THE MANY FACES OF LUTHERANISM IN LATIN AMERICA

This past semester, I taught a course on the History of the Lutheran Church in Latin America. In addition to exploring the history of the different Lutheran Churches in the region, we analyzed subjects such as their organization, leadership formation, worship practices, and vision for mission. Each of the students also did a research project in which they explored some aspect of the history of the churches of which they form part.

What particularly struck the students was the diversity of the Lutheran Churches in the region. In general terms, there are two different types of Lutheranism in Latin America: that which grew out of the immigration of European Lutherans to Latin America and that which is the product of mission and outreach among the people that are native to the region.

The largest Lutheran Churches in Latin America are those that resulted primarily from the migration of European Lutherans to South American countries such as Brazil, Argentina, and Chile in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The majority of these immigrants were German, though many came from Eastern Europe as well. Although most of these Lutheran Churches originally sought to preserve the languages, cultures, and traditions of the European contexts from which their members came, over time they have come to identify more fully with the contexts in which they have become immersed. In many ways, these churches are very similar to the Lutheran Churches in North America such as the ELCA.

In countries such as Mexico, El Salvador, Colombia, Peru, and Bolivia, the Lutheran Churches are the product of mission efforts among people who did not have any European Lutheran roots. Their history generally dates back to the middle stages of the twentieth century. Although most of these Churches use Spanish exclusively, in some places such as Bolivia they also work in indigenous languages.

All of these Lutheran Churches tend to be very diverse with regard to forms of leadership, worship styles, theological formation, and structure and organization. Some, for example, have full-time pastors who have been trained in a seminary, while in others the pastors and leaders are volunteers whose formation has taken place in lay training programs or through online courses.

Although there are many things that distinguish the different Latin American Lutheran Churches from one another, they also reflect many common tendencies. Among these are a strong emphasis on the full and equal participation of women as well as the implementation of programs and activities aimed at promoting social justice, such as those that accompany migrants.

Like the Lutheran Churches in North America and Europe, the Lutheran Churches in Latin America have faced increasing challenges in recent years. In many cases, this has included declines in membership, especially among young people, as well as financial limitations and a lack of pastors and trained leaders. One of the objectives of the course I taught was to analyze these realities and to reflect on what needs to be done to allow the churches to be strong and vibrant and carry out their mission more effectively.

Among the points we particularly stressed was the importance of developing new models not only for congregational life but also for things such as pastoral leadership, financial sustainability, outreach programs, and theological education for leaders. We especially analyzed the manner in which the traditional models for things such as these came from Lutheran contexts outside of Latin America that responded to realities that were very different. For that reason, many of those models are currently in crisis in the Lutheran Churches in the region.

In virtually all of the churches to which my seminary students belong, it is extremely difficult for congregations to afford having a full-time pastor. In many cases, even paying for a part-time pastor is a challenge. This means that new models of theological education must continue to be implemented to train people within the congregations to assume pastoral and leadership roles. Another way of addressing this problem is by finding creative ways of generating the funds necessary to sustain full-time ministries, often by using existing resources such as church buildings or by means of church-related social service programs that receive outside funding.

Another of the subjects that we discussed during the course was that of Lutheran identity. Lutheranism in Latin America is very distinct not only from the Roman Catholicism in this context but also from the other Evangelical Churches, including most of the historical Protestant Churches. While the Lutheran Churches tend to have good ecumenical relationships, they also stress gender equity and justice and welcome and affirm LGBTQIA+ individuals in ways that distinguish them from most of the other Christian denominations in the region. One of the challenges that many of the churches face is learning to articulate more clearly the Lutheran identity that makes them unique.

One further challenge that we addressed in the course is that of formulating our Lutheran understanding of the gospel in ways that respond more effectively to our contemporary contexts. Rather than simply repeating doctrinal formulas from the past that no longer speak to the needs, interests, and concerns of people today, we must learn to communicate the faith that unites us in ways that are not only relevant but also transforming and life-changing.

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