

By Pastor Merv Thompson

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**The Center Didn't Hold**

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"Grace, mercy and peace from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ ."

If I have any post mortem about what happened at the ELCA convention in Minneapolis in late August, I would suggest that the center did not hold. Even though the center makes up by far the largest contingent of Lutherans, the center simply cannot stand against a "highly motivated, politically savvy" wing of the church. This has been true in recent history, it was true again this time. The center got rolled.

Left and right have mastered the art of creating a message that can fit on a bumper sticker or on a bulletin board, "It is a justice issue." Or "It is a civil rights issue." The right declares "Sin is sin," or "The Bible says no." But the center's message is always nuanced to a fault, needing a page or a manuscript to flesh out the argument. The center can never compete with the left or the right in delivering the message.

Some history might be instructive. A generation ago we had three major expressions of Lutheranism. One of these was center-right, Lutheran Church Missouri Synod, one of them was moderate and centrist, the American Lutheran Church, and one of them was center-left, the Lutheran Church in America. While there were exceptions among congregations and individuals, these were the basic tendencies of the three bodies.

The center clearly was dominant in all three expressions until the early part of the 1960's, when the cultural landscape in the world began to change. Assassinations, racial tensions, the Vietnam War, and Watergate all led to a more polarized America. Now both wings of the church began to press for change; cultural wars erupted outside and inside the church.

The first major fissure after the shock of the 1960's came from the right, where a small group of ultra-conservatives pulled off what amounted to a coup within the LCMS. Those in the center were overwhelmed and soon purged from positions of

leadership as well as academia. The center literally had no chance against a "highly motivated, politically savvy" wing group from within the denomination. The center soon was squeezed out of the church and largely disappeared from the LCMS, forming a new denomination entitled AELC (American Evangelical Lutheran Church) and a new seminary in exile.

The second major struggle came shortly after the merger of the ALC, the LCA and the AELC. This time the political pressure came from the left, and soon it became clear that this was no contest. The center simply cannot stand in the face of a "highly motivated, politically savvy" wing of the church. It was not long before it became clear to those who were paying attention that the priorities of the left wing of the church were becoming the central priorities of the ELCA, and the entire political apparatus had been enlisted to enforce this movement.

A major indication of the way this was going happened in the late 1990's. The leaders of the ELCA suddenly proposed that we form some kind of alliance with the Episcopalians. Why we chose the Episcopalians was obscure at first, after all they are one of the denominations experiencing the sharpest declines in membership. Also Episcopalians have the reputation of attracting mostly the elite, the upper-class, why in the time when we were emphasizing reaching out to minorities would we choose Episcopalians?

But in retrospect, the Episcopalians inculcated three values which the left wing embrace; a hierarchical and top-down authoritative structure, an evangelical catholic, high-churched worship style, and a liberal stance on social issues (for instance, electing a gay bishop). So even though several synods blew up over this issue, I was in a synod where this issue decided the election of the bishop, the center had no traction.

But the symbol of the complete takeover by the left wing of the church came in the summer of 2009, when the national convention voted to ordain gays and lesbians and to bless same-sex unions. The center has now been completely marginalized. Even though the vote was only 55% to 45%, this is most likely the highpoint of the influence of the center, and the percentages that favor the values of the center will continue to diminish. Highly motivated, politically savvy" leaders in synods and national offices will continue to lead the church down this road and the center will be virtually ignored.

When I was a pastor in the Twin Cities two decades ago, my educated guess was that about 95% of the congregation were somewhere in the religious middle. Granted, sometimes it seems like muddle, because the center is not always articulate, not always consistent. The center often bumps up against the wings on either side, and then often will drift back toward the center.

Of course we also had about 5% or so who were rather adamantly in the left or the right. Whenever we had some kind of major issue come up, I could always expect to hear pointed and even heated responses from that 5%. The center was mostly quiet. Sometimes those on the left would become so upset that they would leave and head to places like more liberal Lutheran, Presbyterian, Congregational or UCC congregations.

When those on the right would split, they would head toward Baptist, Covenant or Evangelical Free congregations. For some reason which I cannot explain, none of those on the right wing ever gravitated toward the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.

But the center always held, and I suppose the reason why I could stay for more than twenty years in one congregation was that I was able to identify with and speak to the center. I was not nearly as effective at communicating with the wings.

Lutheran Church of Hope is not the same as the congregation that I served, for one thing Des Moines is very different than the Twin Cities. The

Lutheran ethos which dominates much of Minnesota and northern Iowa is not found in the same way in Des Moines. But still my guess is that Lutheran Church of Hope has a strong majority of people who are in the center. Some trend more to the right, some more to the left, but they are most comfortable in the center. Certainly Pastor Mike leads from the center.

So the most pressing question going forward after the 2009 national convention is what happens to the center. Will it fight, flee or just retreat into silence. I don't think we know yet. At the present time there is a whole lot of churning and frustration being expressed, but we do not know how this will play out. Will there be an effort to return to the three different expressions of generations past, with a liberal, moderate and conservative denomination?

Thankfully the church belongs to God and not to us, and so God might lead us in ways that none of us can even imagine. Or perhaps God will raise up some new Martin Luther who could help us find our way out of the chaos. So we will pray that God will unfold for us the path that we should take, and not let our own agendas determine the course. Stay tuned for a bumpy ride.