

My association with The Institute for Ecumenical Research, Strasbourg, goes back more than two decades. Institutionally it has proved to be a stable point of reference accompanying and deepening my growing appreciation for Lutheranism. During these years I have had the extraordinary privilege of working on the Niagara Report of the Anglican Communion and the Lutheran World Federation, and the Porvoo Report of the British and Irish Anglican Churches and the Nordic and Baltic Lutheran Churches. Both reports made possible significant improvements in ecumenical relations in particular regions. The Institute, through its changing and various personnel, has offered the kind of critical support which has recalled us to face the further challenges of the world church.

In truth, developments between Anglicans and Lutherans have seemed to some experienced observers the most promising international context of contemporary ecumenism. If this is indeed the case, it is not because the early history of Anglican-Lutheran relations was especially warm. On the contrary, the stricter form of, especially, Scandinavian Lutheranism was inclined to think that Anglicans had capitulated to heretical opinions in vital eucharistic doctrine. On the Anglican side, there have been painfully few scholars with a real knowledge of Lutheran theology.

In such a context one can hardly underestimate the importance of an institution, which persists in issuing invitations to Anglican scholars, and in providing an encouraging environment in which to explore possible avenues of ecumenical advance. Gradually, and through the medium of personal contact with colleagues (who become, in due course, friends), it has proved possible to expand one's knowledge of the sheer diversity of Lutheran history. And because the Institute is similarly engaged with other world Christian families, one comes to see Lutheran-Anglican relations through the interpretative lens of other traditions. The persistence of the Institute in fostering multi-lateral ecumenical engagement has been a gift of the inestimable value to the oecuméné .

A very marked feature of Lutheranism, especially in its European context, is its capacity for self-criticism. Anglicans, of course, have had to come to terms, recently, with a dispute which threatens the very terms of communion. Both communions,

therefore, might well heed the admonition of St Paul, 'If you go on fighting one another, tooth and nail, all you can expect is mutual destruction' (Gal.5:15). The significance, in such a context, of theological institution, orientated by the terms of its foundation ad extra, is very great. In it, the fires of internal criticism will be tempered by knowledge of analogous disputes in other confessions. My experience of the Institute has been of a context in which some of the more savage internal conflicts which Lutheranism has recently weathered have been rationally assessed and mediated. In performing this role, in my judgment, it has served both world Lutheranism and the wider fellowship of churches with judiciousness and distinction.

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