

THE MINISTERIUM AMONG LUTHERANS IN AMERICA

In order to appreciate what value a ministerium might have for the cause of the Gospel today among Lutherans in North America, it would be helpful to understand the important role that this unique association of pastors played in the early history of American Lutheranism. The *ministerium* (as an association of pastors) was a rather unique ecclesiastical association among Lutherans - something born on American soil to retain a distinctively Lutheran identity. It was an organization that, early on, preserved and extended a Lutheran ministry among immigrant German Lutherans who settled in colonial Pennsylvania and adjacent regions. Indeed, the formation of what was first called the *Evangelical Lutheran Ministerium of North America* in 1748 by Henry Melchior Muhlenberg and five other pastors was characterized by August Graebner in 1892 as *the most important event of the Lutheran Church in America*.¹ His point was that it was that the first effort by American Lutheran pastors to form a permanent association to preserve a Lutheran understanding of the Gospel and extend the Evangelical Lutheran Church on American soil.

Threats to Early American Lutheran Ministry

Three major factors that threatened a distinctive Lutheran identity and ministry in colonial America led to the establishment of a ministerium among the Lutherans. (Perhaps you may see some parallels with our contemporary American Lutheran scene.) The first threat was Pietism. The influence of Pietism was a strong current among many German Lutherans in Pennsylvania who immigrated from Wurttemberg and the Palatinate. The tendency in Lutheran Pietism to relegate the Divine Service of Word and Sacrament to secondary importance over against the subjective religious experiences of the individual, made the confessional differences between the Lutherans and American protestant groups unimportant to many. The practice of unionism with Reformed, Anglican, and holiness bodies was common among many colonial Lutheran groups, especially among the Germans. Many German Lutherans influenced by Pietism's emphasis on personal religious experience and holiness of living were attracted to the spiritual fervor and ecumenical efforts of Count Nicholas von Zinzendorf. During the 1740s, Zinzendorf attempted to unite all German Christian groups - Lutheran, Mennonite, Reformed, Schwenkfelder, Moravian, and others into a single church - *The Congregation of God and the Spirit*. As soon as Muhlenberg was installed as pastor, he extricated all three of the congregations he served from the influence of Zinzendorf and the Moravians.²

¹ August L. Graebner, *Geschichte der Lutherischen Kirche in Amerika* (St. Louis, Concordia Publishing House, 1892), p. 313.

² Abdel Ross Wentz, *A Basic History of Lutheranism in America* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1964), p. 37.

Pietism had another corrupting influence on mid-eighteenth century German Lutheranism. Pietism encouraged the laity to become involved more directly in the governance and worship services of the congregation under the banner of the priesthood of all believers. It embraced a functional and utilitarian understanding of the Ministry of the Church and supported the common practice of "hiring" pastors on a one-year renewable contractual basis.³ Needless to say, the pastors objected strenuously to such arrangements.

Secondly, a distinctive Lutheran ministry in colonial America was threatened by the continuing presence and operation of "pretender" or "vagabond preachers" who were employed by many Lutheran groups desperate for the services of Word and Sacrament in the midst of a great clergy shortage. Many of these imposters were ex-ministers from Europe, defrocked for reasons of immorality or false doctrine. Others were unqualified indentured servants who made deals on the boat with Lutheran groups exchanging the cost of passage to North America for promised pastoral services.⁴ Many of these imposters would also privately ordain one another and then pass themselves off to unsuspecting Lutheran congregations as legitimate Lutheran pastors.

And thirdly, correlative to the problem of imposter clergymen, there was the tremendous shortage of regular and legitimate pastoral oversight. Many Lutheran groups, especially those outside the population centers, lacked the regular ministry of a called and ordained Lutheran pastor. There was a tremendous shortage of qualified, ordained Lutheran pastors during the 18th century in America. For example, there were only forty Lutheran pastors throughout all of North America to serve well over two-hundred Lutheran congregations in 1787. Most ordained pastors from the colonial period up to the beginning of the nineteenth century were supplied by Lutheran universities, mission societies, and agencies of European state churches. Needed were resources and methods to recruit, educate, and certify for ordination Lutheran pastors on American soil. With no Lutheran college or seminary in the colonies, early efforts involved individual pastors teaching theology and pastoral practice to individuals in their homes. At a certain point in their instruction, students were "licensed" to preach and administer the sacraments under the supervision of their tutor. This practice was generally approved and justified on the basis of the critical need for ministerial services amid the critical shortage of pastors.⁵ As a rather *ad hoc* enterprise, there was the recognized need to provide some acceptable standards and procedures for this practice. A common polity was also needed for the examination, certification, and ordination of pastoral candidates when they were deemed ready.

³ A. Wentz, *Lutheranism in America*, p. 46.

⁴ E. Clifford Nelson, ed., *The Lutherans in North America* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), p. 44.

⁵ E. Nelson, *The Lutherans in North America*, p. 46.

The Formation of the Pennsylvania Ministerium

Early efforts among Lutherans to enter into more formal associations with one another included a loose union of German Lutheran congregations in and around Philadelphia. In 1733, congregations in Philadelphia, Trappe and New Hanover formed what they called *The United Congregations*.⁶ Their association, in part, was intended to more effectively appeal to European mission societies for ministers and financial assistance. These efforts led to the arrival of Henry Melchior Muhlenberg from Halle in 1742 to serve three of the United Congregations in and around Philadelphia. Muhlenberg was the major impetus that pulled these congregations away from the radical influence and services of Zinzendorf and a number of free-lance imposter preachers. Influenced by his Halle schooling in missionary zeal and a relative Lutheran orthodoxy laced with Pietism (the Lutheranism of Johann Arndt's *True Christianity*, for example), Muhlenberg began his efforts to establish a distinctive Lutheranism on American soil by establishing Lutheran schools in each of his three congregations. Soon a fourth congregation in Germantown came under his charge.

For the next six years, Muhlenberg received young pastors and *catechists* from Halle and placed them in Lutheran congregations in rural eastern Pennsylvania and New Jersey.⁷ Most of his efforts to provide Lutheran pastors and teachers also involved extricating German Lutheran congregations from the pastoral services and influence of the Moravians and Zinzendorf's *Unitas Fratrum*. It was Muhlenberg who was the prime force behind the establishment of the first American Lutheran ministerium in 1748. Upon his invitation, a total of six ministers, ten delegates from churches that belonged to the United Congregations and most all of the parishioners of the churches served by Muhlenberg met on August 26, 1748 for the publicized purpose of approving a common liturgy that Muhlenberg had composed (Called the *Church Agenda*, this order of worship was basically what later has been called the *Common Service*.) and ordaining the now fully-instructed catechist from Halle, John Nicholas Kurtz. At this gathering, an informal organization of pastors was formed by Muhlenberg and his colleagues. The stated purpose was threefold: 1.) to provide a common defense against the influence of Zinzendorf and the Moravians, 2.) to consult with one another concerning the best establishment of each congregation served by the group, and 3.) to see that a common liturgy for Divine Service be observed by all. In this last regard, Muhlenberg's *Agenda* was adopted. All of these stated objectives could be summed up by the statement that the overriding purpose of the Ministerium was the preparation and oversight of ordained Lutheran pastors for the ministry of the Gospel to congregations in colonial

⁶ E. Nelson, *The Lutherans in North America*, p. 47.

⁷ The office of *catechist* was an auxiliary office to the pastoral office. It did not authorize preaching or administration of the sacraments, but rather the teaching of the faith in catechetical instruction. Catechists served under the supervision of the pastor. Interestingly, however, they were granted membership in the Pennsylvania Ministerium.

America. It was proposed that the Ministerium would meet once a year and lay representatives from the United Congregations would be welcome to attend and speak, but would have no vote.

This new association of pastors was considered by Muhlenberg as an experiment. Initially, it had no constitution, no officers, and no budget. The organization went by a host of descriptive names - the United Pastors, the Preacher's Conference, the Ministerial Conference, the United Reverend Ministerium. Most common was simply *the Ministerium*. It united pastors and their common ministry, not on the basis of nationality, but on the basis of doctrine and liturgy. Despite the tinge of pietism from their common connection with Halle, these pastors were committed to norming their ministry of the Gospel in Word and Sacrament by the Augsburg Confession.⁸ The commitments of the united pastors is perhaps best captured by the ordination vows made by candidate Kurtz at the organizational meeting:

*to teach in my congregation nothing, but what harmonizes with the Word of God and the Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church. . . . to introduce no other ceremonies in public worship, and the administration of the sacraments, than those introduced by "the College of Pastors" [Ministerium] of the United Congregations, and to use no other formulas than those which they approve, and to undertake nothing important either alone, or in connection with the Church Council, without communicating with "the College of Pastors" and receiving their opinion, and acquiescing to their advice.*⁹

Structure and rules came to the Ministerium from experience and example gradually and informally during its first few decades. At its third meeting in 1750, a president or superintendent and a secretary to record the minutes of the annual meetings were elected. In 1760, the president was charged with visiting and exercising supervision over the pastors and congregations between annual meetings.¹⁰ As the "senior" of the German ministers, Muhlenberg was usually elected president much to his weary regret in his last years. He once complained, *Pennsylvania will miss me sorely*

⁸ Lutheran pastors who had accused Muhlenberg of pietism (that he called *Orthodoxists*) were not invited to first meetings of the Ministerium. He accused these *Orthodoxists* of trying to adhere to the unaltered, Augsburg Confession *with unaltered hearts*. See E. Nelson, *The Lutherans in North America*, pp. 62-63. Muhlenberg and most of the pastors of the Ministerium thought that one of the most important elements of pastoral formation was inculcation of "scientific measures" - the cultivation of a rich heart-centered experience of Christ through holiness of living.

⁹ *Documentary History of the Evangelical Lutheran Ministerium of Pennsylvania and Adjacent States. Proceedings of the Annual Conventions from 1748 to 1821* (Philadelphia, 1898), p. 21 as cited in Richard C. Wolf, ed., *Documents of Lutheran Unity in America* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), pp. 21-22.

¹⁰ The Ministerium did not hold any meetings from 1755-59. Muhlenberg revived the organization and its annual meetings in 1760.

when I die, for I am almost like a privy to which all those with loose bowels come running from all directions to relieve themselves. Under Muhlenberg's leadership, the congregations were admonished to maintain harmony and friendship with one another and with the "fathers and spiritual patrons" of the old world. Over time, the Ministerium became progressively less dependent on Europe.

During the early years the united congregations were eager to acknowledge the authority of the Ministerium, in part, because of their dependence on it for the supply of qualified pastors. Characteristic of this recognition was the promise of the congregation in Stauchsburg in its application for a pastor in 1748: *to recognize the aforesaid pastors of the Evangelical Lutheran congregations in Pennsylvania as a true and regular presbytery and ministerium, and especially as our chief pastors, and to regard and respect them as such. Nor will we do, decide, resolve, or alter anything without their previous knowledge and consent.*¹¹ Needless to say, this kind of deference did not last long. The spirit of liberty and independence absorbed among the laity by the Revolution, the birth of the nation, and a somewhat easing of the clergy shortage, made congregations more independent of the Ministerium in their deliberations and preferences. A frequent bone of contention was the congregational desire to contract for pastoral services over against the Ministerium's demand to uphold the doctrine and sanctity of the Call. (Ahhh, some things never change!)

By the middle 1770s, there were increasing calls for a written constitution. Under the leadership of Muhlenberg's son-in-law, John C. Kunze, a constitution was finished in 1777 and adopted at the meeting of the Ministerium in 1781. Several elements of this first constitution are worthy of note. Each pastor professed *to hold the Word of God and our Symbolical Books in doctrine and life* in the conduct of their *Official and Other Relations* [Chapter Sixth]. They also pledged to use the commonly adopted liturgy of Muhlenberg, not to encroach upon another's office, and to introduce into each served congregation a constitution which was common among them and not in conflict with the constitution of the Ministerium. The Ministerium formally adopted a process of investigation and decision in adjudicating charges against member ministers and of licensure and ordination. Complaints subject to investigation included:

- A. *Positive errors opposed to the plain teachings of the Holy Scriptures and our Symbolical Books.*
- B. *Works of flesh . . . and offense given thereby.*
- C. *Faithlessness and slothfulness in the ministry, and, in case of a candidate, also in those matters which are known to be necessary for his further preparation.*
- D. *Neglecting attendance upon the meetings of Synod*
- E. *Bitterness of strife of ministers among themselves.*¹²

¹¹ *Documentary History, Ministerium*, p. 22, as cited in E. Nelson, *The Lutherans in North America*, p. 51.

¹² R. Wolf, *Documents of Lutheran Unity*, p. 28.

Furthermore, member pastors pledged to obey the Constitution and the resolutions of the Ministerium. They also promised to sever their association with the Ministerium **and** their Call to their congregation - and no longer exercise the functions of the Ministry to any other congregation in North America - should a two-thirds vote of the Ministerium declare the minister unfit for office.¹³ The official name in the Constitution was *The Evangelical Lutheran Ministerium of North America*. Since the Ministerium now served congregations that stretched from New Jersey and Virginia to Ohio and Kentucky, regional districts or conferences were formed for local meetings of conversation and mutual support between the Ministerium's annual meetings. This provision to deal with the great geographical distance encompassed by the growing Ministerium was not altogether successful.

The Eclipse of a Distinctive Lutheran Ministerium in America

As the Ministerium approached the beginning of nineteenth century, this unique organization and its purposes began to fade away. It lost its strong Lutheran doctrinal commitment and it lost the exclusive ministerial character of its organization. The constitutional provision for regional conferences or districts within the Ministerium soon led to the formation of independent Lutheran organizations. In 1792, Ministerium pastors from New York, together with some congregational lay representatives approved a constitution (also written by Kunze) for *the New York Ministerium* which was formed six years earlier. It incorporated some important changes in organization. First, the New York Ministerium was really a *ministerium* in name only. Its constitution granted both voice and vote to lay representatives from those congregations served by its pastors and therefore its organization was *synodical* rather than strictly ministerial. It was an organization of pastors and congregations. This essentially synodical organization in New York became the template for virtually all future American Lutheran church bodies for the next several decades even though the name *ministerium* would continue as a popular title. Secondly, while the Ministerium (in Pennsylvania) had three classes of ministers - ordained pastors, licentiates, and catechists - The New York Ministerium allowed only the first two (no office of catechist). Between 1787 and 1793 three other Lutheran associations were formed - all with a synodical polity - in South Carolina, in North Carolina, and Virginia. The Western District of the Ministerium became the Ohio Synod in 1817. The Synod of Maryland and Virginia was established in 1820.

In many ways, the 1790s began a four-decade period of what could well be called the *dark ages* of American Lutheranism. Much of American Lutheranism became more interested in blending with the general protestant makup of the American Church at the time than preserving and extending a Lutheran ministry of the Gospel. The Ministerium in Pennsylvania was reorganized in 1792 with a quasi-synodical polity. Under the provisions of a new constitution also written by Kunze, lay representatives as

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 27-28.

well as the clergy would have voice and vote at the annual “general meeting” of the Ministerium.¹⁴ Because the clergy feared being out-voted (since there were far more congregations than serving clergy), a complicated formula was adopted to see that there were never more lay delegates than clergy attending each annual meeting. The clergy and licensed candidates met separately after the general session for the “most important meeting” to deal with the usual matters of pastoral practice, clergy supervision, and the examination and ordination of pastoral candidates. At first, this constitutional revision simply modified the old Ministerium by providing some lay participation at a pre-conference session prior to the deliberations of the real business of the Ministerium. In time however, a full synodical polity held sway with most elements of the Ministerium’s business. In recognition of the New York Ministerium, the name was changed from the Lutheran Ministerium *of North America* to *the Evangelical Lutheran Ministerium of Pennsylvania and adjacent States* (or more commonly, the *Pennsylvania Ministerium*).

More important than the name change, however, the 1792 Constitution dropped any mention of Lutheran Confessions. Lutheran historians are divided about the significance of this omission at the time. Some downplay it by pointing to Kunze’s strong confessional commitments, particularly concerning Baptism and the Lord’s Supper. Nevertheless, all agree that the importance of a distinctive Lutheran understanding of the Gospel began to wane in the Pennsylvania Ministerium as throughout much of American Lutheranism during the first three decades of the 19th century. Citing the need to close ranks in order to effectively defend against the evils of Deism and Rationalism. Many pastors of the Pennsylvania Ministerium engaged in joint church work with the Reformed, the Episcopalians, the Moravians, and to a lesser extent, the Methodists. These activities included joint worship, the establishment of united Lutheran/Reformed congregations, joint church schools, and evangelistic outreach. The Ministerium officially authorized its pastors to commune the Reformed *in emergency situations*.

Revivalism grew in popularity among German Lutheran pastors and laity during the first three decades of the nineteenth century. While the Pennsylvania Ministerium officially advised its pastors to avoid revivalist camp meetings, it did not prevent them. Many of its pastors, ablaze with evangelistic zeal, saw the methods and dynamic of revivalism very attractive. This was especially true on the frontier. The success of the the camp meetings and revivals by Protestant groups achieved the visible results of just what the Lutheran leadership with pietist heritage wanted to see in the converted. As one Lutheran observer enthusiastically testified, . . . *even Deists were brought to*

¹⁴ The push for lay representation was presented by the members of the Zion and St. Michael’s in Philadelphia. These were Muhlenberg’s old established congregations and they had considerable influence. The American sentiments of *no taxation without representation* and the distrust of hierarchy were, no doubt, influential in this lay appeal. There seemed to have been little opposition by the clergy. cf. E. Nelson, *The Lutherans in North America*, pp. 84-85.

*confession in this way.*¹⁵ Hence, camp meetings and revivalist methods to produce decision-oriented conversions were popular among many mission-minded Lutherans. For the sake of the Gospel, many were ready to make common cause with other Christian groups in evangelistic outreach and fighting the evils of rationalism.¹⁶ Here we see in the early history of American Lutheranism a misperception of the Church's Gospel Ministry which confuses faithfulness with effectiveness - a neurotic burden for souls that exchanges the truth of the Gospel and sacraments for tangible results and numbers. At the same time, a Gospel reductionism was embraced to justify unionistic activities to confront what was seen as the greater evil of a secularizing rationalism. And that just shows you that *what goes around . . .* keeps going around.

In another vein, the supply of pastors from Europe to the Pennsylvania Ministerium had reduced to a trickle. The Ministerium did not ordain any candidates for the Ministry between 1792 and 1800. Viewing differences with the Reformed to be of diminished importance, The Pennsylvania Ministerium worked with the Reformed to establish a Lutheran/Reformed ministerial training program at their joint school, Franklin College.¹⁷ Although, it was never finalized, their efforts and priorities to this end served as a major factor in the decision of the Pennsylvania Ministerium to withdraw from the newly formed General Synod in 1823, a short two years after its formation. Joint theological education with a Reformed Synod close-at-hand was seen by many in the Ministerium as more valuable at the time than a more distant cooperative endeavor with Lutherans.

In summary, the residual effects of a long-standing pietist streak, the sense of threat by Deism and Rationalism, the impressive visible results of revivalistic evangelism methods, the critical need for pastors, and a willingness to relax and compromise its doctrinal commitments lead to the eventual loss of a distinctive confessional Lutheran ministry in the Pennsylvania Ministerium. With the exceptions of the Ohio and the Tennessee Synods, the Ministerium reflected the general character of most of American Lutheranism during the first three decades of the 19th century. These currents set the stage for the *New Measures* of Samuel Simon Schmucker's American Lutheranism and

¹⁵ Letter of V. A. Storch to Pr. Velthusen, February 25, 1803 as cited in E. Nelson, *The Lutherans in North America*, p. 107.

¹⁶ E. Nelson, *The Lutherans in North America*, pp. 107-08. Nelson also pointed out the close affinity between the residual pietist influence among the German Lutherans and the heart-centered emotional appeals of revivalist evangelism methods.

¹⁷ Franklin College of Lancaster, PA was jointly purchased by the Reformed Synod and the Pennsylvania Ministerium in 1787. Conversations and resolutions between the two bodies moved to establish a joint committee to plan and impliment a joint ministerial education program at the college eventually fell through due to internal strife and dissention within the Reformed Synod during the early 1820s.

the strong confessional reaction of Charles Porterfield Krauth and others . . . including the Pennsylvania Ministerium at mid-century.

A Reflection on the Lutheran Ministerium: Historical, Theological and Practical

The following is intended to provide some reflection - historical, theological and practical - on the use of the ministerium in the history of American Lutheranism with an eye to its value in serving the cause of the Ministry of the Gospel among Lutheran pastors today. First . . . a few historical observations. The ministerium played a unique, but brief role in the history of American Lutheranism. In its pure form, the ministerium was a polity only of the Pennsylvania Ministerium - and then, only for the first forty-five years of its 214 years of existence.¹⁸ In 1792, it began the transition to a synodical polity which became the more normative organization among Lutheran bodies up to this day. The Lutheran synod as an association of pastors and congregations was the fusion of what started as two independent but related associations - one of congregations (*the United Congregations*, 1733) and a parallel association of pastors (*the United Pastors*, 1748).

The ministerium was Muhlenberg's brainchild and his tireless work on its behalf was of tremendous importance in making it successful despite a shaky start. It began with six pastors and had twenty-something at the time of Muhlenberg's death in 1787. To what extent Muhlenberg was the driving force to keep a pure ministerial polity is not known. It is interesting to note, however, that the Ministerium transitioned into a synodical polity a short five years after he died. For its first 33 years, the Ministerium functioned with great simplicity. It only had two elected officers - a president and a secretary - no constitution, no operating budget, no full-time employees, and no payroll. In 1792 a treasurer was added to manage funds to cover office supplies and stamps. The president or superintendent (usually Muhlenberg) carried out a visitation and supervision of pastors and congregations on a volunteer basis while serving full-time his own congregations. Conditions were difficult. Most pastors in the Ministerium served multiple congregations, were poorly paid, and often served under harsh physical conditions. The Ministerium provided an important instrument for mutual support and encouragement; for building and maintaining a consensus in matters of doctrine, liturgy, and pastoral practice; and, for the examination, certification, and ordination of pastoral candidates.

Through the tireless efforts of Muhlenberg, the Pennsylvania Ministerium was a pastoral fellowship formed to preserve and promote Lutheran pastors and a distinctively Lutheran Ministry of Word and Sacrament to Lutheran congregations. In this regard,

¹⁸ The Pennsylvania Ministerium (founded in 1748) held membership at various periods of its existence in the General Synod (1821-23, 1852-66), the General Council (1867-1919), and the United Lutheran Church (1919-62). The Ministerium and all existing synods of the ULC were dissolved upon the formation of the Lutheran Church of America in 1962.

three major tasks were assumed by the ministerium for the spiritual care of their people. First, they banded Lutheran pastors together to promote a God-pleasing practice of Church fellowship while providing a united defense against unionism - particularly countering the unionistic activities of the German Moravians in Pennsylvania. The pastors kept their members away from Moravian meetings and gatherings, and their recruiters were made most unwelcome at their congregations. They taught their people a Lutheran understanding of the Gospel and warned them against Moravian errors. Secondly, the Ministerium adopted and implemented a common liturgy for the Divine Service of Word and Sacrament that truly reflected a Lutheran understanding of Gospel. Muhlenberg's *Agenda* was the commonly used liturgy throughout this period. It was essentially what would be adopted 100 years later as the Common Service in American Lutheranism. Thirdly, they examined and certified pastoral candidates for appropriate public ordination.

Secondly . . . some theological observations. Efforts to meet the demand for faithful Word and Sacrament Ministry amid a continuing critical shortage of pastors involved several strategies - some of which were rather theologically contradictory. On the one hand, the Ministerium did all it could to run off vagabond pastors and those who touted private unrecognized ordinations. This was done despite its inability to supply many German Lutheran groups with the regular ministry of a properly ordained Lutheran pastor. It was deemed better to have sparing pastoral services for God's people than to have them performed by those who did not legitimately hold the office. The Ministerium insisted that those who would exercise the Holy Office must be as the Augsburg Confession prescribes - *rite vocatus*. Over against these freelance preachers, they insisted that their congregations be served by pastors who were rightly educated, committed to the Lutheran confessions, called, and publically ordained.

On the other hand, the Ministerium administered its own "lay ministry" program. It invoked the same shortage of pastors *to justify* using unordained licentiates to preach, absolve, and administer the sacraments. Moreover, licentiates (and catechists) were able to be full voting members in the Ministerium. To be sure, the licentiates were required to function under the supervision and continuing theological instruction of an ordained member of the Ministerium. Their progress was reviewed by the Ministerium and their licenses were renewed on an annual basis. Nevertheless, the sense of need trumped Augustana XIV when it came to the Ministerium's program of lay ministry while AC XIV trumped the great need when it came to the free-lance vagabond preachers.¹⁹

¹⁹ It is my conviction that this confessional duplicity concerning AC XIV was the "foot-in-the-door" early-on in the Pennsylvania Ministerium that would eventually justify crass practices of unionism with the Reformed Ministerium in Pennsylvania. These also were advanced as practical solutions to deal with clergy shortage, e.g. proposed joint seminary training at Franklin College and the creation of Lutheran/Reformed congregations.

Efforts to “home grow” their own pastors produced slim results. Some pastors like Muhlenberg took ministerial students under their charge teaching them in their homes. Unfortunately, it was rare to find a pastor who had the time, ability, and means to do so. Adding to the short supply of tutors was the short supply of students. Few colonial Lutheran young men felt motivated to become pastors. While Muhlenberg felt strongly the need for an American Lutheran seminary - and even purchased land to that end - the outbreak of the Revolutionary War put an end to his efforts. On the whole, however, the major strategy of Muhlenberg and the Ministerium to deal with the shortage of pastors was to continue to appeal to Halle and other European connections. By the end of the century, however, the European connections had all but dried up. It was this situation that encouraged the Ministerium to seek a practical solution by making common cause for a joint seminary with the Reformed Synod of Pennsylvania. Again, the argument to “get real” with practical solutions to address the ministerial shortage led to the doctrinal commitments of the Ministerium being trumped again.

When the Pennsylvania Ministerium became pragmatic and practical in assessment of its problems and solutions to deal with matters of clergy shortage and effective evangelistic outreach on the frontier, it compromised its commitments to be a distinctively Lutheran association of pastors. When quantitative measurable results - greater numbers doing ministry and coming to worship services - these Lutheran pastors no longer thought that there were significant differences between themselves and their reformed counterparts. And I am sure that it would elicit no surprise to also report that concurrent with these shifts in self-understanding by the Ministerium, Muhlenberg’s Lutheran liturgy for Divine Service also falls into general disuse by many during the first decades of the nineteenth century, being replaced by more simple forms common to neighboring reformed churches. A renaissance of Muhlenberg’s liturgy does not occur until it serves as the foundation of the American Lutheran Common Service in the context of the confessional revival movement of Charles Porterfield Krauth.

What can we learn from the Pennsylvania Ministerium? What can it teach us about our current situation as Lutheran pastors desiring to explore the wisdom and benefits that a Lutheran ministerium might have for us today? Let me modestly make a couple of observations. First, the history of the Pennsylvania Ministerium helps us to understand that a ministerium is no *silver bullet* that kills all temptations to trade confessional commitments for practical measurable results that reflect worldly success. As we have seen, contemporary Church Growth reasoning and practices in today’s Missouri Synod have an already established track record in nineteenth-century “American Lutheranism.” Moreover, even before Schmucker’s program, these trends began to captivate the vision and strategies of the Pennsylvania Ministerium and other Lutheran Synods even before the end of the eighteenth century. It was Lutheran pastors, not the laity, that led the way into pragmatically justified expressions of unionism.

Perhaps, however, we have overstated this point as concerns the Pennsylvania Ministerium . . . when it was a *true* ministerium. The dissolution of its constitutional commitment to the Augsburg Confession coincided with its determination to move to a synodical polity in 1792. Prior to this time (most of which was under the leadership of Muhlenberg until his death in 1787), the Ministerium stood as a major influence in North America promoting and conserving a distinctive Lutheran ministry of the Gospel and liturgy. By today's standards, it was small, fluid, informal, and completely pastoral. Nevertheless, it was also the largest Lutheran body during this time period. With the passing of Muhlenberg and the distinctive ministerial character of its organization, Lutheran commitments began to deteriorate quickly at the close of the eighteenth century.

As a second observation based on the above, a ministerium can only be of service to a confessional expression and maintenance of the ministry of the Gospel if it is made up of pastors who are willing to see their ministry and that of their colleagues as a participation in the cross of Christ. Only a commitment to a profoundly Lutheran theology of the cross that captures both the head and the hearts of its pastors can a ministerium offer a meaningful fellowship that offers a positive service to the ministry of the Church. The external circumstances of ministry - the shortage of pastors, the meager compensation, the wilderness settings of life, the small numbers, and the isolation of the pastor's vineyard - provided ample experiences of *tentatio*, God's humbling reminders that we live by grace in the cross of Christ or we do not live at all. Moreover, these rude and mean contexts of ministry reminded these colonial Lutheran pastors that their primary labors involved offering the saving gifts of Christ in the Gospel and the sacraments to keep the children of God alive and well. These pastors were not captured by breathless visions of building congregations to reflect the triumph and glory of what will only come when Christ returns again. It was the awareness of the priceless importance of these humble services - heightened by such a shortage of qualified, faithful pastors - that kept both pastors and people humble and thankful for the Lord's faithfulness. They understood well that the Ministry of the Gospel was a matter of life and death - dying to sin to be raised up in Christ - not measurable worldly success. When life in the Cross was seen as not enough for the pastor or his people, when issues of outward success and growth begin to overtake the vision of what the Church and its pastors are to be about, neither Lutheran ministeriums nor synods were of any benefit for the cause of the pure Gospel. As we would consider the merits of a ministerium today, let us recognize that it can only be of service when, and if, it maintains a fellowship of pastors who are committed to and living in the cross theology that Luther so eloquently summarized and defended in Heidelberg in 1518. May that Cross remain deeply anchored in our heads and hearts as we share in the sufferings of Christ and consider the use of the ministerium for advancing his Cross and its saving gifts today.

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