

Reflections after a Lutheran Convention in Charleston

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In South Carolina, on America's southern Atlantic coast, lies Charleston, a city with an unusual number of monuments, reminders of the American Civil War in the 1860s. Today the city is a popular tourist destination. The North American Lutheran Church (NALC) met here in late July for their annual convention, to which Bishop Roland and I were invited as observers. A strong resistance movement – Lutheran Core – in the largest and most liberal Lutheran church in the United States – the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (ELCA) – resulted in the formation of a new church body in 2010. Nearly 400 congregations left the ELCA and formed NALC primarily because of the issue of same-sex marriage.

On a trip to the United States in October 2013 on behalf of the Swedish Evangelical Lutheran Education Foundation, Dr. Christopher Barnekov introduced me to the leadership of the NALC, Bishop John Bradosky and his closest associate for church relations, Dr. David Wendel. We shared with each other the similarities and differences in "the journeys" of NALC and the Mission Province. A major difference concerned the issue of the ordination of women. Despite this, Bishop Roland and I were invited last spring to participate in the NALC's convention in Charleston (NALC covered all expenses for our trip).

We considered at length whether this was something we should do. By making the trip we could show our support for a church body that had so clearly taken a position on the issue that divides the world's church bodies more than most external issues – whether churches should bless same-sex marriage. The NALC includes many congregations that originated in the Augustana Synod, the old Swedish "diocese" that until 1960 had been the home for about half a million descendants of Swedish immigrants. We wanted to show our support for our Swedish-American brothers and sisters in the faith. In my meeting with the NALC's leadership in October 2013, I heard that the issue of the ordination of women was probably an issue the NALC should examine in the light of Scripture. We wanted to be supportive of such a process, because we know that it is crucial for the NALC's future to come to grips with the issue.

The Convention was preceded by two days of theological symposium with several interesting and fruitful talks. On the first day of the actual convention,

when up to 700 delegates from NALC had gathered, the agenda provided that I should present a greeting from the Mission Province. What was said there – the speech is available on our website – became a message from the Nordic church struggle, in which the issue of refusing ordination to those who could not affirm collaboration with women priests played a central role. It was also made clear that our struggle was about the authority of Scripture. Various reactions afterwards can be summarized in the words: "We must also take up this question!"

Bishop Roland had promised to preach. But we had not anticipated that this would take place in a Communion service, in which also female priests participated. Our unfamiliarity with the questions that have to do with the altar and pulpit fellowship made us somewhat bewildered. The outcome was that Bishop Roland preached with power about Christ's cross; but he did not join in the great procession, and he did not appear at the altar. It was clear that he withdrew, and neither of us received Communion.

There are ties that connect to people in the NALC. We have made a clear testimony and the confession we have made both publicly and in many private talks is unmistakable: the ordination of women does not belong to apostolic order and runs counter to Scripture's clear Word.

Unfortunately, it is true enough that the Lutheran pastor, in the midst of the German church struggle in recent decades, has it right, when he – to paraphrase – says: "The church that accepts the ordination of women cannot in all seriousness say on some other issue: 'Thus says the Word of God.' "

In the Swedish Church, we have seen a frightening development, in which the decision on the ordination of women in 1958 had a decisive impact. The matter is a question of God's order of creation as regards masculine and feminine. This is also where the issue of same-sex marriage is centered. The first phenomenon sooner or later opens the way for the second, in the manner that we have witnessed with sorrow in the last decade.

Unless NALC seriously tackles the issue of the ordination of women, the risk is obvious that one does not have the strength to hold out against either the issue of same-sex marriage or against the devastating forces of religious multiculturalism (that is, syncretism).