

The Rev. Raymond M. Bost, Ph.D.

As pastor, educator and historian, Raymond Morris Bost claims the rare distinction of having taught in one Lutheran educational institution and serving as president of three others.

Following eight years as a parish pastor in Spartanburg, S. C., and Raleigh, he joined the faculty of Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary in Columbia, S.C., as professor of church history and director of field education in 1960, beginning a 33-year ministry as a Lutheran educator and administrator. He taught six years at the seminary before joining the staff of Lenoir-Rhyne College as academic dean where, after the second year, he was selected to serve as president for eight years.

In 1976, he returned to the seminary community, this time accepting the presidency of Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia for nine years. Following two years as historian of the North Carolina Synod, he joined the staff of Newberry College as dean and later director of the Center for Ethical Development before accepting election to the presidency for a three-year period ending in 1995.

Intercollegiate Leadership

During his Lenoir-Rhyne administration, he gave intercollegiate educational leadership as president of the Piedmont University Center of North Carolina and the Independent College Fund of North Carolina. He also served on the executive committee of the North Carolina Association of Independent Colleges and Universities.

His service to the church includes committee work in the North Carolina and South Carolina synods as well as service to the Lutheran Church in America through the Board of Theological Education, the Board of Publication, and the Standing Committee on Approaches to Unity.

Bost's interest in history led to co-authorship of a history of the North Carolina Synod and contributions to published histories of the South Carolina Synod, the Southern Seminary, and Robert J. Nelson's "Christian Unity in North America." His writings have also appeared in "Essays and Reports," a periodical of the Lutheran Historical Conference, and in "Lutheran Quarterly."

Born August 18, 1925, in Maiden, North Carolina, Bost earned degrees from Lenoir-Rhyne (A.B.), Southern Seminary (M.Div.), and Yale University (M.A., Ph.D.) and was ordained by the North Carolina Synod of the United Lutheran Church in America in 1952. He enlisted in the Marine Corps in 1943 for four years and later served eleven years in the Army Reserve as chaplain, attaining the rank of major. He married Margaret M. Vedder in 1947 and they have four adult children.

Changes in Church Life Recalled

In an interview in late 2009 at his retirement apartment in Hickory, Bost recalled changes in the life of the church that he had witnessed and that have been significant in his life. "They may not be significant for the church as a whole," he explained, "but for me there are a couple themes that come out rather prominently as I try to get perspective on what has happened to the church to which I am committed and which has been a blessing to me.

"I reflect my age and my environment by starting with the subject that has been a major preoccupation and concern as far back as I can remember: namely, race.

"I was blessed with a mother whose outlook was thoroughly catholic. Her background was Episcopalian before she married a Lutheran. I don't know whether that had anything to do with it or not but, in fact, from my childhood she exposed me to church life beyond my congregation and on an inter-racial basis which I gather was unusual, given my environmental setting.

First Impressions of Racism

"I think, for example, of my first impressions of racism; they go to funerals that I attended in my childhood because of my mother. I recall distinctly - we were not living in Maiden at the time, we were in another community - that a prominent black lady in the town died, and Mother went to her funeral. I remember going to that service and being one of perhaps eight white people in a church overflowing with black worshippers. And I remember feeling different in that setting.

"I remember also a prominent member of St. Martin's, Maiden, who owned a little land and employed a couple of tenant farmers, who were black, to help farm his land. One of them died, and when this landowner had his funeral a couple of the black sharecroppers came to the service at St. Martin's. There was no disturbance - this would have been in the 1930s - but it was clear these people were not regular members of our church. It wasn't just the color of their skin, but they took seats on the very back row and they were very discreet. I can remember sensing what a gap there was.

"Then one Sunday morning, in Maiden, it was driven home for me. It was probably 12:15 or so on Sunday, and I had just left St. Martin's. We lived on North Main Street at the time, so I had to walk by the Baptist church to get home. Before I got to the Baptist church, I encountered an incident: a little cluster of men by the edge of the street, and seated on the curb was a weeping woman holding in her lap a bleeding child who had just been hit by a car. The child must have darted out into the street in front of the church. The lady, in between sobs, was begging somebody to take her child to the doctor. And those white faces, looking at that black woman with a black child bleeding on her dress, didn't move. As I reflected on what I had seen I realized that little boy who could have been killed and was bleeding in his mother's lap was just about my age. About my age and size, but his skin was black. His mother was black. She wore a well-ironed and starched summer dress, the lap of which was covered with blood.

"One of the gentlemen in that cluster of people was a figure I recognized immediately as one of the prominent Christian gentlemen in our community who was obviously just leaving the Baptist worship service. And in the agonizing silence that greeted the woman's plea for help, that gentleman finally spoke up and said, 'I would be happy to take him, but I just traded for a new car. I don't want to get the seats bloody.' Not just race, but values so dramatically illustrated: a child could bleed to death, right there on the Main Street in Maiden, and we wouldn't want to mess up a new car.

"Those experiences of black and white churches made a tremendous impact on me. I think that's one of the areas in which I've seen the church of which I am privileged to be a member change for better. It's not where it ought to be; remember our ambitious goal a few years back, probably ten years now: ten percent of our members over the next decade to be persons of color. Well, maybe we made one percent, I'm not sure. But, for me at least, it's no longer surprising when I go to worship in another Lutheran church and see a black family or two. I think the attitude has changed in our church, that we recognize that we have been off base for a long time and there is a concern, prodded by

groups like Luther League, Lutheran Church Women, and lots of other pushing influences. I do believe I've seen some change.

Confessionalism

"The second thing that comes directly out of my background in terms of change is a willingness to recognize fellow North Carolinians in the synod as genuine Lutherans. I guess the theme would be confessionalism: what does it mean to be a Lutheran?"

"Growing up as I did, at St. Martin's in Maiden, I was made very mindful of the fact that the Lutherans who started St. Martin's Lutheran Church came out of the Tennessee Synod to create a Lutheran congregation and sustain it in that synod. But in 1918, well before my time, that began to change. By 1925 the merger was nearing completion in what was called the United Lutheran Church in America, and the Tennessee Synod had to go out of existence. But its presence was still very much felt.

"When I became conscious of being a member of the Lutheran church, pastors serving in the synod were readily identified: Tennessee Synod, North Carolina Synod. That would survive for a long time. Why? For a hundred years, there was this combat between two competing bodies of Lutherans trying to carry out their ministries and missions on the same territory.

Synodical Differences

"What was the difference? Lutherans in the North Carolina Synod regarded Mt. Pleasant (in Cabarrus County east of Charlotte) as a Mecca. That's where North Carolina College had flourished for a time, but then shrank. That was the home of Mt. Pleasant Collegiate Institute, the synod's chief educational institution, and some of the most historic families in North Carolina Lutheranism were associated with Mt. Pleasant and what it stood for. What did it stand for? Well, it got caricatured of course by the Tennessee Synod but in some measure there was truth behind it. The North Carolina Synod had moved into the mainstream of revivalistic American Christianity; conversion being 'born again' was a strong emphasis of the North Carolina Synod. Regarding the Sabbath as peculiarly holy and not to be desecrated was also a strong emphasis, and abstaining from alcoholic beverages - even serving grape juice instead of communion wine - was not atypical of the North Carolina Synod. Authority? The Bible, always the Bible. That's where it says you must be born again.

"Tennessee Synod? Bible, yes, but as understood by the Lutheran confessions. How do you become a member of the church? The North Carolina Synod folk were looking for that second birth; the Tennessee Synod folk said, 'Baptize that child.' Baptize that child in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost. Rear that child - on Biblical teachings, yes - but as crystallized in Luther's Small Catechism and the Augsburg Confession. North Carolina Synod Lutherans wanted to be Lutheran, wanted to be called Lutheran, but they were not that confessional. Being Lutheran to them meant being faithful to the Bible. And that difference was quite conspicuous as I perceived my church in the 1930s and even into the early Forties.

"I think most of the traces of those differences have been erased. I'm biased, I'm sure, but I do believe most of the emphases for which the Tennessee Synod stood have prevailed through our mergers. We had a healthy warning against exaggerating our Lutheranism because of our brothers and sisters in the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. In our tradition we wanted to be confessional, we wanted to be Lutheran, we wanted to be Biblical, but we did not want to slip over into fundamentalism. And I think for the most

part, we avoided it. We lost a few members. A few elected to go that way and either join Missouri, or more likely become 'independent' Lutherans. But change? Yes. Traces of the old, century-old antagonism between Conover and Hickory Lutherans and Mt. Pleasant Lutherans I think is pretty well gone

Worship

"I think in worship we've seen significant change. I came on the scene when our book of worship was called The Common Service Book, as of its 1918 printing. That black book served us well. And we thought it was still serving us well, many of us, when in the 1950s the Service Book & Hymnal came out. There were changes, lots of changes. Some of them went over pretty well, some of them didn't, but most of them I think we adjusted to without a lot of difficulty.

"But then, in rapid succession, came two more hymnals. What does it all mean? Well, I think, reflecting on just the hymnals, we see our church moving much more to the mainstream of the one holy, catholic and apostolic church of which we are a part. I'm grateful for that. For a while I had misgivings about our attempts to merge with the Episcopal church. On the whole I supported it and do, but theologically I think our companionship with the Episcopal church leaves a lot of unanswered questions. Maybe that's as it should be. But, in fact, I do believe that our movement has not been in a sectarian direction. We have tended to explicate our understanding of Lutheranism in a broad and catholic way, and I think that's as it should be. That doesn't mean I approve of every idiosyncrasy in liturgical innovation, but to go back to the mainstream of Christian worship in the Western tradition seems to me has been a healthy thing for us.

"I notice change in worship particularly because much of it came at a period when I was teaching in a Lutheran seminary. I can remember how shocked I was, and some of my colleagues more so than I, to have an entering class at the seminary don clerical collars for their first seminary photographs. They hadn't even studied the Small Catechism, and here they were putting on clerical collars for their pictures! We had one dear professor, a colleague of mine whom I highly esteemed, named Harold Creager. He came out of Gettysburg Seminary at the time when it was most extremely low church, and he couldn't get used to people wearing cassocks and surplices in his church. Here his own students come out with clerical collars! I'm sure that aged him ten years. But, transition? Yes. I think worship is more broadly inclusive in a Christian sense than it was when I was being nurtured simply on a Common Service Book, and I'm grateful for continued developments in the field of worship.

Theology

"Theology? Yes! Again my privilege of working and worshipping in a seminary community made me aware of dramatic changes in the area of theology. When I attended Southern Seminary, theology consisted of a brief textbook of about 150 pages by one of the former professors at Southern Seminary, Andrew George Voigt - Daddy Voigt they called him - the patron saint of Southern Lutheranism in many respects. Voigt was a graduate of Mt. Airy Seminary in Philadelphia, but after graduating he had an opportunity to go to Germany and study for a year that broadened his outlook significantly. He was a very fine person evidently: everybody who knew him was impressed positively with him. I never had the privilege of knowing him directly, but Daddy Voigt was a lasting influence. Another was a man named Joseph Stump, a

professor at Chicago Seminary who prepared a book of theology and dogmatics and a catechism. Stump's Catechism was standard in many parishes for years.

"These were the theologians, but it was during my brief tenure at the seminary as a student that we began to get some newer theological thinking. In my student days we were introduced to Swedish theology which was being published in English. These were books that had significant influence, but the significance was not just the content of the volumes but the fact that theological works other than Voigt and Stump were being given serious attention by Lutherans in the South. Major theologians in other traditions like Karl Barth and Emil Brunner were being read as part of standard course work in our Lutheran seminaries. The theological outlook for Lutherans in our tradition ceased to be simply rehearsing what was written 100 years earlier in Germany.

"Our friends in the Missouri Synod did not fare so well. Traditional Lutheran volumes on dogmatics that rehearsed arguments from earlier centuries and offered few new insights remained prominent in required reading lists and continued to be prominent until the Missouri Synod experienced a significant schism.

"In Lutherans with whom I'm acquainted, the horizon has broadened theologically without any perceptible reduction, I think, in loyalty to Lutheran ideals: fundamentals of understanding that the center of the Bible is not Proverbs or Judges, it's the Gospel, particularly as articulated by St. Paul about the forgiveness of sins through the redemption in Jesus Christ. That's the heart of it. Yes, the whole Bible is important, a treasure, but let's be focused as Lutherans on what's central.

Ethics

"We've had some changes in ethics too. It seems to me that we have much more openness to discussing even controversial issues in our church. Not all is pleasant, as our recent discussions on human sexuality have made clear. There have been real bedrock disagreements. But some of them get back to other issues.

"I think the most encouraging thing has been the decision to enter into serious biblical study again in our congregations because I think that's the root of the problem. We have a great many members, I'm afraid, who really can't understand loyalty to the Word of God in any way except a fundamentalistic approach to scriptures. 'The Bible says this! And that's it.' Well, in some instances, it should be - if it's saying God loves you, he really does! Fine! Be biblical! But some of the stuff that gets dragged in because of this devotion to the scriptures can become misguided. *That's* where we have a problem, I think.

"A lot of people can't come up with any way of being serious about the Bible without worshipping the Bible instead of God. And as Lutherans I think that's where we really depart from Luther. I defy you to find anyone who had more reverence for the Holy Scriptures than Luther, but he could put the label on the book of James and say this is an epistle of straw because he could see that it wasn't extolling the central message of scripture which he found so clear in other writings, particularly the writings of St. Paul, summarizing all the New Testament all together, coming forth with the glorious commitment to what God has done in Jesus Christ. We Lutherans have our differences, but one of our biggest problems, I think, is bibliolatry, trying to worship the Bible rather than the God and the Redeemer revealed in the Bible. And that's a dangerous shift in emphasis, I think.

Ecumenism

"I believe we have also changed in our approaches to ecumenism. It seems to me we've not only come a long way from the turf wars between the North Carolina and Tennessee synods. Ecumenically we've moved really substantially, and it's not a novelty. It's simply a rediscovery of what we've been confessing all along: that we believe not in 223 churches serving Jesus Christ, but we believe in one holy, catholic and apostolic church. We so often in the past have lost sight of that simply because we thought we could be more Christian or Lutheran or pious than somebody else. But that's not the point. The point is if we are in Christ we are one with brothers and sisters in other traditions who also confess Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Now, we've known that all along because most of us have been able to drop in occasionally at a Methodist church or an Episcopal church or a Presbyterian church and find that we can worship God there. And we did. But it's been a big challenge for us to get over our antipathy for Roman Catholicism. We can see Christians in other traditions but not Catholics. Happily, God is moving by the Spirit in those places where I've been, where more and more Lutherans even acknowledge the reality of the one holy, catholic and apostolic church which we've been confessing all along. There is just one church and wherever hearts surrender to God as he has revealed himself in Jesus Christ, there's the church. We know no other God than the one who has revealed himself in Jesus Christ. We may imagine God in other ways but I don't think we know any God except the one who has elected to reveal himself to us."

Speaking of change, Bost noted, "Two of the most respected figures in Lutheranism in the United States have recently departed from the ELCA. One was Jeroslav Pelikan, a Slovak Lutheran out of the Missouri Synod and scholar without peer who published in several languages and whose multi-volume 'The Christian Tradition' is surely one of the most significant works published in the field of the history of doctrine in the twentieth century. He was a Lutheran who moved from the Missouri Synod to the ELCA but, before called to his eternal reward, he felt compelled to leave the ELCA and join the Orthodox Church. Richard John Neuhaus, another brilliant theological mind with an equally fine spirit reflected in everything he did, was a lifelong Lutheran coming out of Canada but spending his career in the Missouri Synod, in the ELCA and, for about three years before his recent death, a member of the Roman Catholic Church, a priest in good standing. He was in many respects the finest analytical mind we had in American Lutheranism and his decision to go to the Roman Catholic tradition was not lightly made but in fact reflected continuing concern that many have. Change in Lutheranism? Yes, but there are those who say, 'Not quite enough.' Too many of the vestiges of Protestantism cling to us, in the view of some."

Theological Leadership

Although Bost sees no trends of church change that seriously alarm him, he says he is "sobered by the loss of strong theological leadership. In addition to Pelikan and Neuhaus, death claimed Joseph Sittler in Chicago, who was a superb theologian. I don't see a lot of thinkers of that caliber coming along, but it may be just my limited vision because I don't have the perspective now in terms of broad travel.

"When I was a young pastor getting acquainted with my church, I could look at the yearbook and on every board and agency of the church, almost without exception, I'd see the name of somebody whom I knew, or had met or heard speak. I don't see that anymore. Going through our yearbook, for example, board after board, I don't know any

of those people. Now, the church is much larger than it was when it was the United Lutheran Church in America. It's a bigger body. But there is, for me, an expanded sense of distance from those who are actually in the day-to-day operation of machinery. I just don't know the people in the hierarchy anymore."

It may be because the South is losing some influence in the national church, he speculated. But, he asked, "Why is the South losing influence? Is it just a matter of expanding size? Well, that would contribute to it but where are the seats of intellectual excitement and prowess in our church? With all due respect and love for my Southern Seminary I don't think it's there. At one time, LSTC in Chicago had a couple of really powerful people. If a young, aspiring ministerial student came to me today and said, 'Look, where should I go to seminary?', what should I say? Well, there are some able people at Luther Seminary, but what's it like being a young seminarian in a student body of six or seven hundred other persons struggling to understand themselves, and God's call to serve as a Minister of the Word in the Church? Concordia Seminary at St. Louis: the same thing. They are so large. I was blessed: I think there were twelve in my class in seminary, and we got theological dialog - all we could ask for, we got.

"I don't see the South's influence expanding. Is it shrinking? Quite possibly. Is that good or bad? That's another issue. I think we contributed to the national church with our emphasis on the importance of the auxiliaries - the Women of the Church, the Brotherhood (as we called it in the old days), the Luther League. That's gone now, but in fact I think those were important contributions that we made in the past by stressing - and the background of the old Tennessee Synod is significant here - the importance of the laity. Sure, we need pastors. Sure, they must be confessional Lutherans. But we believe in a church that is primarily made up of lay people, and the witness of the laity is always important in our tradition."

(This thorough and historically informative biographical piece was written by Jeff L. Norris of Hickory, who co-authored a history of the North Carolina Lutheran Synod with Dr. Bost. The interview by Norris was conducted on December 30, 2009).

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