

An Open Letter to Mr. Daniel J. Lehmann
Editor, *The Lutheran*, Magazine of the ELCA
8765 W. Higgins Rd.
Chicago, IL 60631

Dear Sir..

I am writing in response to your editorial in the October 2010 issue of *The Lutheran*, the magazine of the ELCA. In that editorial you write about the formation of a new Lutheran church body, the North American Lutheran Church. You make a number of statements that are either petty or untrue, creating a false impression.

1) You observe that “the NALC becomes, in the eyes of this magazine, one more Lutheran denomination” and you assert that “*The Lutheran* won’t give it any special coverage just because of its heritage.” Why not? *The Lutheran* should serve the people of the ELCA and not only the bureaucracy at Higgins Road. The NALC is composed entirely of congregations and pastors who left behind many close friends and relatives in the ELCA. The NALC is therefore not just another Lutheran church body, no matter what you say. It will always have a special relationship to the ELCA as “a chip off the old block.” Don’t you think the people of the ELCA deserve to be kept informed about what their friends and relatives are experiencing in the NALC? Your response is pitifully petty, a mere defensive reaction born of resentment.

2) You observe that “the magazine turned down an advertisement sought by organizers of the NALC gathering. It promoted a theological symposium that served as a run-up to the constituting convention.” These statements are half-truths. As a journalist you should pay attention to the pesky little things called “facts.” I was the initiator and coordinator of the theological conference, “Seeking New Directions for Lutheranism.” I know what happened, down to every detail. The fact is that Lutheranism in North America has been and is theologically in disarray, in a state of confusion. My idea was to ask CORE to sponsor a free theological conference for *all* Lutherans, to discuss the identity and future of Lutheranism with integrity in an ecumenical age. When this conference was planned and announced, there was not a hint about the formation of a new church body. The theological conference was announced at the CORE assembly in September, 2009, Fishers, Indiana, at which time there was no proposal for a new church body on the table. Our theological conference was organized as a function of CORE, pure and simple. What possible objection could you as a journalist or editor have to that, unless you had already taken the side of the bureaucrats in the church struggle that led to the 2009 ELCA assembly in Minneapolis? The fact that the organization of the NALC took place chronologically soon after the theological conference was an after-thought. The advertisement that you turned down was sought by the officers of CORE and not by the organizers of the NALC, as you suggest. The ad was for a conference sponsored by CORE. Not a single word suggested anything about creating a new church body. When we planned the conference, selected the speakers, and produced the brochure, we knew nothing about the NALC, nor was it on anyone’s radar screen.

3. You observe that “many if not all of those involved were still on the ELCA roster, but their actions were schismatic.” Now, as a self-professed schismatic yourself, you should know from experience that neither the conference itself nor any of the speakers were guilty of actions that were schismatic. Who are you to judge that their actions were schismatic? All of the speakers are ordained ministers of the ELCA and have served for decades as professors of theology at its colleges or seminaries, in some cases more than 50 years. Neither the theme nor the aim of the conference was to call for or to promote the creation of a new church body. We are all church theologians and not church politicians. We covered the *loci* of Lutheran dogmatics -- the authority and interpretation of Scripture, the doctrine of the Trinity, the centrality of Christ, the nature and purpose of the Church, Christian ethics, and so forth. The Lutheran theology embedded in these lectures stands on its own feet, and does not ride piggy-back on the church-political actions to start a new church. You should know that theologians who promise to serve the whole church of Jesus Christ are not beholden to the officials of any Protestant denomination. Over the years all of us speak across the ecumenical spectrum, at Catholic, Orthodox, Baptist, and Evangelical institutions. Is there something un-Lutheran or un-churchly about that? Now that the NALC is organized, as theologians we are free to speak at its events, just as we are free to speak at any non-ELCA Lutheran church bodies. That may be too difficult to grasp by those who think and act as though church theologians should be the functionaries of church bureaucrats who manipulate the levers of power. If Martin Luther were here, he might say with Yogi Berra, “It’s *déjà vu* all over again.”

4. You ask “why would the magazine assist with highlighting an event aimed at distracting, if not undermining, the ELCA?” What do you know about the aim of the theological conference? The brochure states the aim this way: “This theological conference will reaffirm the original aim of Lutheranism to be a reforming movement within the whole church that is both evangelical in preaching and orthodox in doctrine. Each of the presenters will focus on a particular article of faith at risk in Lutheranism today and spell out what we confess on the basis of Holy Scripture, the ancient Creeds, and the Lutheran Confessions. We invite all Lutherans in North America to come together to reclaim the great tradition that witnesses faithfully to Jesus Christ, builds his Church on earth, and proclaims the Gospel of salvation to the nations.” Those are scary words, but only to heterodox revisionists moved by a different spirit and loyal to different principles and standards.

More than eight hundred persons attended the theological conference. You were invited too. Editors from non-Lutheran magazines chose to attend, for example, *Christianity Today*, *Touchstone*, *inter alia*. You chose not to attend, even though it was a major theological event within the orbit of the ELCA. There is a reason for this, and we know what it is. Lutheranism began in history as a movement of critical theology, biblical and dogmatic. The lackeys of the church bureaucracy at that time were opposed to Luther and his reforming and renewing efforts. They could not tolerate criticism. All the theologians who spoke at the theological conference in Columbus, 2010, are responding to the

theological crisis in American Lutheranism. They have been critics of various aspects of the ELCA from its earliest beginnings, for example, the quota system, radical theological feminism, antinomianism, etc. The two “Call to Faithfulness Conferences” at St. Olaf College in 1990 and 1992 put the spotlight on a number of critical theological issues. Those who have ears to hear heard, and the rest plugged their ears.

Is there something un-Lutheran about raising voices in protest and criticism of false teachings and practices going on in the church? That’s what theologians do. Lutheran theologians have been doing that from the get-go. Understandably, then and now the church politicians don’t like to hear it. What is the mission of *The Lutheran*? Is the ELCA beyond criticism, so that critical theological voices should be ignored, muted, and regarded as schismatic? That is what the bureaucrats charged against Luther when they tried to muzzle him. Does *The Lutheran* have a greater obligation to heed the wishes of the bureaucrats of the ELCA than to hear the voices of its theologians? Do the bureaucrats who have served the ELCA for a few years have a greater right to address the ELCA than its theologians who have served its various educational institutions for many years?

A schism has occurred now. You seem to exhibit no understanding of what caused it. It’s not the case that a few pastors and congregations woke up one morning and said, “Hey, let’s start a new church? Wouldn’t that be fun?” Every historical event has a cause. We know what caused the schism. There would have been no schism except for the ELCA assembly decisions in Minneapolis, August, 2009. The game is now hard-ball and you have joined in, using the kind of tactics applied against you in that other schism to which you refer.

You end your editorial with a quotation from Luther: “The most dangerous sin of all is the presumption of righteousness.” Your editorial reeks with the kind of self-righteousness Luther had in mind.

My question to you is: As a journalist, why can’t you be fair to all parties involved in the debates and discussions going on within the ELCA? Why do you need to be a partisan beholden to its bureaucracy? If that is the mission of *The Lutheran*, maybe that explains why it has fewer and fewer subscribers and readers, as you yourself have acknowledged.

I am sending this as an “Open Letter,” because I do not expect to see it in *The Lutheran* magazine. Nor do I want it edited so as to make it say things I did not write. I have had that experience before.

Sincerely,

Carl E. Braaten

