

Mark Menees

BURLINGTON--Mark Menees would likely be one of the first to concede that he has gone through more changes than a theatrical costume designer.

In Menees' case, however, these multiple shifts have virtually all been spiritual rather than material. And therein lies the story of one man's journey through an incredible maze of conflicting theological steps and understanding of human frailties that have eventually led to inner peace.

Menees, a 60-year-old native of Nashville, TN, served as Bishop of the North Carolina Evangelical Lutheran Synod during the first half of the 1990s before resigning following public disclosure of personal indiscretions involving a female parishioner more than a decade earlier while serving as a pastor in Hickory. His leaving the bishop's position meant the end of his official capacity within the NC Lutheran Synod and ultimately the denomination itself. He now works in a top-level administrative position at Twin Lakes, a Lutheran retirement facility in Alamance County, but he has severed all ties with the Lutheran church.

Menees doesn't dwell on the dark, agonizing period in his life and career, but neither does he attempt to hide from it. And he has moved on through a series of self restoration endeavors to keep himself and his new career on track.

"It is part of history and is what it is," he said with complete candor in discussing his past personal shortcomings. "I am glad it is behind me. It is certainly not the path I would have chosen if I had the opportunity to rethink it (ahead of time). But I have come away with a keener sense of human frailties and a better understanding of personal struggles than before. It has been said that every man's brokenness diminishes me, just as mine did. God works through the imperfections of people. That seems to round it out for me."

Interestingly, despite the trauma and angst of his departure from the Bishop's position in 1996, Menees still receives high marks and praise from those within the Lutheran hierarchy who observed his performance as Bishop and leader and worked with him on church issues. He was uniformly accepted as a scholar and a person whose ideas should be listened to. He was even considered by some as a person who had potential to become head of the national Lutheran organization based on his administrative and leadership skills. Persons familiar with the Synod staff at the time of his resignation said his colleagues there were saddened and grieved at his leaving.

Menees was ordained as a Lutheran minister in 1977 and came to North Carolina in the late 1970s to serve as pastor of Mount Olive Lutheran Church in Hickory where he met and became friends with Michael C.D. McDaniel who was then serving as Synod Bishop. Menees later joined McDaniel on the Synod staff in 1982, serving initially in the area of theological educational work, a specialty for which he was well qualified based on academic training. He was appointed to replace McDaniel in the summer of 1991 and served in that capacity until his resignation in 1996.

Leaving the Lutheran Synod and giving up not only his official role but also his denominational membership were not the first twists and turns in Menees' spiritual life, just the first public ones. His personal and professional lives have been woven slowly, yet surely into an enigmatic tapestry that has evolved over almost half a century as he peeled back the layers, dissected and reformed his theological thinking. Although now

divorced from Lutheranism in practice, his past experiences in the church and Synod remain an integral part of his life and beliefs.

“A lot of my theological thinking is rooted in Lutheranism,” Menees said in discussing the many transformations of his early and later religious thinking. “Serving society at large is good Lutheran theology and that fits my job here (at Twin Lakes).”

He was not a Lutheran growing up, but had had Lutherans in his family background, with earlier ancestors grounded in that faith from pre-Revolutionary War years in Pennsylvania. His immediate family members as a child were divided between the Catholic and Methodist faiths, not a Lutheran among them.

“I felt as early as 10 or 12 years of age that I was headed in the direction of the Catholic Church,” he said. “I had a Jesuit mentor who told me I had the mind of a Jesuit and the heart of a Franciscan and he told me that maybe I ought to consider becoming a Lutheran. Some people suggested that I ought to be a pastor and at that time I said good Lord no. But I knew early on that where I was (in faith thinking) was not where I wanted to be. My life has been more of an evolution. It is not that God one day said this is what I want you to be. If there is one Northern Star in my life it is that the finite is capable of conveying the infinite.”

After growing up in Nashville, TN, where he still has family, Menees attended tiny Martin College in Pulaski, TN, before earning a degree in philosophy and medieval history from the University of Tennessee. His plans at the time were to become a scholar as he pursued degrees in both the New Testament and divinity from Vanderbilt University. All this led him slowly but surely toward the Lutheran faith even though while in graduate school he served for a time as pastor of a Methodist church in Tennessee as his evolution toward Lutheranism continued. In North Carolina within the Lutheran hierarchy, he felt he had found a home, until his past indiscretion became public.

When he resigned as Bishop in 1996, Menees dropped out of active church involvement for several months as he sorted out his life and sought other employment. “But I missed worship,” he explained, “and after you go through a crisis, you learn what is really important and what isn’t.” He joined an Episcopal church in Burlington where he learned first hand to appreciate lay members’ frustrations with church bureaucracy. While laid up in the hospital following surgery, he tried and failed to find help from ministers at his newly found Episcopal congregation. The pastors ignored his health concerns, but upon release from the hospital he began receiving calls asking why he had failed to make a financial pledge to the church, a point of frustration that ended his association with that congregation.

“It is interesting to be a lay person in the pew,” he said. “So much of what the church does is benign and trivial, not very meaningful.”

Within a short while, Menees learned through a friend of a freshly formed Anglican Catholic parish in Greensboro where he was invited to attend. He delayed for a time accepting the chance to renew his ties with Catholicism, which had lain dormant since his childhood, then one Sunday morning drove the 15 miles to Greensboro to see what the new church was like. It was, he suggested, as if God was quietly observing.

“There were no flashes of light,” he said, “but the more I participated in that church, the better I liked it.” He was in short order asked to read homilies at the Sunday services, then asked to become more involved. His religious faith evolvment began to

stir again. "It was more of a spiritual journey in the perception of what God is and what he was asking me to be and do. Pretty soon, people (in the church) were telling me I had missed my calling. A priest said something was missing in me."

A series of church-related conversations and written tests followed. Menees met all with aplomb, surprising himself if not others. The Catholic connections continued to flourish one step at a time. In June 2009, Menees was ordained as a priest in the Anglican-Catholic church and became a member of St. John's Catholic Church in Greensboro. As an Anglican priest, Menees can maintain his family relationships as they were before he was ordained into the priesthood. "I am not a Roman Catholic," he explained, "but if you attended our Anglican services you would feel as if you were in a Roman Catholic church."

His conversion into full Catholic faith leaves Menees with some of the same questions his former Lutheran associates may have. "It is one of those things that is hard to articulate," he said, "but when you start looking back, it is that for me when one door closes, another opens up. That is part of who I am. I think that what distinguishes the Christian faith from other faiths is that God works in history. I think that in what has happened with me is not just a series of coincidences but that God was trying to tell me something. Something was still missing in my life (until then) and that is the point that I moved to the Catholic Church."

Menees' acceptance of the Catholic faith, he said, is another one of those seemingly providential happenings in his life. "It would be easier to explain if I were Presbyterian or a Calvinist, neither of which I am," he said with a chuckle. But like so many of the occurrences in his life, faith and otherwise, events just sometimes seem predetermined. Whatever the reasons or whomever is responsible for the many transformations in Menees' life, he feels he has finally reached his true calling as a Catholic and lay missionary in his duties at Twin Lakes Center.

His duties at the retirement center until early 2010 were as director of health services. In February of 2010, he was chosen director of pastoral services, a role that better fits his experiences and strengths as a scholar and advocate of social ministries. In his new job at Twin Lakes, he sees his role as a better use of his interest and experiences in social ministry and serving the community at large. That, he said, is what more churches, regardless of denomination, ought to be doing.

Menees, as an outsider, sees Lutheranism in North Carolina as a struggle for relevancy although he calls changes in the last quarter century "astounding" and worthy as the church explores new ways and new ideas. "It is not much the (particular) issue, but how the church goes about making decisions on the issues that are more important," he said.

As a hobby, Menees has been involved for many years with participation in Tae Kwon Do. "And I have said that the Martial Arts community has treated me with ten times more grace than the Lutheran church has," he said, "and I think that is still true."

Menees is married to his longtime wife Martha Jo. The couple resides in Gibsonville, a small community just west of Burlington, with their daughter Beth and two granddaughters. They also have one son, Matthew, who lives in Rowan County.