



THE UNFINISHED REFORMATION

A statement adopted by the Tenth General Convention of The American Lutheran Church (GC80.6.93) "as a statement of comment and counsel addressed to the member congregations of The American Lutheran Church, and their members individually, for their consideration and such action as they may deem appropriate." Ballot vote tally: Yes—900; No—19; Abstain—9.

In adopting its *Manifesto for Our Nation's Third Century*,¹ The American Lutheran Church in 1976 pledged its "involvement in the social systems and structures, so that these become more responsive to God's will for the world." Its vision was of "a world made new for a life of promise and fulfillment."

The evidence that we are so involving ourselves as a church is meager. This reformation is unfinished!

In adopting *A Call to Affirmation of Human Values*,² The American Lutheran Church in 1972 observed "with deep concern" that:

—an increase in unemployment has been accepted in order to curb inflation without adequate provision having been made for the livelihood of those removed from gainful employment;

—welfare reform proposals designed to assure minimum standards of adequate food, clothing, shelter, and medical care for all the nation's people while providing proper incentive for self support are in the process of emasculation and corruption into punitive measures of oppression and want;

—governmental bureaucracies have proved inadequate instruments for translating personnel and funds into effective programs;

—the private sector too often has failed to fulfill its potential for leadership in solving urgent problems and meeting human needs;

—Christians and the general citizenry have retreated into personal concerns and have abandoned their neighbors to lives of discrimination and want.

"In the face of this critical situation" the 1972 General Convention called upon every segment of The American Lutheran Church "to rededicate and recommit efforts to the solution of these crucial problems, to overcoming these evils, and to the achievement of human values and goals."

This Reformation is unfinished!

"The influence of the church and its members needs always to be a witness for honesty, integrity, justice, truth, wholeness in the community, and the other ingredients basic to a sound society." So said The American Lutheran Church in 1978.³ It declared its intention to:

- a. study and analyze issues causing tension and values in conflict in society;
- b. evaluate the effects of current trends upon persons, and upon the ability of the various institutions and structures of society effectively to fulfill their special functions within the community;
- c. seek to bring a biblical and theological perspective to bear upon contemporary issues and trends in human society;
- d. clarify the goals and objectives for persons and community, as well as the values and criteria by which to judge the wisdom and wholesomeness of measures for civic righteousness;
- e. resist every effort which would make the church captive to a particular class, political, economic, racial, national, or ideological interest, keeping itself free to proclaim that counsel and bear that witness which it believes its Lord expects of his church.

This Reformation is unfinished!

"Our concern as a church is for people," said this church in 1976.⁴ It continued:

We know that human beings, male and female, are created in God's image (Gen. 1:27). We know the dignity and the dominion God has given mankind. (See especially Ps. 8:4-9.) We know God's promise of life offered through the Son's death (John 3:16). We know that God's laws and commandments are good for people, a blessing to those who heed them. (See, for example, Ps. 19:7-14; Rom. chapter 7; Ps. 1:2.) We see ourselves as our Lord's agents today, 'to preach good news to the poor . . . to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord' (Luke 4:18-19). Freed, we find in our freedom the opportunity through love to be servants of one another (Gal. 5:13). We are called to discern the times, seeking to understand their meaning (Matt. 16:1-4; Luke 12:54-57). Our freedom binds us to serve our Lord—through serving the least of his brethren in their pains and perils (Matt. 25:31-46).

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The issues of our day, as the 1976 Convention pointed out,⁵

present us with opportunities to live out the great commandments—love God, love neighbor as self (Matt. 22:36-40). We live with the vision of a 'can do' people. The American tradition is that of a people who get things done. In many matters they press government to meet its responsibilities. But, they need not wait for government to act. They themselves can do much of what needs doing. They can join forces with others of like mind in voluntary associations. Some work on one issue, others on another issue, still others on yet other issues. Separately each grapples

with and seeks to correct some problem, evil, injustice, or exploitation on which its members agree to concentrate. Together, operating under law, fully respecting the views and rights of others who differ with them, they improve the quality of our life in society. Not only our American, but more so our Christian, tradition frees us for such volunteer service. Christians gladly join forces with people of good will in any opportunities to overcome evil with good (Rom. 12:21).

We in The American Lutheran Church are thankful to God for the freedom and opportunities we have in our country. We give thanks for the many dedicated and competent persons who serve in the governmental and private sectors of our life. One of the strengths of our country is that loyal and grateful citizens can speak out in a common search to improve the quality of life for all.

Joining with our entire confessional family The American Lutheran Church in 1980 celebrates with gratitude and with humility the anniversary of key documents in our confessional heritage. The confessions set forth scriptural teachings on the church and its mission, God's mighty acts and human responses, and how faith in Jesus Christ transforms a person's life and relationships.

Our Lutheran tendency has been to emphasize one's own personal relationship to God, and the necessity for a clear understanding of the Scriptures and confessional teachings. Built into the Lutheran confessions, however, is also a recognition that one's relation to God changes one's view of neighbor, of self, and of the institutions and structures of society.

Recognizing and holding these complementary emphases in creative and wholesome tension is part of our unfinished Reformation. Our Lutheran heritage confesses that:

—Our baptism calls us into God's kingdom; our calling puts us into the world;

—We are members of the priesthood of all believers; as believers we are called to be servants of all;

—God justifies us into his kingdom by free grace through faith; in this world we strive for justice as a human right through law;

—Our salvation does not depend on our doing good works; we do good works to testify to the fact that we are saved;

—We live as both sinner and saint under both law and gospel; we carefully distinguish between the two in their meaning for the whole of our faith and our life;

—The structures of society are God's framework for preserving the common good; we participate in them as individuals and corporately as a church to make them more responsive to God's will for the world;

—The church is God's channel for empowering his people through the Means of Grace; we proclaim the Spirit's power to change hearts, lives, and relationships.

Our confessions give us a doctrinal balance for our social involvement: Law and Gospel, faith and works, grace and reason, personal and corporate, love and justice, the kingdom of God and the kingdom of the world. We believe that our Lord is calling The American Lutheran Church to bring this doctrinal balance

to bear upon our involvement in the social systems and structures and in the issues and challenges of our age.

This, too, is part of our unfinished Reformation!

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- ¹ 1976 *Reports and Actions, Part III*, page 1096
(Manifesto for Our Nation's Third Century, pages 1095-1096)
- ² 1972 *Reports and Actions, Part III*, page 1107
(SOS: A Call to Affirmation of Human Values, pages 1107-1108)
- ³ 1978 *Reports and Actions, Part I*, pages 316-317
(Christian Social Responsibility, pages 313-317)
- ⁴ 1976 *Reports and Actions, Part III*, page 1056
(Issues and Opportunities that Bind and Free, pages 1056-1058)
- ⁵ 1976 *Reports and Actions, Part III*, page 1058
(Issues and Opportunities that Bind and Free, pages 1056-1058)

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