

THE ROLE OF  
THE AUGUSTANA EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH  
IN AMERICAN LUTHERAN UNITY

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## INTRODUCTION

The picture of American Lutheranism in the early twentieth century is a confusing one to say the least. The church bodies which called themselves Lutheran were divided into synods too numerous to mention. The reasons for these numerous divisions were doctrinal differences and differences in national background and origin. Once these Lutheran bodies had broken the ties with Europe the next natural step of course was to try to unite these American Lutherans into one organized church. In 1930 American Lutheranism was divided into two organizational groups, the National Lutheran Council and the Synodical Conference. The Synodical Conference represented a rather stable conservative brand of Lutheranism at this time. But there was trouble and disunity brewing within the National Lutheran Council. The United Lutheran Church had taken on the historical critical view of Scripture and exercised a liberal attitude toward lodges and unionism. Other National Lutheran Council members, especially the American Lutheran Church and the Norwegian Lutheran Church had not yet adopted such viewpoints and became distrustful of the United Lutheran Church. This led to the formation of the American Lutheran Conference in 1930 by five midwestern Lutheran churches which still retained membership in the National Lutheran Council. So the 1930's saw Lutheranism settle into three general groups. The first group, represented mainly by the United Lutheran Church, symbolized the most liberal end of American Lutheranism. This liberal faction of the Lutherans was counter-balanced on the other side by the conservative Synodical Conference represented mainly by the Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod. In the middle of these two groups was the American Lutheran Conference.

One of the members of the American Lutheran Conference, the Augustana Synod, played a rather interesting and significant role in the Lutheran

unity efforts of these years. In fact since its formation in 1860, the Augustana Synod pointed toward Lutheran merger. For forty-eight years Augustana's membership in the General Council provided fellowship and service with the United Lutheran Church. Even in 1930 when Augustana joined the American Lutheran Council, a resolution was passed expressing hope for eventual cooperation even with the United Lutheran Church. This paper will attempt to show Augustana's role in the efforts toward Lutheran unity. Upon examination of this role it will be noted that the Augustana Synod indeed was pointed toward a merger almost from its very beginning.

#### EFFORTS FOR UNION WITHIN THE AMERICAN LUTHERAN CONFERENCE

The early forties saw a reawakening spirit of Lutheran unity as various conferences and meetings were held discussing unity and cooperation in various social concerns especially during the war. As was mentioned before, Augustana for many years dealt cooperatively with other synods through its participation in the General Council. In the thirties and forties Augustana viewed itself as a mediator between the two factions in the National Lutheran Council - the United Lutheran Church and the American Lutheran Conference. Augustana showed itself ready and willing to lead the way for Lutheran unity. In a meeting of the American Lutheran Conference in Minneapolis in November 1940, Augustana expressed its feelings in the following way.

The Spirit of fellowship and cooperation which we have enjoyed these ten years convinces us that the American Lutheran Conference offers to the Lutherans of America the best answer to the problem of church unity. Not only does it occupy a middle ground between the other two major divisions of the Lutheran Church, but its form of organization, which preserves complete autonomy for the constituent groups, affords a basis for a genuine federal union of all Lutherans. Organic union at this time appears rather remote, but a fed-

eration of Lutherans is well within the realm of attainment.<sup>1</sup>

So the Augustana Synod viewed itself to be in the ideal position to mediate between the liberal and conservative extremes of American Lutheranism and lead the way for unity of these two factions. Augustana showed a great deal of enthusiasm and optimism for Lutheran unity in these early years. Augustana felt very strongly that American Lutheranism needed to present a united front to the world instead of a splintered group of fighting factions. Also financial waste by duplicating and overlapping of programs could be avoided. This feeling was especially heightened as World War II approached and the churches became involved in the many social concerns connected with the war. These concerns were viewed as the perfect opportunity to present a united front and cooperative effort. As early as 1941 Augustana expressed optimism regarding the involvement of even the conservative Missouri Synod in Lutheran unity. "Even the Missouri Synod, which has often been accused of being separatistic, has begun to show a marked degree of impatience with certain groups with which it is associated in the Synodical Conference who stubbornly insist on clinging to their traditional isolation."<sup>2</sup> The Synodical Conference was a thorn in the flesh for Augustana when it came to its hopes for unity. The Synodical Conference represented conservatism and non-unionistic tendencies. So Augustana would have loved nothing more than to see Missouri break away from the Synodical Conference and come join the cause for Lutheran unity. So whenever disruption or disunity arose within the Synodical Conference, (as it did many times in the forties and fifties)

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<sup>1</sup>E. E. Ryden, "Conference Closes Ranks For Action," The Lutheran Companion, Vol. XLVIII, (Nov. 28, 1940), p. 1507.

<sup>2</sup>E. E. Ryden, "Lutheran Editors Discuss Unity," The Lutheran Companion, Vol. XLIX, (Oct. 9, 1941), p. 1155.

Augustana was most pleased to report it. Augustana expressed much animosity toward the Wisconsin Synod by proclaiming it to be isolationistic, separatistic and to show no growth or vitality for anything but starting theological arguments. For Augustana, Wisconsin was a barrier in the way of total Lutheran unity.

Lutheran unity gained new hope in January of 1942 when the National Lutheran Council met in Pittsburgh. At this meeting a plan was formulated for a federation of all Lutheran bodies in America. The Lutheran Companion, the official weekly publication of the Augustana Synod, reported this with a great deal of enthusiasm. "This plan, if it is consummated, will link together more than five million confessing Lutherans in an organization which would use the National Lutheran Council as its working agency in cooperative enterprises of the Church."<sup>3</sup> Anyone who does any reading in Augustana's publication from these years will notice an emphasis upon numbers and size of synods as this preceding quote indicates. Large numbers apparently were considered impressive by Augustana in presenting Lutheranism to the world. The larger the Lutheran group united, the better it would be.

The National Lutheran Editors Association wrote a letter to the National Lutheran Council at Pittsburgh in support of their efforts. The letter was signed by E. E. Ryden, editor of The Lutheran Companion. The following expressed the feelings of those involved.

We are firmly convinced that the present desperate crisis in world affairs presents a definite challenge to the Lutheran Church in America to close its ranks and to meet the problems now confronting it with a united front. We are persuaded that nothing will serve to provide greater inspiration to the rank and file of our Church in their response to the appeal which is shortly to be made on

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<sup>3</sup>E. E. Ryden, "Plan For Lutheran Unity Is Launched," The Lutheran Companion, Vol. L, (Feb. 12, 1942), p. 195.

behalf of orphaned missions and spiritual ministry to service men than the realization that at long last definite steps are under way to bring about unity among the Lutheran forces of our land.<sup>4</sup>

In November 1942 the American Lutheran Conference met in Rock Island, Illinois. The Conference urged its members to invite into pulpit and altar fellowship those Lutheran groups with whom they were not then in fellowship. This resolution was largely the work of E. E. Ryden, Peter O. Bersell, the president of Augustana and Conrad Bergendoff, editor of The Lutheran Quarterly, another Augustana publication. But this resolution was met with opposition from the Norwegian Lutheran Church which resented Augustana's eagerness for unity and feared the liberal position of the United Lutheran Church. This opposition by the Norwegians was indicative of two factions beginning to take shape in the American Lutheran Conference which was foreshadowing a change which would eventually take place in Augustana's course toward Lutheran unity.

On the basis of the recommendation from the 1942 meeting of the American Lutheran Conference, the Overture for Lutheran Unity was presented. The Overture called attention to various doctrinal statements of church bodies and declared them to be in essential agreement and that no further doctrinal statements were necessary for unity. Augustana reacted this way:

If the Overture is adopted by the St. Paul convention, as seems quite probable, it will become the basis on which the Synod will seek establishment of pulpit and altar fellowship with other Lutheran groups. Such fellowship already exists with the other four constituent bodies of the American Lutheran Conference, and a tacit understanding exists between the Augustana Synod and the United Lutheran Church, which is the result of the former membership of our Synod in the old General Council.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid. p. 195.

<sup>5</sup>E. E. Ryden, "Synod Will Face Unity Question," The Lutheran Companion, Vol. LII, (May 31, 1944), p. 3.

As expected, Augustana adopted this Overture at its 1944 convention.

For the next couple years efforts at Lutheran unity seemed to stagnate somewhat. The impatience of Augustana is exemplified in the following.

The Augustana Synod has proved again and again that it is in dead earnest about this business of Lutherans getting together. And it wants something more than mere resolutions phrased for the most part in pious platitudes. A 'sinful waste' of funds and manpower in the work of the Church is something hard to justify. It calls for definite steps on the part of every Lutheran general body to find the remedy for such a situation.<sup>6</sup>

Then in January 1949 representatives of the American Lutheran Conference met. The Evangelical Lutheran Church representatives spoke critically of the United Lutheran Church because of its liberal doctrine and practice. So the division within the American Lutheran Conference was growing wider and wider. In this same month Dr. P. O. Bersell, president of the Augustana Synod, called a meeting of the "Committee of Thirty-four" which included the presidents of the eight bodies of the National Lutheran Council. Out of this meeting came the two-fold proposal that the eight bodies declare themselves in favor of organic union and before such a union a federation be formed. Once again enthusiasm and optimism arose in Augustana. The following statements from The Lutheran Companion express Augustana's optimism and pride in her own leadership in the drive for unity.

On the basis of that decision, and unless unforeseen difficulties should arise, it may now be stated with a considerable degree of certainty that some form of organizational union involving two-thirds of the Lutherans of America is definitely on the way.<sup>7</sup>

If any credit for human leadership should be given, it ought to go to the president of the Augustana Lutheran

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<sup>6</sup>E. E. Ryden, "Synod Makes New Unity Proposal," The Lutheran Companion, Vol. LIV, (Dec. 25, 1946), p. 3.

<sup>7</sup>E. E. Ryden, "Definite Move Is Made Toward Lutheran Unity," The Lutheran Companion, Vol. LVII, (Jan. 19, 1949), p.3.

Church for the wise direction and constructive suggestions he gave to the meeting.<sup>8</sup>

The membership of the Augustana Lutheran Church may also experience a sense of gratitude that it was their own Church that assumed the initiative in promoting the conference, and that the first meeting was held in the Augustana church headquarters. Perhaps no more historic meeting than that which was held on January 4 will ever occur within its walls.<sup>9</sup>

Even Luther Youngdahl, the governor of Minnesota and a lay delegate to the meeting got into the act with the following statement.

"I am sure," said the Minnesota chief executive, "that if the laymen of our various groups could meet together, it would not be difficult for us to reach agreement. I can't for the life of me understand why we should delay getting together. Haven't we been praying for this for years? Are we ourselves frustrating God's will? Personally I have not heard a single valid argument to support our divisions, and I can find nothing in the teachings of our Lord to justify the present situation. We are confronted today by a definite challenge, and I am convinced that we will be held to account for our attitude on this question. The time has come for some decisive action. We should go back to our church bodies and report we have made definite progress in the direction of unity."<sup>10</sup>

It would be about a year and a half before any significant action was taken on this proposal by the various bodies of the National Lutheran Council. But in the meantime the following interesting sidelight appeared in The Lutheran Companion concerning Lutheran union. The Lutheran congregations of Red Wing, Minnesota joined together on Sunday evenings in the fall to worship together. This practice had started some years before when the attendance was even greater. The reason for the decline in attendance also helps to point out Augustana's attitude toward the Wisconsin Synod's fellowship principles.

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid. p. 3.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid. p. 3.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid. p. 3.



The reason for this was that St. John's Lutheran Church of the Wisconsin Synod also cooperated in the joint project at the time. The late Rev. J. R. Baumann, a venerable pastor who had shepherded St. John's for some forty years, had learned to know and to appreciate his fellow Lutherans of Red Wing, and he also believed that much would be gained if Lutherans stood shoulder to shoulder and worked together.

But good old Pastor Baumann grew too old to carry on his ministry and had to retire. About a year later he died. The youthful and zealous pastor who succeeded him had other ideas. The Wisconsin Synod's strict isolation policy had to be carried out to the letter. His edict was that his flock could not worship and pray with other Lutherans. And that was that.

The facetious remark is sometimes heard in various quarters that "a few more funerals will take care of the problem of Lutheran unity." The inference is that the "old guard" and "die-hards" are blocking the way to Lutheran understanding. It is not true. At least, it was not true in this case. Many years in the ministry usually do something for a man. For one thing, they give him an increasing appreciation of genuine spiritual qualities in his fellow Christians, no matter where he may find them, and they teach him also not to "strain at a gnat and swallow a camel." But men of big souls like Pastor Baumann, alas, do not live forever.<sup>11</sup>

But what happened to the unity proposal of the National Lutheran Council? From Augustana's point of view the results were not good. The picture became clouded even before the respective conventions were able to vote on it. Three members of the American Lutheran Conference - the Evangelical Lutheran Church, the American Lutheran Church and the United Evangelical Lutheran Church moved to form a merger. The negative attitude of the Evangelical Lutheran Church toward the United Lutheran Church seemed to be one of the motivating factors in this move which indicated a rejection of the National Lutheran Council's proposal. But Augustana could see the handwriting on the wall. Their hope for organic union of the eight-member National Lutheran Council was failing.

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<sup>11</sup>E. E. Ryden, "Stress Lutheran Unity On Reformation Day," The Lutheran Companion, Vol. LVII, (Nov. 16, 1949), p. 3.

Suddenly Augustana saw itself with no union hopes with either the United Lutheran Church or the American Lutheran Conference. The following astute comment was made. "It would be one of the ironies of history if the Augustana Lutheran Church, which has always been in the forefront in urging a united American Lutheranism, should eventually find itself walking alone."<sup>12</sup>

The majority of the National Lutheran Council bodies voted against this measure in 1950. The only remaining union movement was the one by the United Evangelical Lutheran Church for an organic union of the American Lutheran Conference. Augustana was disappointed at its failure in efforts for unity in the National Lutheran Council. So it became apparent to Augustana that their course for Lutheran unity would have to change.

#### A PERIOD OF INDECISION

What would Augustana do now? There was still hope in September 1950 that the remaining two members of the American Lutheran Conference - Augustana and the Lutheran Free Church - might join in the proposed merger plans. Augustana obviously felt slighted by the original proposal of the three bodies of the American Lutheran Conference. They also were angered that the merger was not open to all Lutheran bodies. The following response was made concerning the three-way merger and the possible addition of Augustana and the Lutheran Free Church.

The Church hereby offers to enter into negotiations with with any or all of the constituent bodies of the American Lutheran Conference, as well as any other Lutheran body which holds that the Bible is the Word of God and adheres loyally to the Unaltered Augsburg Confession and the other historical confessions of the Lutheran Church with a view to discussing additional definite steps

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<sup>12</sup>E. E. Ryden, "Lutheran Unity Issue At Washington Synod," The Lutheran Companion, Vol. XGV, (June 7, 1950), p. 7.

that might lead to closer organizational unity in American Lutheranism.<sup>13</sup>

But Augustana could never have been satisfied with the five-way merger of the American Lutheran Conference.

However Augustana could not become reconciled to the fact that the proposed five way merger falls far short of the ideal of real Lutheran unity. It would have embraced only one-third of those who bear the name of Lutheran in America. It failed to include other Lutheran bodies with whom we have worked and worshipped for many years. And it did not invite into the union still other Lutheran groups with whom we would rejoice to work and worship. In other words it was not a perfect union.<sup>14</sup>

So merger with the American Lutheran Conference appeared doubtful for Augustana. The thought arose then that the Augustana Synod might best serve the interests of Lutheran unity as a persistent advocate of unity and as a mediator between the two factions of the National Lutheran Council. Whatever the case, Augustana would have to decide at its 1952 convention whether to join the American Lutheran Conference merger or go it alone or to seek a closer relationship with the United Lutheran Church. Merger with the American Lutheran Conference was viewed as a lesser union and second choice, but it was also understood that the lesser union might be the best for the time until a great union would be possible. On the other hand it was argued that a merger of the American Lutheran Conference would delay further union for a generation. The question was debated by various members of the synod until some basic conclusions began to surface. It seemed to be generally agreed that no further participation on the American Lutheran Conference level was desirable if certain Lutheran bodies were automatically omitted. In the meantime Augustana seemed content to go it alone while calling for more discussions on the National

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<sup>13</sup>E. E. Ryden, "Conference May Move Toward Organic Union," The Lutheran Companion, Vol. XCV, (Nov. 29, 1950), p. 7.

<sup>14</sup>E. E. Ryden, "Augustana's Lutheran Unity Challenge," The Lutheran Companion, Vol. XCII, (July 30, 1950). p. 7.

Lutheran Council level. And then if any step is finally taken it would be in direction of merger with the United Lutheran Church.

The 1952 Augustana Convention was held in Des Moines, Iowa. Augustana reported to the Joint Union Committee of the American Lutheran Conference that it was unwilling to continue in unity discussions that were not open to all Lutheran bodies. It requested the other Lutheran bodies of the American Lutheran Conference and the Joint Union Committee to invite all other Lutheran bodies to participate in further negotiations. In the fall of 1952 the Joint Union Committee indicated that it could not meet the conditions of Augustana's request. Therefore any possible participation by Augustana in a five-way American Lutheran Conference merger was brought to an end. It was clear that Augustana's approach to Lutheran unity must take another direction. A chapter in Lutheran unity efforts had come to a close.

#### EFFORTS FOR UNION WITH THE UNITED LUTHERAN CHURCH AND OTHERS

One might think that after all this Augustana's enthusiasm for Lutheran union would have been severely diminished. But nothing could be further from the truth. Union efforts once again began on the widest possible plain. Therefore the invitation went out from Augustana to join in negotiations.

Therefore, it is our conviction that the Augustana Lutheran Church by tradition, by relationships with other Lutheran bodies, by consistency of action, has a right to address this earnest plea to all Lutheran bodies. Let's at least open doors wide for unlimited discussion so that those groups which can and should get together, may have an opportunity to do so.<sup>15</sup>

On March 28, 1955 a meeting was held in Chicago between representatives of the Augustana Synod and the United Lutheran Church. At this meeting a Uni-

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<sup>15</sup>S. E. Engstrom, "Augustana's Position on Unity," The Lutheran Companion, Vol. C-GI, (March 2, 1955), p. 13.

ted Lutheran Church proposal was presented to join in issuing invitations to all other Lutheran church bodies to participate in merger discussions. Thus Augustana's desire was fulfilled that Lutheran unity discussions be open to all and not only to some selected few. Augustana's unity hopes were so optimistic after this invitation from the Chicago meeting that it prompted the following concerning eventual total Lutheran unity.

Such an eventual goal, of course, would also demand the inclusion of Missouri and Wisconsin; but miracles have happened before in the history of the Church, and they may happen again.<sup>16</sup>

Considering Augustana's opinion of the Wisconsin Synod, the statement was indeed an optimistic one!

The 1955 convention of Augustana in St. Paul, Minnesota almost unanimously accepted the Chicago proposal. So Augustana's new course of action in Lutheran unity was now becoming clear. A new optimism and renewed zeal came to Augustana's efforts as indicated by the following words of Dr. Benson, president of Augustana.

We of Augustana are definitely committed to continuing negotiations with the ULC, looking toward organic union, and I might add that there is every prospect of such a union being consummated. This, of course, is all predicated on our ability to reach final agreement in our discussions.<sup>17</sup>

Once Augustana had established clearly her course for Lutheran unity, merger came rather quickly and without many obstacles. The future Lutheran Church in America took shape quickly. The invitation extended from the United Lutheran Church and Augustana was accepted by the American Evangelical Lutheran Church and the Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Church. In 1956 the United Lutheran Church president delivered a statement on Lutheran unity

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<sup>16</sup>E. E. Ryden, "Union Prospects Brighter," The Lutheran Companion, Vol. CII, (Jan. 11, 1956), p. 7.

<sup>17</sup>E. E. Ryden, "Agree On Momentous Merger," The Lutheran Companion, Vol. CII, (Jan. 4, 1956) p. 3.

that was recognized as an unofficial charter for the new church. In December of that same year, the representatives from the four church bodies met to form the Joint Commission on Lutheran Unity. This group worked for five and a half years working out the details for the merger. At the conference meetings of the Augustana Synod during the spring of 1961, an overwhelming affirmative vote to the question of the merger was given. Thus Augustana had taken the final step toward to merger. The four groups met in Detroit in June 1962 to officially form the New Lutheran Church in America. The Lutheran Church in America began its actual operation on January 1, 1963.

#### CONCLUSION

Augustana seemed to give up its identity for the sake of Lutheran unity without too many regrets. Someone who feels any amount of pride or spirit for his own synod might find Augustana's enthusiasm for merger somewhat unusual. But upon closer examination one finally does realize that the greater part of Augustana's existence was dedicated to Lutheran unity. It appears that Augustana was destined for merger. The following poem by Victor E. Beck on the cover of the December 26, 1962 issue of The Lutheran Companion, the last issue of the periodical, seems to express Augustana's feelings well.

#### AUGUSTANA

From Sweden's shores a forward-looking band,  
Their fortunes seeking, came to this fair land.  
Not wealth of gold or silver did they bring.  
Their riches did not lie in anything  
Material; and yet, abundant wealth  
Was theirs: of faith, of hope, of health  
Had they a rich, full measure; and they brought  
Their Bibles and their Hymnals, and they thought  
Of God and of His Church. In this new land  
Churches were built by many a willing hand,  
Where worshipers in fellowship could meet,  
As in their homeland, at the Saviour's feet.

## MERGER

Now Augustana is in merger lost,  
Her very self, her very name, the cost.

## NEW LIFE

The grain of wheat that falls into the ground,  
And dies, in plenteous harvest will abound.  
Thus Augustana's "last"  
With all its glorious past,  
Is but a "first," to larger life reborn,  
With visions of a new and greater morn.

That "a new and greater morn" has dawned for confessional Lutheranism in the Lutheran Church in America is unfortunately rather doubtful. But Augustana had gained what it wanted - at least partly anyway. Total Lutheran unity was still hoped for as can be seen from the final Lutheran Companion.

And so, through such a series of events, Augustana's life now finds rich fulfillment in the life of the new Lutheran Church in America. Across the years doors were closed, and doors were opened. Augustana was led thereby to take the path it took and thus to become a part of this new Lutheran church body. Let us thank God for what has been done, and ask that He continue to guide all Lutheran bodies to bring into being that church of evangelical confession which will include all those who carry the name Lutheran.<sup>18</sup>

Augustana's ultimate dream has not been fulfilled. Whether it ever will be remains to be seen.

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<sup>18</sup>Marvin H. Lundeen, "Since Its Birth Augustana Has Pointed To Merger," The Lutheran Companion, Vol. CVIII, (Dec. 26, 1962), p. 24.

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