

Bishop Atle Sommerfeldt:

What does it mean to be a Lutheran church in our different contexts?

*Consultation between ELCJHL Church Council and Borg bispedømmeråd,
Beit Jala, February 28, 2015*

The Church of Norway is rooted in the history of the people of Norway.

1. In my theological tradition the understanding that the Lutheran theology we formulated on the basis of the confessional documents, was a contextual theology framed by the historical and contemporary situation in Norway, was under communicated. The thinking was that the doctrines were above contexts and should be understood as such. A life in the ecumenical movement has taught me differently. More important, the last 20 years an understanding of the importance of context is internalized in main stream theological and liturgical reflections and praxis. Let me therefore start with a brief presentation of the context of The Church of Norway.
2. The Church of Norway has been present in the territory we today name Norway since the tenth century. This presence is not a confessional presence, but a presence of the universal church in that geographical area with different confessional identities through these thousand years. In this perspective, we are first people, then church and finally Lutheran.
3. We can distinguish four different periods. The first hundred years was the church in Norway part of the undivided orthodox and roman-catholic church. This implies that our national Saint – Olav – is recognized both in the western and orthodox churches. His icon is on the fifth column in the Nativity Church, dating back to the beginning of the 12th century.
4. The second phase lasted closed to 500 years when The Church of Norway was part of the Roman-Catholic Church – by some orthodox regarded as a well designed coup against the Orthodox since Olav became a mature Christian in Kiev. We have a number of church-buildings from this period, only in Borg diocese 15 are still in use. They represent a major symbol of identity and rootedness for the communities.
5. The Lutheran reformation was imposed on the people by the king – then the king of Denmark. Norway was a province in the Danish empire from the 14th century until 1814. Our reformation year is 1536. The Lutheran reformation established the state-church in which the church was regarded as part of government, responsible for religion, education and social security. The Church of Norway was the only religious institution allowed on the territory and only ordained pastors could publically preach.
6. The spirituality of the people in the communities continued however to uphold several traditions from the roman catholic time. This local independence in spirituality may be one of the elements which made it possible for the great lay-movement lead by the Borg-farmer Hans Nielsen Hauge to carve out a spirituality with links to medieval mysticism and modern organization in opposition to the hierarchy of the church.

7. During the centuries a division of labor between the central and local government developed. The central government was responsible for ordained personnel – bishops, deans and priests - and the local community was responsible for church-buildings and graveyards, creating a strong and independent local parishes. This double structure of responsibilities is still a major element in understanding how the Church of Norway is structured with both congregational and episcopal elements. A synodical structure developed only in the last century with the establishment of a national synod in 1984, with a majority of lay members.

During the 19th century the monopoly of the church hierarchy inside the Church eroded as well as the monopoly of the Church of Norway herself in the Norwegian society.

8. The fourth stage is our present situation where the state is withdrawing from Church governance and The Church of Norway is regarded as one religious actor along side others. However, The Church of Norway still maintain a special position in the constitution of the country. §16 in the constitution states that the "Church of Norway is an Evangelic-Lutheran Church and remain the church of the Norwegian people (Folkekirke – Norway's folk-church), and on the other hand grants full freedom of religion to all citizens and that all other registered faith-communities should be financially supported on the same level as The Church of Norway.
9. This principle of financial support by the government to religious (and non-religious) communities on the same level is quite unique. The principle is in line with the Nordic Societal Model. This model is based on negotiated compromises between different interest-groups in the society, mixed economy, a responsibility for government to secure all the citizens a basic economic security based on equal access and level on social services like health, social security and education, and a role of the state to finance sectors regarded as important for society – like culture, media, humanitarian aid and religion.
10. The history and our present reality in a plural society with all main sectors of society delinked from the dominance of the church, frame the religious context of our strive to develop our identity. This strive is taking place in one of the wealthiest and best governed states in the world, with a rank as no 1 or 2 on the UNDP World Development Index. This position has three main element: rich natural resources in oil/gas, (minerals, forests, fish), good governance developed as part of the Nordic model and high equality between the citizens.

The identity of the church of Norway

11. The history shows that our identity has two centers, the confessional, now Lutheran, and the people. Two conflicting models on how to relate the church to the people form the base for most discussions. It may be seen as two ways of solving the potential tension in CA 5 and 7 between a sacramentally based ecclesiology and a fellowship based ecclesiology.

- a. The three circle model

In this model the **inner** circle consist of the persons with high commitment to the Christian faith and with active participation in the activities of the church

The **second** circle are all the baptized members of the church who attend church mainly at special occasions (Christmas, confirmation, baptism, wedding, funerals).

The **third** and outer circle is people who are not member of the church.

- b. The two-polar model

This model is an ellipsis with two centers, the **first** is the proclamation of the Gospel and the sacraments, the **second** being the local parish with the people of which a major part are members of the Church of Norway. The Swedish tradition will name this model a “sacramental folk church”.

Lutheran identity: By grace alone

12. In our church the Lutheran tradition of God’s act for us as basis for salvation has a strong position. This leads to a general consensus that only baptism can be the criteria for membership and participation in church governance. All attempts to try to distinguish between baptized persons f.ex. in terms of proven commitment, are regarded as contradictory to the Lutheran understanding of Justification by grace and faith alone.
13. We have however a major challenge in making people to accept the need for salvation from their own participation in evil. In Stavanger diocese congregations with an evangelical profile did not find it relevant to have confession of sins in the ordinary liturgy – despite that these communities are heavily dependent on income from the oil and gas industry, major drivers in the climate crisis. In this, the wealthy communities forms alliances with liberal protestants and the modern worship of the innocent child, in their alienation from the basic Lutheran quest for an accepting and merciful God. To convince people that they are structurally interwoven in sin and guilt has never been a popular message of the church, but needs to be an important element in our society which welfare and level of wealth, are based on the product responsible for climate change.
14. In addition, our society is based on the citizens basic rights and the duty of authorities to secure these rights. People is therefore used to claim their rights based on their citizenship and democratic rights. To get an understanding of the Lutheran position that salvation is not a right based on our own good intentions, but a gift we can not deserve, is difficult.
15. But this implies that the tradition of baptism and grace has a renewed relevance for people. The Norwegian society is undergoing rapid change. The culture of competition and expectations of high performance and life’s based on merits, by all ages, create a society where nothing is for free – except the gift of baptism. The proclamation of all persons equal dignity given to us by the Creator, confirmed by Jesus Christ and upheld by the Holy Spirit in her Church, gives the Lutheran tradition high relevance and a distinct spirituality. This spirituality is different both from the so-called neo-Anabaptists in the Mennonite tradition who gives preference to the community of (true) believers, and from the catholic and orthodox who regard monastic life as a higher form of Christian life.

Lutheran identity: God`s act in sacraments foundation for Christian life

16. The baptized people of God (3,8 million) is quite diverse and brings very different experiences to the church. Although economic equality is high in Norway, cultural differences along class, geography, urban-rural, profession and education are significant. The community of the baptized people of God is therefore pluralistic. It becomes then very difficult to build the local church around one fellowship. One size will not fit all. Our major challenge is therefore to develop a culture of plural fellowships by people around the sacramental center.
17. This leads to more weight on the Eucharist based on the understanding that the only foundation of the church is the incarnate, crucified and resurrected Jesus Christ. The Eucharist is open to all baptized regardless of age and publically proclaimed faith. The new liturgy states that the

normal service in the church includes Eucharist. This is new. The more frequent, open and inviting practice has resulted in a Eucharistic revival with 3 times as many participants in each Eucharist than 50 years ago.

Lutheran identity: Baptized into the universal church

18. The sacramental foundation leads further to an understanding of the Church of Norway as part of the global Lutheran and ecumenical church. Our relation to other countries has been dual. On the one side we have a history of being an annex to the church in Copenhagen and Uppsala. This lead to a strong weight on our own sources and a strive for independence. On the other side a strong missionary seal developed to bring Gospel and welfare to other people.
19. Our contemporary challenge as a Lutheran church is to break away from our national and tribal understanding of the church which have been a strong element in traditional Lutheran ecclesiology. We must internalize the Lutheran core vision of the local congregation being an expression of the ecumenical, universal and global community of churches. In a society where between 10 and 20 % of the population are immigrants, partly from quite different cultures, the understanding of the church as the largest, multicultural movement in the world, will help us to create a common platform for our society.

Lutheran identity: God is present in all religions

20. During the last 20 years the presence of Islam, Buddhism and Sikhism is quite significant in many local communities. We have very little experience in relating to other religions in our neighborhoods. We experience with amazement that we actually are religious and have several possibilities to mutual understanding in a society where non-religious trends are very strong in the public realm.
21. Lutheran understanding is that God is acting outside the church to upheld human communities. This open up to new ways of acting together as religious bodies for God's creation and our local communities.
22. All humans are created in the image of God with ability to spirituality and a longing to relate to God, the ultimate reality. This is a strong element in the Lutheran understanding of God as creator. This reality makes it possible for the church to explore alternative spiritualities developed outside the church in a more open way than we are used to when we had a monopoly on spirituality.

Lutheran identity: The life of the baptized is lived in the community

23. When the parish is the other center of the church, it implies that the church must be a church which is involved in the life of the community and the nation. The interaction will be from within, accompanying the communities in their struggle to protect and promote a dignified life for all. The Christian life is developed in all professions. To quote our lay reformer Hauge: "My opponent will establish monasteries, we will be involved in trade, industry and farming".
24. We have as a church a calling to be involved with people in their daily life, enabling them to see God's involvement in their lives. We do that when we accompany people in their moments of great joy and deep pain. Another element of this involvement is through cooperation with the local government in education, health care, care for the elderly and prevention of youth sliding into societal marginalization. After a period where government looked upon the church

with suspicion, we are now experiencing a new openness with new possibilities only limited by our own imaginations and resources.

Lutheran identity: The teaching of the two kingdoms

25. The Lutheran teaching of the two kingdoms got a specific form in The Church of Norway as a response to the Nazi occupation from 1940-1945. The main stream Lutheranism in the 1930-ies in Germany understood the two kingdoms as separate with very limited legitimacy for the church to interfere in governance of the state. This led to an apathy towards the Nazi regime.
26. In Norway the teaching was upheld, but with a clear mandate of the church to monitor, guide and if necessary resist government, based on the performance. This has meant that the Church of Norway has been much more receptive of the ecumenical movements strive for human rights, peace and global justice.
27. We have however a challenge to develop that role in our own society where positions easily will be perceived as politically partisan. This is specifically relevant when we challenge areas sensitive in the Norwegian debate, as climate, protection of refugees and gaps between proclaimed rights and actual reality.

Lutheran identity: Christian formation

28. Baptism is in our Lutheran tradition closely followed by the call to Christian formation. The Norwegian government has decided to finance the formation of children in their respective faith through their religious institution. This means that the Christian formation of the baptized members of The Church of Norway is receiving a substantial governmental grant. This has led to a large extension of the Christian formation programs in the local congregations. The aim is to include all baptized children between 0 and 18 years. The reform also strengthens the relation between the church and the families. Hopefully we will be able to renew the family based spirituality in the Lutheran tradition, although this is a huge challenge.
29. The Lutheran perspective on the baptized life is a lifelong process of living the reality of the new life. We have a situation where the basic Christian knowledge in the generation between 20 and 50 is very weak. As much as we need to renew our Christian formation for the children and youth, we have a major challenge also to develop Christian knowledge and formation for all people. A Lutheran identity may for us be built more on a sacramental experience of the holy, but we also need a foundation of basic knowledge about what the Christian faith actually contains. The Lutheran tradition of one-sided teaching from a pastor or a teacher of the correct interpretation of faith is not the way to go. But we still need to develop a people-oriented formation for adults which in true Lutheran spirit enables the baptized to interpret the Gospel in their own life without being dependent on the priest interpreting a detailed church doctrine.

Lutheran Identity: planting trees waiting for the second coming of Christ

30. We can observe in our ecumenical context in Norway that apocalyptic speculations are present, not least in the theological interpretation of the State of Israel. The traditional skepticism in the Lutheran tradition of making apocalyptic interpretations of the signs of the times, is therefore highly relevant. The apocalyptic interpretation creates also today much pain, anxiety and distorted positions on world developments in general and in the Middle East in particular. The classical saying by Luther on planting an apple tree today, even if Jesus returns tomorrow, is therefore important for us to contextualize.

Conclusion

31. The Church of Norway will understand our Lutheran identity as a dialectic relationship between the two poles, the Gospel in Word and Sacrament, and the parish. In our pilgrimage we have a greater awareness of belonging to a larger community and that we need other parts of the body of Christ to inspire us and develop our perspectives and understanding. Also for a Church is the Lutheran basic sin to be bent into oneself, unable to the others.