



Lutheran Quietism - You keep your head down, you do your work and you don't make a fuss.

By Bishop Greg
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I am currently working on a theory about Canadian Lutheran culture that I refer to as “Lutheran Quietism.”

When we consider the DNA of an organization, we think about why does it act or not act in a certain way. This question came up in a recent conversation in our synod regarding social action; about decisions regarding participation in marches, public demonstrations and protests.

I have noticed that certain denominations have a history of speaking to the politicians, the establishment, the “movers and shakers.” Our Lutheran Church does so to a certain degree, but I’m trying to understand our DNA underneath the surface.

We might know and believe that certain things must be said, but the emotional process affects how we make our pronouncements and live them out.

Here is a rough outline of my theory, based on my experiences of growing up in western Canadian Lutheranism and in part on my own paternal family history. This might be a simplistic view written years later in the comfort of a safe, privileged life.

In the late 1890s, my paternal ancestors arrived in Saskatchewan. They had left eastern European lands, with all of its wars and rumours of war. The First World War began and those of German descent were regarded with suspicion, sometimes even considered to be the enemy. In such situations, you keep your head down, you do your work, and you don’t make a fuss.

After that war, there was more immigration.

Then World War Two erupted. Once again, those of German descent were the enemy. Unlike those of Japanese descent, they were not forcibly removed from their homes, and sent inland with their rights denied. However, there was suspicion, fear of the other, distrust, and perhaps even violence fomented against them.

So, you keep your head down, you do your work, and you don’t make a fuss. You also try to show your faithfulness to your new country. You do not want attention brought your way.

I think back to stories of my grandfather, a pastor in southern Saskatchewan in the 1930s. He lived in the same town as a Baptist minister, Tommy Douglas.

When I read about Tommy Douglas, I was struck by the differences between his actions and what I have gleaned about my grandfather. Tommy Douglas’ cultural DNA was the same as that of the political and business class in Canada. My grand- father’s cultural DNA was not.

Tommy Douglas led protests and marches for workers’ rights. He saw the inequities, the cast-aside lives of vulnerable people, and he challenged the powers and principalities.

My grandfather ministered to the German Lutheran congregation and led worship services at the local hospital and care centre. He and the congregation kept their heads down, did their work, and didn’t make a fuss.

I think such an attitude and posture is still embedded in many of us, today. It affects the decisions we make and the actions we take. It underlies the hesitancy and, perhaps, the fear.

I do not want the cultural DNA of Lutheran Quietism to be an excuse. It is not a reason for us to abrogate our responsibility to speak out against in- justice, let alone to refrain from acting against injustice. If we understand our history, we then can move beyond it.

Let’s name it. Let’s talk about it. Let us not be afraid to share our hesitations and concerns. Then, let us take those concerns, let us bring our DNA of Lutheran Quietism, and set those things alongside a call to action on any number of issues. And let us ask ourselves the question: “How do we NOW choose to be and to act?”