formed for God's family, so your second purpose is to enjoy true fellowship.
- **Growing** : You were created to become like Christ, so your third purpose is to learn real discipleship.
- **Serving** : You were shaped for serving God, so your fourth purpose is to practice real ministry.
- **Sharing** : You were made for a mission, so your fifth purpose is to live out real evangelism.

The technologies of blogging, texting, twittering, video streaming, etc., are changing our culture's idea of what it means to be in community. We don't need to be in the same room, building, or even country to connect online. While these connections are still awkward or unknown to many of the church's leaders, it is the norm for my children. The way we come together is changing. What does this mean for how we go about congregational life?

These are challenges to us. What do we mean by “ecumenism” in the face of these shifting sensibilities and identities? It seems that while we pursue formal agreements and relationships like full communion, the members of these participating denominations do not themselves identify with just one form of Christianity. Is this what we hoped to accomplish? Do we have ecumenism achieved, or do we have indifference?

Another element in the American culture is the presence of a politically-flavored so-called American Christianity. Public media refer to “Christian” as if there is only one kind and it is fundamentalist, evangelical, and understands the Bible from a literal perspective. This absorption of an American triumphalism Christianity into popular culture language means that even mainline denominations which practice infant baptism as a sacrament find that they have members who believe that they must be “born again” and “accept Jesus as their personal Lord and Savior” in order to be saved. This doctrine of decision of the so-called American Christianity flies in the face of Lutheran theology of justification. Nevertheless, there are many people who say they are Lutheran but in actuality have been influenced by this fundamentalist, evangelical sensibility. To the degree that ecumenism demands a clear sense of who one is in order to represent that self/theology/identity to the other, then this kind of misunderstanding of denominational teachings is a great problem.

Ironically, this muddle does present leaders with a teaching moment -- an opportunity for checking in with their people to see what they really believe. Too often we gather for the usual rituals and activities that keep a congregation working, but don't actually share discussions of faith with one another. Helping our own membership to be able to articulate what it means to be Lutheran, or Episcopalian, or Methodist, for that matter, makes it possible for them to engage in conversation with other Christians from a place of security, without feeling threatened by the reality that not every believes in God the same way, and more comfortable with the paradox that we all might be correct in our own ways.

In the midst of disintegrating denominational identity, creeping fundamentalism and protectivist exclusivity, those of us activity involved in grass-roots ecumenical relationships can provide the witness and model that the rest of the larger church needs very much right now.

Reconciled diversity -- how we can stay together, be ourselves, and celebrate our variety without pushing for uniformity -- this is precisely what the church needs.

People ask why we need to worry about ecumenism any more. I think this is our answer: to model unity to the world and to show that we are united in Christ. Our faith must rest in trust in God rather than in our own efforts.

It is very important that we keep connected as we address every issue that comes our way. The most destructive force in American culture at the moment is a tendency to label everyone who doesn't agree with me as my enemy. This insistence on demonizing those with different perspectives and seeing every issue as a black and white dichotomy may indeed be one of the most sinful practices of our day. The gospel calls us to a different way - grass roots and formal ecumenical efforts, keeping connected, building relationships across boundaries and allowing for the possibility of a future that is richer because we work to include a variety of voices.