

## **Lutheran Missionary Activity Among Quebec Francophones in the Late-Twentieth Century**

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Almost all Canadian Protestant denominations have established missions among Roman Catholic Quebec francophones. From the Conquest onwards, the established Anglican Church had persistently planned to convert the French-Canadians through legislation. By mid-nineteenth century, Anglicans, Presbyterians, Methodists and Baptists were all involved in mission work among french-speakers.<sup>1</sup> However, the dawn of the twentieth century witnessed dwindling interest and support.<sup>2</sup> Only the Baptists survived as a dynamic missionary force in the francophone field.<sup>3</sup>

Not until the 1960s did interest in mission work among francophones wax again. This time a full range of Protestantism was represented. Pentecostal groups, Mennonites, Brethren groups and others joined the Baptists to work intensely in french-speaking Quebec. Finally, yet another church entered the arena; the Lutherans arrived on the francophone mission scene. My primary interest here is to describe the Lutheran missionary activity among Quebec francophones in the late-twentieth century. I will discuss the various contextual elements which contributed to the work's beginnings as well as its development. I will also offer an explanation of this group's motivation for initiating work when other traditional churches had curtailed their missionary activity among French-speakers.

***Factors Contributing to a Favourable Climate for Lutheran Mission Work in Francophone Quebec***

Lutheran missionary activity targeting French-Canadians was already a nascent notion in the early post-World War II years. The interest in that community was only part of a broader thrust to reach outward and to expand. In general, Lutheranism was maturing on Canadian soil. This coming-of-age provided energy and resources to go beyond the traditionally Lutheran spheres of soul-gathering based on historical affiliation. Immigration swelled the ranks,<sup>4</sup> churches were being built, congregations were growing,<sup>5</sup> and Lutherans felt comfortable enough on the English-Canadian scene to look elsewhere. French-Canadians were singled out. Three major factors permitted this audacious enterprise to be considered feasible.

**Vatican II.** First, on a global scale, was the series of sweeping reforms of Vatican II which encouraged exchange between Protestants and Roman Catholics. The impact for Quebec's religious establishment was revolutionary. That which had been taboo became sought-out, and with Rome's imprimatur. Naturally, the point of departure for reconciliation was the point of initial rupture. Thus, among the first ecumenical dialogues of which Quebec took note were those between Lutherans and Roman Catholics.<sup>6</sup>

**The Quiet Revolution.** Second, the social upheavals of the Western world during the sixties were made manifest in Quebec in the form of the "Quiet Revolution." Following on the heels of such World War II effects as urbanization, industrialization and secularization, the far-reaching reforms of that revolution brought about a general attitude of openness to the hitherto unknown and prohibited.

One indication of the pervasiveness of the changes was that of participation in the Roman Catholic mass. Religious practice plummeted at an amazing rate from near universal attendance at mass (excepting certain urban parishes) in the early sixties to less than 50% by 1975.<sup>7</sup> On both the religious and socio-political fronts a new openness was in vogue.

**Public Lutheran Awareness.** Several specific events heightened public awareness to help create a climate for Lutherans to ponder the possibilities of bringing the Lutheran reformation to Quebec's francophones.<sup>8</sup> First was the Christian pavillion at Montreal's Expo '67 sponsored jointly by Roman Catholic and Protestant churches, including

the Lutheran. This blatant Roman Catholic-Protestant co-operation glaringly legitimized a Lutheran presence on Roman Catholic Quebec territory. The other emboldening event from within the inner-sanctum of the Lutheran ethos was that of the approaching five-hundredth anniversary of Luther's birth.<sup>9</sup>

Another factor also helped to determine the choice of mission work in French-speaking Quebec, namely former non-involvement. The hope was that the openness of the sixties would allow room for a denomination that was recognized as catholic, but without the baggage of law-oriented "romanism" or the distaste for things "English" in the form of the British Protestant churches. Until this point, Lutherans had simply been absent from any French-Canadian reality. Church officials thought that the attitudes of prejudice and social, historical and religious resentment were linked with specific denominations, but not with the Lutheran. The question involved was the reason for the drop in religious practice: did it represent a wholesale rejection of Christianity, or only of particular expressions of the same?

### ***The Beginnings of French-Language Lutheran Outreach***

On 15 November 1948, the Ontario District of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod (LCMS) reported correspondance with a student at the LCMS Concordia Seminary in Saint Louis, Missouri concerning the possibility of French-language work in Quebec.<sup>10</sup> No mission work resulted from this contact. However, a decade later, Daniel Pourchot, a pastor from the Lutheran Synod of Monbéliard (France) who had studied at the Saint Louis seminary, arrived in Montreal. Although not serving the church in an official capacity, he did occupy the protestant chair of the University of Montreal's (Roman Catholic) faculty of theology. This position gave him access to seminaries and religious orders as guest lecturer on various aspects of Lutheranism. His contacts with Roman Catholic professors and Dominican fathers earned him the title, "The Pet Heretic of Quebec."<sup>11</sup>

This unofficial ministry of the church was legitimized in 1965 by the English District of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod's agreement to sponsor the *Centre de documentation et rencontres*. Pourchot was named the part-time director. The dream was to make the center a co-operative effort of the major Lutheran church bodies in Canada,<sup>12</sup> so as to avoid the disaster of carrying Lutheran differences into French Canada. Pastor

Pourchot envisioned a center that would:

1. Initiate a program for dialogue with French Canada to reach the lay and clerical members of the church in ecumenical studies. There is no thought of proseletizing among any members of any existing church.
2. Serve those who have no church relationship and might be interested in forming a worshipping community. A congregation could result from the work at the Centre but this should not be the immediate purpose for its establishment.<sup>13</sup>

In 1966, independently of the Center's activity, Saint Paul congregation<sup>14</sup> (LCA-CS) in suburban Saint Laurent began bi-weekly services in French. A retired pastor from France, Florimand Canapeel, officiated at the services. Through Saint Paul, this same pastor initiated French (and German) worship services in Quebec City in 1967, and continued to do so for three years. One church historian commented, "However, this ministry was not followed through by the BAM (Board for American Missions) with an aggressive approach towards making an entry into the field . . . Nor was the BAM excited by the prospects, even though a survey had not been taken . . . So the dream faded."<sup>15</sup>

The same fate seemed to await Pourchot's project. The centre that had been built on so much hope floundered for a decade. Still, the prolonged non-directional venture provided time and opportunity for evaluation and planning. Ironically, the attention that the problematic situation required was partially responsible for the perpetuation of the interest in French ministry. Often that stimulus was in the negative in the vein of "so much to do, so little being done, so poorly."

Nevertheless, during the decade 1966-1976, several events steered the French work in a more defined direction. These events led to the establishment of worshipping communities in both Montreal and West Quebec. In 1969, the work being done by Pourchot was undergirded by the broadcasting of "L'heure luthérienne," a radio program from France sponsored by the Lutheran Laymens' League (LLL), an auxiliary of the LCMS. For several years, only one station carried the program. But by 5 April 1976, two more stations in Quebec added the program, thereby covering most of the province.<sup>16</sup>

Meanwhile, the Center's work progressed. Professors and students

gathered for discussion and several students were instructed in the Lutheran faith. This group requested that Pastor Pourchot lead them in regular worship at the University chapel.

Concurrently, Christ Memorial Evangelical Lutheran Church, the English District's English-language Montreal congregation began to consider work in French. By September 1975, Pastor Pourchot transferred his work to Christ Memorial which became the mission congregation of "La Réconciliation" after the English congregation disbanded because of dwindling numbers. One of Pourchot's theology students who had become Lutheran, Denis Fortin, was ordained in 1979 and began working on Montreal's East side. His work led to the development of another mission congregation which eventually took the name "La Communauté de la Pâque."

During the same time that full-time French work was being consolidated in Montreal, similar work was being planned by the Ontario District of the LCMS in West Quebec. The district's official organ, *The Supplement*, revealed the come-of-age mentality that helped spark the new work: "We are ready to begin, for the first time in the nearly 100-year history of the Ontario District, mission work in the French language."<sup>17</sup> The city of Gatineau was deliberately selected so as to be surrounded by the care and support of the six English-language LCMS churches in the area. West Quebec was the only part of Quebec where this physical proximity of so LCMS many churches held true.

The French ministry was launched in 1976 by David Elseroad, a newly-ordained American from the Saint Louis seminary. At the same time, Charles Cooley, one of Elseroad's classmates, had been assigned to the then century-old parish in Buckingham, thirty kilometres east of Gatineau. Cooley was to study the French language and begin part-time French outreach in that town as a complement to the Gatineau initiative.

The new mission work in Gatineau took hold, and was organized under the name "L'Église luthérienne évangélique du Sauveur Vivant." Door-to-door surveys, small-group Bible studies and newspaper announcements conveyed the message that the Lutherans were present. A Quebec-produced radio program, "Au pays des vivants," provided another contact to heighten the awareness of that presence. Indeed, the first family of Lutherans-to-be came to the mission through that program.<sup>18</sup>

### *Evolution of the Missionary Activity*

The initial flurry of activity in outreach and response in both Montreal and Gatineau gave rise to great expectations. These two spheres of activity were seen as only small beginnings of better things to come. In 1981 Elseroad reported that L'Église du Sauveur Vivant had ten communicant members. The sobering reality of limited response could not be ignored. Still, far from being discouraged, he optimistically stated: "The faithful are catching a vision of what their mission is throughout Quebec as pioneers of the Reformation witness to the Good News in 'La Belle Province.'"<sup>19</sup> Reports from Montreal reflected the same sort of limited response as well as the same sort of optimism.

Despite the optimism, the pioneering endeavour of French work took its toll on the missionary workers. In the period from 1976 to 1990 a total of ten full-time workers were sent to establish the Lutheran presence in Quebec. Various posts were begun and failed. Out of the ten workers who had been sent to do French work, only three were in place by 1990. The monthly French worship services begun in Buckingham in 1976 came to a halt with the departure of Pastor Cooley in 1981. In 1980 a candidate was sent from the Saint Louis seminary to begin work in Aylmer (West Quebec). After six months the pastor felt uncomfortable with the French-Canadian culture and took a call to a Hispanic parish in Brooklyn.<sup>20</sup>

In 1985 Elizabeth Chittim, a convert to Lutheranism through the French outreach, began her work as deaconess with the two communities in Montreal. Lack of funds from the district caused her to seek employment as a social worker elsewhere in 1988, while remaining active in the French work.<sup>21</sup> Also, in 1988 monthly French services and outreach were begun again in Buckingham as a ministry of the Gatineau mission, but after a year the services were stopped because of limited interest. In 1990, after ten years of diligent, intensive and dedicated work, Pastor Denis Fortin left the Lutheran ministry. Combined factors of lack of numerical growth and funding as well as geographic and cultural isolation from the Lutheran community-at-large contributed to his resignation.<sup>22</sup> His departure marked the end of the Communauté de la Pâque congregation that had already been reduced through doctrinal controversy and work-related transfers of members. Since the early 1980s, Ascension, Montreal, had half-heartedly attempted to establish some French work but never quite succeeded.

Along with the internal failures that hampered the work were many external factors that adversely effected the missionary activity. The

secularization that so devastated weekly participation in the Roman Catholic mass did nothing to inspire the seeking out of another form of Christianity. Those who did seek out an alternative to Roman Catholicism often found Lutheranism too Catholic in practice or too Protestant in doctrine. Moreover, the element of “former non-involvement” that had been viewed so positively often worked against the outreach because Lutheranism was *so* foreign and unknown.<sup>23</sup>

By the late 1980s the handwriting was on the wall for Communauté de la Pâque, and La Réconciliation had reached a plateau of growth. But all was not considered lost. Indeed, a series of events brought new life and vigour to the French missionary enterprise. The Gatineau parish, by then being served by Pastor David Somers, had broken out of a holding pattern and began to grow at a modest but steady rate. In 1988, one of the Gatineau members, Yves Osborne, entered Concordia Lutheran seminary (LC-C) at Saint Catharines, ON. He was the first French-Canadian to do so.<sup>24</sup> He was ordained in 1992 and was assigned to the Gatineau parish.<sup>25</sup> By 1988, David Milette, a member of Ascension, Montreal, announced his intentions of entering the same seminary with the goal of working in French.

Then, in 1990, a group of three disenchanting francophone Pentecostals of former Roman Catholic background literally knocked at the door of the English-language Ascension church. After having studied the Lutheran confessions, they had decided that they were Lutherans and thus had sought out the church. Eventually, in September 1992, their presence gave rise to the founding of a preaching station under the supervision of the East District of the Lutheran Church – Canada (LC-C)<sup>26</sup> through the Gatineau pastors. One of that initial group, Jason Kouri, entered the seminary at Saint Catharines in 1992.<sup>27</sup>

Also in Montreal, francophone Lutherans had become more numerous in the fourteen congregations of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada (ELCIC).<sup>28</sup> One parish, Good Shepherd in suburban Saint Lambert, began monthly services in French to serve its own members. Although no independent French-language community existed in the ELCIC the situation led to the formation of “Le comité pastoral francophone” in order to address the needs of the francophone community.<sup>29</sup>

Despite the minimal results after so many workers and so many years of Lutheran outreach, the Lutherans appeared more optimistic than ever. The East District president wrote in 1993 concerning the situation,

“prospects for mission outreach in French-speaking Canada are brighter than they have ever been.”<sup>30</sup>

### ***Motivation***

The last aspect of the Lutheran missionary outreach among Quebec francophones in the late-twentieth century to be considered is that of motivation. Limited success notwithstanding, the Lutherans remained determined to continue work in French. The drive to persevere is evident in the pertinent church literature which conveys a consistent message of a sense of uniqueness in the Lutheran presence in Quebec. The first missionary at Gatineau expressed it thus:

The Lutheran Church is the last major church to enter the field. Is our presence necessary or will we only duplicate the efforts of others? . . . There is certainly more than any one denomination can claim to do. But there is also an urgent need for a mission ministry of Word and Sacrament that is truly informed by the Scriptures and the Confessions; for a clear witness to the objective Gospel of justification by grace through faith in Christ amidst the confusion of man-centered subjectivism; for a sound demonstration of that Christian liberty that faith in the Gospel engenders . . . Will that call to stand firm with the authentic Gospel be heard in Quebec?<sup>31</sup>

The zeal for a clearly Lutheran expression of the Christian faith was not unique to the Quebec outreach. One author expressed the same in writing about the necessity for a Lutheran presence in the whole of Canada in 1977: “It would seem that an indigenous Lutheran church is necessary because we would not feel ourselves completely at home with another tradition on account of either doctrine or practice. We feel we have something to say and to show about the Gospel that other denominations are not saying or showing.”<sup>32</sup>

This attitude of unique confessionality within the church catholic helps explain the interest in establishing a francophone Lutheran presence in Quebec at a time when ecumenism was all the rage. While other mainline churches were in the mainstream of ecumenism, many Lutherans often tended to swim in the same waters but in other currents. Denis Fortin, the first French-Canadian Lutheran pastor expressed it thus:



Is not the essential for Christians that Jesus be recognized as Savior and Lord? That the Good News be shared with the greater number? Structural Union, desirable though it may be, cannot occur at the expense of the spiritual growth of members, and of the faithfulness to the Gospel message. Differences do remain at this level, and they are more than theological quarrels about theoretical formulations.<sup>33</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Lutheran missionary activity in the late twentieth century was the culmination of a series of developments. Both inside and outside Lutheranism, the time appeared to be right, everything seemed in place. The opening of the Roman Catholic Church to the outside world through Vatican II at the same time as the Quiet Revolution made Quebec more readily accessible to outsiders than ever before. That accessibility, coupled with an increasing Canadian, Lutheran self-confidence, attracted mission attention to the geographically-convenient province where Lutheranism was virtually unknown especially among the francophone population. Despite these apparently favourable conditions, the mission endeavour was an uphill battle exacting casualties in personnel, time and energy. Response to the outreach was largely indifferent and growth was not only slow but also limited.<sup>34</sup> But for one factor the missionary activity might have succumbed to the discouraging situation. The key element in the pursuit of the French work was the conviction that Lutheranism had a vision of the Gospel that was necessary to communicate despite the cost. It is that sense of uniqueness that leaves the story of Lutheran missionary activity among Quebec francophones in the late-twentieth century an unfinished tale.

### **Endnotes**

1. See Robert Merrill Black, "Different Visions: The Multiplication of Protestant Missions to French-Canadian Roman Catholics, 1834-1855," in *Canadian Protestant and Catholic Missions, 1820s-1830s*, eds. J. Moir and C.T. McIntire (New York: Peter Lang, 1988), 49-73.
2. John S. Moir, *Enduring Witness* (The Presbyterian Church in Canada: Eagle Press Printers, 1987), 155-157.

3. W. Nelson Thomson, "Witness in French Canada," in *Baptists in Canada: Search for Identity Amidst Diversity*, ed. J.K. Zeman (Burlington: G.R. Welch Co. Ltd., 1980), 55-59.
4. Lutherans made up 1% of the Canadian population in 1881, 2% in 1901, 3% in 1921 and 1941, and 4% in 1961 (see Reginald W. Bibby, *Fragmented Gods: The Poverty and Potential of Religion in Canada* [Toronto: Irwin Publishing, 1987], 47).
5. F.M. Malinsky, ed., *Grace and Blessing* (Kitchener, ON: Ontario District of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod, 1954), 26.
6. Jean Hamelin, *Histoire du catholicisme québécois. Le XXe siècle*, Tome 2, *De 1940 à nos jours*, dir. Nive Voisine (Montréal: Boréal Express, 1984), 308.
7. Bibby, 20.
8. Beginning in 1854, Lutherans established congregations in Montreal and West Quebec. By the 1960s there were eighteen such communities numbering 5,079 communicants. Although nine languages were used for worship, French was not one of them (see J. Bodensieck, ed., *The Encyclopedia of the Lutheran Church* [Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1965], s.v. "Quebec," by B. Pershing).
9. E.T. Bachman and M.B. Bachman, *Lutheran Churches in the World* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Press, 1989), 558. The stimulus of such reformation-related events on Lutheran outreach was observed in Germany at the three-hundredth anniversary which contributed to a confessional revival, as well as the 400th anniversary which led to an intensified thrust of Lutheran doctrine dissemination in the English-speaking world (see Clifford E. Nelson, *The Lutherans of North America* [Minneapolis: Augsburg Press, 1975], 151, 334).
10. Norman Threinen, *Like a Mustard Seed* (Kitchener, ON: Ontario District of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod, 1989), 171-172.
11. "Lutherans in La Belle Province," *Lutheran Witness* 105 (February 1986): 7.

12. The major divisions working in Eastern Canada at the time were the American Lutheran Church (ALC); the Eastern Synod of the Lutheran Church in America (LCA); and the English District, the Ontario District and the Synod of Evangelical Lutheran Churches (SELC) of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod (LCMS).
13. “French Lutheran Centre”, 27 May 1965, Minutes of Organizational Meeting, East District Archives, Kitchener, ON.
14. For the purposes of this paper, the terms “congregation,” “worshipping community,” “mission” and “parish” are used in a non-technical sense to describe a gathering of believers.
15. Roy Grosz, *The Wheels of Change* (Kitchener, ON: Eastern Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, 1989), 188-189.
16. “Lutherans in La Belle Province,” 21.
17. Threinen, 173.
18. “Mobilizing for Mission in Quebec,” promotional pamphlet, 1983, archives of L’Église évangélique luthérienne du Sauveur Vivant, Gatineau, PQ.
19. Threinen, 174.
20. Rev. Kelly-Ray Merrit to Dr. A.J. Stanfel, 29 January 1982, East District Archives, Kitchener, ON.
21. Report of Meeting of the Advisory Board for l’Église évangélique luthérienne au Québec in Montreal, 13 September 1989, East District Archives, Kitchener, ON.
22. Denis Fortin, “Bilan pastoral du temps vécu depuis la dernière assemblée de l’Église,” 20 May 1989, pastoral report, archives of La Communauté de la Pâque, Montreal, PQ.
23. Denis Fortin, “Être Québécois et protestant aujourd’hui,” in *L’Église Luthérienne: origine et implantation au Québec* (Montreal: Église évangélique luthérienne au Québec, 1987), 16-25.

24. Denis Fortin, the first Quebec-born francophone Lutheran pastor, did his theological studies at the University of Montreal.
25. *East District News* (Lutheran Church-Canada) 1 (June 1992): 1.
26. The Ontario District of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod became the East District of the Lutheran Church – Canada in 1991.
27. “Montreal French Outreach Goes Ahead,” *East District News* (Lutheran Church-Canada) 1 (October 1992): 1.
28. The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Canada (including the former American Lutheran Church) and the Lutheran Church of America – Canada Section merged in 1986 to form the Evangelical Lutheran Church In Canada (ELCIC).
29. Derek-Michael Strauch, “The Lutheran presence in Montreal,” *Canada Lutheran*, November 1992, 12.
30. R.E. Winger, *East District Report*, in *Third Lutheran Church-Canada Convention Workbook* (Winnipeg: Lutheran Church – Canada, 1993), E50.
31. “*Q-in*,” mss, 1983, Eglise évangélique luthérienne du Sauveur Vivant, Gatineau, PQ, 3-4.
32. V. Ericksson, “Rationale for an Indigenous Lutheran Church in Canada,” in *In Search of Identity*, ed. Norman Threinen (Winnipeg: Lutheran Council in Canada, 1977), 45.
33. Original French text: “L’essentiel pour les chrétiens n’est-il pas que Jésus soit reconnu comme Sauveur et Seigneur, que la Bonne Nouvelle soit partagée au plus grand nombre? L’union structurelle aussi souhaitable qu’elle soit ne peut se faire aux dépens de la croissance spirituelle des membres et de la fidélité au message de l’Évangile. Des différences demeurent toujours à ce niveau, et elles sont plus que des querelles de théologie sur des formulations théoriques” (Fortin, 26-27).

34. The two francophone missions of La Réconciliation, Montreal and Sauveur Vivant, Gatineau, had a combined communicant membership of 40 in 1991 (see *Lutheran Churches in Canada: 1992 Directory* [Winnipeg: Lutheran Council in Canada, 1992], 37).

