

Oral History Interview
with the Reverend Dr.
Edgar R. Trexler

June 21, 2006

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The Rev. Dr. Edgar R. Trexler oral interview - June 21, 2006

Oral History Interview with the Rev. Edgar R. Trexler is being conducted at Hendersonville, North Carolina, on June 21, 2006, by the Rev. Lowell G. Almen, secretary of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

Almen: Thank you for consenting to the interview. You served for more than two decades in the office of the Lutheran Church in America in Philadelphia on the staff of The Lutheran, including as editor from 1978 to 1987. Then you served in the churchwide office of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America in Chicago from the autumn of 1987 through October 31, 1999. How would you compare and contrast the ecclesial culture and awareness of those two different offices?

Trexler: Well, I had been brought up and educated in the LCA and its colleges and seminaries. I was aware of the nature of the church as the LCA understood it, meaning one church with various expressions. Being churchly and a sense of churchmanship was highly prized. I felt very comfortable in the LCA. It meant that you could be pretty sure that wherever you were across the breadth of the LCA that similar kinds of practice and understandings and even a theological mainstream were fairly obvious. You could be very comfortable because you knew where the parameters were—not too much to the left, not too much to the right, but very much mainstream. And it meant that as editor, for example, I could pretty well judge what we should publish and should not publish based in part upon the reactions you anticipated from different viewpoints in the church because you knew where the mainstream was.

In the ELCA, and I suppose it was unavoidable because of the coming together not only of different geographic areas, but in some sense ecclesial cultures, that, at least in the early days, and I think pretty much all the way through my time there, although it was improving by 1999, the ELCA did not have that sense of a single, united ecclesiology. There was the old LCA point of view and there was the ALC point of view which to me was much more congregational. I was surprised when the ELCA began that those differing cultures permeated the new church and the new structure so thoroughly, and continued to permeate it for some years, even though we all had the same intellectual understanding in the constitutional language regarding the nature of the church. Actually, the nature of the church that is articulated in the ELCA constitution is verbatim from the LCA constitution. But the regional differences that had given rise to certain ways of understanding, particularly with governance, and with understanding the roles of the different expressions of the church, whether synod or district or its congregational or national church body, those preferences continued and it meant that the mainstream was not as obvious. There was kind of a mainstream for a certain part of the church, perhaps in the sense of, from my perspective, of the Upper Midwest, and the mainstream was a little bit different if you moved toward the East Coast and those two never really swam together in the early days. And, therefore, again, as editor, it was a little more difficult to assess certain kinds of articles and what their impact would be because you didn't know where the mainstream of the church was on this or that issue. Now this was probably unavoidable since it was a merger and things had to sort out and to shake down. This might be a simplistic description, but it seemed to me that the matter of the nature of the church, ecclesiology, was something that was not settled at the time of the merger, even though the

words were there. And it did not settle in the early days of the church. And I would say, at least for a decade, there was still very sharp differences as to perspectives on the nature of the church and I think it impeded the coming together of the church. It's well documented. You can go back and read all sorts of places where the East Coast felt that the Midwest took over the church, or the Midwest thought that the East Coast was trying to continue to govern, since it had always governed, since it was primarily an East Coast church, just as the ALC had been primarily an Upper Midwestern church. It took a long time, and I guess we are there now. I don't know, but my suspicion is that we either are there or we are approaching a more common view of the church because we've grown a new generation of pastors and leaders who do not have the baggage that some of us brought with us, even though the baggage was well intentioned on all sides. I am not suggesting anybody was out to do anyone in. But there was the sheer reality of all of our pasts coming together and, until we have a common history, those differences were going to continue to be there.

Almen: You were ordained by the United Lutheran Church in America in 1962 and that was the year of the constituting of the Lutheran Church in America. From your vantage point as a young pastor, did you see a more rapid coalescing of those four church bodies that formed the LCA?

Trexler: The reality of that LCA merger is, first of all, that it wasn't really a merger. It was an absorption by the ULCA of the other bodies, not in a malicious sense, but just the sheer reality of the size of the ULCA. Having grown up in North Carolina, we did not have any congregations of the other three bodies that came together with the ULCA to make up the LCA. And then when I was serving a congregation in Upstate New York which, again, was very heavily ULCA, I don't know that we noticed a difference. It was just business as usual. The headquarters didn't change. The bishop didn't change, or the president, I should say, didn't change—Franklin Clark Fry. And, you know, The Lutheran was still the same in many ways, but, again, now remember that I am coming out of the ULCA. I am sure someone out of Augustana or out of the Danish and the Finnish bodies, no doubt, would have a different perspective, but that continuity and that sameness was so prevalent, in my judgment, that the LCA came into being and had relatively smooth sailing. It did have some financial hiccups along the way in 1968 or 1969, somewhere in there, because I remember Franklin Clark Fry publishing a piece called, *This Is An Emergency*. But, nonetheless, the coming together of the LCA as a merger and the coming together of the ELCA as a merger were two completely different experiences. The first, I think, was a whole lot more positive than the other.

Almen: You were acquainted with Dr. Franklin Clark Fry in his role as president of the LCA, and his successor Dr. Robert Marshall, and then you worked closely with Bishop James Crumley of the LCA, and then with Bishop Chilstrom as the first bishop of the ELCA, and Presiding Bishop George Anderson in the ELCA. Is there a way in which you characterize the primary style or manner of each of those leaders of the churches that you knew so well?

Trexler: Well, there were differences. I think everyone recognizes that Franklin Clark Fry was a very strong leader whether it was his role in the LWF or World Council of Churches or ULCA. The way in which he thought and envisioned, more often than not came to pass,

whether it was in documents or decisions of the church. He was a very strong authority in the church. I am not ready to call him authoritarian, but the way Dr. Fry thought influenced a lot of people in a lot of different areas so that the direction of the church very much reflected his view of the church. In many ways much of the same is true with Bob Marshall. Now, nobody is a Franklin Clark Fry. Even Bob Marshall would tell you that, and he sort of trembled at the idea of walking in the shoes. But Bob is a good theologian, and continued in this understanding of the nature of the church and its ecumenical endeavors, just as Fry had done. You pretty much knew where Bob stood on most anything and everything, then Jim Crumley, as well, although I don't think Jim was as strong an authority in the church as was Fry or Marshall. I think that is partly a matter of Jim's background, his very genteel way of living life, and being a part of life. But I would also say that by the time Jim came along, the culture in general was changing, and the older, more authoritarian style would not work the way that it did when Fry was president. And yet, even at the time of the merger, there were times within the LCA delegation that there was open criticism of what Jim was not saying as opposed to sometimes what he was saying. In other words, there were times that parts of the delegation would say, "Jim needs to say XYZ," whatever it is, and be very direct and very forceful about it. And Jim tended to take the high road and he did so, again, with this genteel nature. Reuben Swanson did the in-fighting, in terms of issues that were part of the merger commission at that time. So, the style there of Crumley, in some eyes at least, could have been stronger and more of a real hand on the till that said, "Folks, this is the way we are going." Jim preferred discourse leading to consensus, and letting that process do its work, as opposed to striking out and saying, "Here we go." We go on with Herb Chilstrom, and I think that of all the bishops that I worked under and with, and I guess there were five (Fry, Marshall, Crumley, Chilstrom, and Anderson), Chilstrom was the one that I was never quite sure of where he stood on a lot of issues. He is the only bishop I ever was editor under who cautioned me about whether I should do this story or that particular news story. The one particular instance I remember, he was saying, "Well, if you use that, I won't back you." That story was the obituary of Larry Hand. He was bishop of the Southeast Pennsylvania Synod and after performing a wedding he died while he was on the dance floor with the wedding party and his wife. And our story said that's what happened. And Herb was very upset with that because he said, "I can't back you if you say that. That won't go in parts of the church." And I said, "Herb, everybody knows what happened. If you knew Larry, you knew that dancing was one of the things that he and Pat enjoyed, as his wife." "No, well, it's just too risky. We don't need to inflame people in certain parts of the church." And I said, "Well, I understand what you are saying, and I also know what I need to do." And we ran the story. I asked him several months later if he had gotten any mail about the piece, or had anyone talked to him about it, and he said no. And I didn't think he would. And, frankly, in that instance, I didn't think he knew the church as well as perhaps he might. I am not trying to say I knew it better, but my news judgment was that this would not be an issue, that it would be okay to have in print as opposed to hushing it. It wasn't a big deal, but it is an example. I often wasn't sure where Herb was going to be, and I think we saw that at other times and places in his administration. He sent a letter to Clinton in support of gays in the military, and that created a big hue and cry across the church. Maybe it was prophetic. Maybe it was necessary. Maybe it wasn't. And, just to let me finish with George Anderson. I certainly came back into a much higher comfort level of knowing my bishop and knowing where he came from and how he thought. Of course, I was a student of his and an admirer, and continue to be, but I never worried about where George was because I knew who George was. I didn't always know where Herb was.

Almen: Did that incident related to the obituary for Bishop Hand, did that not only seem, from your perspective, to reflect a certain detachment from the reality of culture, but a lack of sense of proportion? To threaten to withhold support on the basis of one line in an obituary, the proportions seem out of whack there.

Trexler: Yeah, I think they are. And, as you said, it is one line. And, yet, I thought it was an integral part of that particular piece if you wanted to understand the nature of the person who had died. I don't know that you should attach a whole lot more to it. I think it was Herb's Swedish piety that was still in the back of his mind and he just didn't want to offend people who might come out of a pietistic background for whom dancing was not something that you did publicly, at least.

Almen: Obviously, during all of your years as editor, there were some, you know, touchy subjects that you had to cover. Do one or two stand out in your mind as the most difficult editorial decisions in relation to your role in the LCA and the ELCA?

Trexler: Well, I suppose one of those would be the deliberations leading up to the ELCA merger. I favored the possibility of a merger from the very beginning and I think one of my very first editorials, which would have been in the late '70s, dealt with that possibility. It was entitled, *When, Not If*, because the point being, was that merger should happen. It was not a question as to whether it should happen; it was a matter of when it should happen. And I stayed with that position and I still think it was the right position, although there were times, I have to admit, that I had second thoughts and said, boy, this is really becoming a difficult process. Or after the church was formed, there were a lot of people who said, looking back, we never should have done this. I never said that. And I won't say it, even though those early years in the ELCA were professionally the hardest of my life, without question. Nothing else even came close to dealing with the constant defense, not only of the merger, but the way the church was going. The attacks were so broad-based and came from clergy in great numbers and with great rhetoric. So that you realize that it was tough sledding for this new church to organizationally get off the ground and be accepted and approved and people ready to join and get on with it. There was a lot of initial enthusiasm, but it died out quickly. Those are the years I am talking about, when being both the editor of the magazine and trying to explain what was going on in the church, often was interpreted as a defense of the church, when that was not the primary motive. Those were not easy years. I am not even sure they were good years for the ELCA. Those were tough years because with the financial issues, and with some personnel issues, because that was a time when a lot of the early news about clergy sexual misconduct was coming into play. So that was the hardest.

Now, some of the other things I might mention are related to some extent. I was always a firm believer and still am in the ecumenical nature of the church. And I think if you had the kinds of opportunities I did to see the church at work, whether it was organizationally with the World Council of Churches or the LWF, or in bilateral conversations, or on-site with missionaries and our various institutions, almost all of which overseas had some ecumenical nature, because you needed it. For example, two-and-a-half percent of India is Christian. Over there, you can't be just Lutheran. Being Christian itself is very distinctive. But so many people in the church did not have that wider view of the church. I am not necessarily

speaking of leadership, although some, but primarily, of the people in the pew. And so when you got into these ecumenical agreements, such as the Lutheran-Episcopal, the reactions to those became irrational. At that point, there was not a whole lot the magazine could do except to say it the way it is. In other words, this is what the document means, or these are the implications, or here are some of the historical reasons why it makes sense for these two churches to have some deeper communion. But the irrationality there meant that sometimes you just never got very far. I remember even George Anderson saying one time he wished he could have done more to have helped the understanding, but it just wasn't happening. And it wasn't because it wasn't being said. It's just that either it was not heard or it was what was being heard was not what people wanted to hear. And then, obviously, the issues of sexuality became one of the larger ones and, again, with the very beginning of the ELCA, with the events in San Francisco, with the irregular ordination of three people, sent that whole subject off on a tangent that is still with the church. It came to something of a head, I guess, in 1991 in relation to an abortion statement, but, later on, as that first draft of the Statement on Sexuality, which was in, what, '93?

Almen: October '93.

Trexler: '93. That became a difficult one in the sense that it was a statement that probably never should have been issued in the form in which it was issued in 1993. It obviously was still premature in some of its thinking and it created a bombshell. I kind of smiled to myself when saying that, "Yep, that one was not a good moment for the church," and I said so editorially, I think the line was, "Let's face it. The release of the statement on sexuality is a disaster." And it was because there was an awful lot of cleanup that had to come after that. But those are the kinds of things that were the difficult moments and you always had the mixed editorial responsibility of trying to help to guide and lead and direct the church in the sense of saying now here is what we are trying to do, or here's what's trying to be said, or these are directions we are trying to set, and, at the same time, maintain your credibility with all kinds of critics who think you are doing nothing except just stonewalling for the sake of the church. That was not the issue, and most of the critics were those real rock-ribbed types, who would not let the editor make that distinction between what seemed to be good and sound on the basis of our theology or our history or our understanding of the whole church as over against just simply being the mouthpiece of headquarters, which I never considered myself to be and would have rebelled if somebody had suggested. But, nonetheless, I got that moniker and there wasn't much you could do except just lay it aside and do your work.

Almen: Is there a particular editorial decision that you made along the way that, from the perspective of some years now, and a long career in church communication, you would do differently if you had the chance to do it again?

Trexler: Well, I suppose it sounds a little arrogant to say I'm not sure that there is. I am sure that there are some relatively smaller kinds of editorial opinions that expressed on this subject or that, I might have worded differently, but I can't think of an opinion that I would have changed. I can't think of any that are issues of real significance in the life of the church that I would have taken a much different stance on than I did. Even that flap with the first ELCA Conference of Bishops meeting over their intervention with getting David Preus and

Jim Crumley to withdraw opinion pieces was a matter of upholding the principle of no prior censorship. That was a stand I would take again.

Almen: One of the things that, you know, is very important for perspective and understanding on certain issues is adequate background information. Did you find any difference in your access to that kind of background information in the Lutheran Church in America in comparison to the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America? For example, where bishops were more willing to brief you in the background of a developing issue in one church body versus another? Or was it essentially the same?

Trexler: I think perhaps it was a little easier to get backgrounding in the LCA. Again, a lot of those bishops were contemporaries and people that I had known even before I became editor, and I knew them before they became bishops. Again, the LCA I knew, used and understood terminology, like background sessions and executive session and closed session and the nuances that go with those. When the ELCA formed, there were a lot of bishops who didn't know me and I didn't know them, and we had to reinvent those terminologies and what they meant. And until that was done, it was more difficult to get background because they didn't know me and I didn't know them and I suppose the element of trust wasn't very strong in the sense of their not knowing exactly what you would use out of what they would say. That improved over the years, I remember later on that people like David Hardy, who was an ELCA counsel, would call me every three months or so and say, "It's time we have a session to brief you and bring you up-to-date on the issues that are out there," and these were primarily sexual misconduct cases, "just so you don't get surprised and so, if you hear anything, you will know in what context to use it." I appreciated that immensely and obviously went as often as he called. And I found David to be very helpful. I certainly would not say that about all the executive directors, even to the last day, in terms of how much they were willing to tell you, how much leeway they were willing to grant you, and how much you might know as over against how much you might use. It was hard to deal with people who were not sure how much they wanted to tell you, or how much they trusted to tell you. I worked hard at understanding confidentiality and certainly maintaining it. I don't think there is anybody out there who can say, "Well, I told Trexler this in confidence and he used it." I don't think that is out there anywhere on any subject because trust was heart and soul of being able to do my job, to be able to get information, and then to carefully assess it and use it in ways that not only had journalistic integrity, but also with a sense of a responsible role that you played as a church official. And not to be able to get the information in the first place always made me think, well, they are not quite sure yet, you know, after all my years.

Aim en: Was that primarily in the ELCA?

Trexler: I would say that is primarily in the ELCA. Yes.

Almen: You had some, you know, very strong executives in the LCA, too, with very distinguished service. Ken Senft, for example.

Trexler: Okay. Ken Senft and Kent Gilbert. I would have to say, up to the last, Kent Gilbert and I never did really see eye to eye on everything. He tended to be kind of closed mouth in

general. But he was not as open with me as some others. In the ELCA, there were some, and some are still in office, who—not necessarily bishops, but even churchwide staff—who were not always sure that they were going to tell you much. They would tell you a little bit, but maybe not everything.

Almen: Well, if it's any comfort, that's a broader problem than just in relationship to a magazine and has been along the way.

Trexler: Yes, I am sure that is true.

Almen: The fact is that presiding bishops have been surprised in some unfortunate ways that should not have happened either. And I hope that system is being refined. But it is a broader problem.

Trexler: I remember Elson Ruff telling me when I was starting out at The Lutheran—this would have been the late '60s—and I consider him my mentor, he would say in effect, "I don't need to know everything, but don't surprise me. Don't let me be surprised." And I know why he said that. And you do too. You had to have some sense of confidentiality. I needed to know what I needed to know. I didn't need to know everything, but don't let me be surprised.

Almen: We both lived through all of the meetings of the Commission for a New Lutheran Church, from September 1982 through June 1986. I remember that first meeting in Madison, Wisconsin, being bewildering to an astounding degree.

Trexler: And it wasn't just those of us who were observing who were bewildered. The participants were very much overwhelmed at the time. I will let you ask your question, but that meeting just seemed to start and then went in all different directions at the same time. It was very difficult to pull it together so that in three-days time, you had some sense that something had happened.

Almen: Ed, you know, Bill Kinnison, as chair, really had a very important role to play, but in some ways that first meeting made it appear as if there were 70 agendas operating with no one either sharing the agenda or listening to anyone else's agenda. It was almost scary. By the second meeting, things came along a little bit. But do you have some key recollections of points of development in the CNLC where you saw some constructive things occurring, beyond, of course, the completion of the document, and what, you know, led to the three conventions and then the constituting convention?

Trexler: Well, the first three meetings, I guess, maybe into part of the fourth, continued to have that overwhelming and then bewildering kind of mood and feeling. I couldn't quite get a handle on all the things that were coming and I think it is in my book that I used the Kinnison quote, or maybe I just referred to it in my own language, that, you remember, there was one night that Kinnison just read the riot act to the CNLC.

Almen: In Minneapolis.

Trexler: In Minneapolis. And I think I titled that chapter, *The Night It Almost Fell Apart.* "

Almen: Yes.

Trexler: And it did, almost, fall apart that night.

Almen: Mmmhmmm.

Trexler: The CNLC came back the next morning and people seemed to have been aware that they had been chided and were more ready to sit and listen and to think collegially. I do think that then things took a pretty good turn. But there were a few issues, as you know, all the way down the line, whether it was the size of a pension that pastors were to receive, the percentage of salary, some issues related to the size of the Church Council, that just stayed on the surface until the very end. I think the thing that, at least for some of us, was a little troubling, was that so much of at least the early days of the CNLC, and I am thinking maybe up through like meetings five and six, it was still very much a commission that was dealing with nuts and bolts. It was mechanistic, it was logistical, as opposed to either philosophical or certainly theological. The theological papers never got the due that they needed. And, as we both know, that almost blew up, I believe it was at the 8th meeting, when the LCA Conference of Bishops said, hey, this won't do. I mean, what had been produced to that point, particularly regarding the understanding of the church, was inadequate to them.

Almen: There was no chapter at that point on the subject.

Trexler: I guess you are right.

Almen: You know, the chapter on the nature of the church was added after that.

Trexler: It was added after that. It came from the LCA constitution.

Almen: Yes. Word for word.

Trexler: Yeah. That's right. Word for word, for one section. But what I am thinking about was the task force on theology. The work was done, but the output didn't permeate the understanding of the nature of the church, or the vision of the church, or the organization of the church, or how certain things did have a theological basis that ought to be taken into account. I think we all knew that by the time we got to the 10th meeting that the merger was going to fly, but it took almost getting to that point before there was enough comfort in the room that you would say, "Yeah, this is going to work." Most people wanted it to work. Most people hoped it would work. I mean that there would be a document that the churches would accept and the merger would take place. But I think it was, looking back, probably a little more tenuous all along than I thought at the time because there were a lot of things that could have gone wrong, could have skewed this way or that way, and, if not having thwarted the process, at least delaying it.

Almen: I suspect it was mainly in the debate on the percentage of contribution for the pension plan that I found myself a bit puzzled because in my recollection so much of the debate was on the basis of assertions that reflected patterns of the two large predecessor bodies—the LCA and ALC—without a lot of discussion of the underlying principles or purposes that had been observed in the question of adequate pension upon retirement, issues of years of service. If that detail existed in some background report, it didn't seem to be reflected in debate. The debate seemed to be a kind of repetition of certain mantras without informed discussion. Yeah, I think to me, in my recollection, that was the most obvious place that that occurred. There may well have been others. But some of that, you know, seemed to arise from a certain anxiety of certain leaders in relation to one another. Even the composition of the commission giving that disproportionately large number of members to those from the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches because of what was apparently the leadership of The American Lutheran Church anxiety about the fact that the Lutheran Church in America was larger. You know, that ended up skewing some of the discussion along the way, too.

Trexler: Definitely, the AELC was certainly overrepresented and it was represented by persons who would have been to some extent on the edges of either the LCA or the ALC in relation to certain topics such as women and the pension plan. There was a very definite point of view out of the AELC on that, but with good reason. They were struggling to provide almost any pension to pastors who had come into the AELC. And yet, on the whole matter of the makeup, at the time of the LCA merger, the merger commission was not proportionate because Franklin Clark Fry said, "We will have a certain number from the Danes, and a certain number from the Finns, and well beyond their proportion in relation to Augustana and the ULCA. If they had only selected on the basis of church-body size. Then the old ULCA could have just adopted whatever they wished.

Certainly, with the pension thing that you mentioned, both the ALC and LCA were convinced that the plans that each had were the right plans and were the good plans for the future. You know, the percentages were good. The numbers were right, and the groups did not waver very much, and it went right down to the last meeting of the church bodies. Remember, there were two or three issues that were decided on the basis of vote at the church conventions, and the ALC stood by itself and the LCA stood by itself. And the ALC joined basically the LCA and it turned the tide. And there were personalities. David Rokke was always in the midst of this. And Al Anderson was in it. And certainly Reuben Swanson was in it. I am trying to think of who else from the LCA.

Almen: Of the whole group of 70, there was hardly anyone in the room who had any expertise on pension and investment issues.

Trexler: Yes.

Almen: Dr. Swanson would be an example of someone who did. Al Anderson had expertise in finance, and issues like that. But, the extensive debate did not seem to be debated by people who were speaking out of a certain level of expertise on that question. In some of the meetings,

in my recollection, it would almost get awkward at points because of the apparent antipathy between Bishop Crumley and Bishop Preus. In your observation, did you see that at points, skewing the character of the deliberations in the CNLC?

Trexler: Well, they clearly were at different places on a number of issues. I don't know whether it was in pensions as much as in the ecumenical issues, and of course, church organization in general. I always had the feeling that Jim would try to make his points as kindly as he could, maybe even with a velvet-glove kind of approach. Dave, to me, was more right out front. I don't want to characterize him the wrong way, but I mean it was very clear where he was, and why he was where he was, and, I don't know, maybe with not as much readiness to find a way around an issue. That may be harsh. But, as I said earlier, Jim took the high road, and he sort of let Reuben Swanson do the in-fighting. And I mentioned earlier, that there were even those in the LCA delegation that felt on certain issues Jim did not take as strong a leadership role as he might have. This might be going off on a little bit of a tangent, but, as the merger process moved along and there was even the constituting convention with regard to the election of the first presiding bishop, I think most of us in the LCA know that Jim had no real interest in being the bishop of the new church, but he would not withdraw because David did not withdraw. And then, of course, David got a lot of votes, and for good reason. That's not the point. The point was that I think an awful lot of people felt that neither one of them should be the bishop of the new church, and I think Jim was probably in that number. But he was not going to take his name out of the hat.

Almen: Bishop Crumley has alluded to, you know, a prior understanding or a prior agreement, that none of the existing heads of the predecessor churches would be the presiding bishop of the ELCA, and it seemed to indicate a feeling of betrayal when Bishop Preus was pursuing it. And it became a kind of further example of the differing perceptions between those two leaders. Along the way, some of that even carried over into the Lutheran World Federation.

Trexler: Okay, that's where I was going to come in. I know you are aware of that. It was the LCA's turn, as I recall, to provide a vice president of the LWF. I am a little fuzzy on exactly what transpired— but David didn't step aside

Almen: Yes.

Trexler: And David ended up being the vice president.

Almen: Was that in '84 in Budapest that that occurred, after Jim had left?

Trexler: . After Jim had left the LWF assembly.

Almen: There was a sense of betrayal about that.

Trexler: Betrayal there, yes. And see, that's '84. That was right in the middle of a merger process and it further heightened the kind of uncertainty that Jim held for Dave. I don't know whether it would be the other way around or not. But Jim was never sure that he could fully trust whatever it was that Dave was saying, and I hate to make that kind of a blanket statement because I can't back it up with chapter and verse, but the whole sense and

feel of the relationship between the two men was always left incomplete. In other words, they never quite got together. They maintained a little distance because it seemed that each of them felt they needed to have that buffer because they didn't know what might come up that they would need that distance.

Almen: Yes. Yes. And each would, you know, speak about being surprised or undercut by the other now and then.

Trexler: Yes.

Almen: From Bishop Preus' perspective, that exchange of letters by Bishop Crumley and Pope John Paul...

Trexler: Yes.

Almen: That came as a surprise to David and was perceived as a kind of ecumenical end run.

Trexler: Was that really a surprise all the way around? I can believe that it might have happened because Bill Rusch is very much involved in this, and Bill would have been very direct in warning that that letter was coming.

Almen: My understanding from what Bishop Preus told me is

Trexler: Was that he was surprised

Almen: It was a complete surprise

Trexler: Well,

Almen: It came to his awareness only through the news article.

Trexler: Well, that's too bad. That shouldn't have happened that way, but it may well have. I can't speak from firsthand knowledge as to whether it was or not.

Almen: It really was a very historic exchange though. In preparation for the March ecumenical journey, I went back through all of that documentation and quoted parts of both letters in the presentation I made to the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, as a kind of survey of the last quarter century of development.

Trexler: I think that was in 1983 that I was in Rome with Bill and Jim and it may have been the first time that Jim had met Pope John Paul II. I remember afterward Jim sitting around at the table having coffee just glowing with having had the experience. He said, "I felt like I was sitting on the rim of history." I remember that for all these years because it was such a good line to summarize the sense of what he thought he had just experienced, and how much he was taken with it and the promise that it held. So, for him to send that letter the next year would have been something that he would have relished being able to do. It's like when, I

think it was our '86 LCA assembly, when Robert Runcie came, and they celebrated communion together and I remember Jim saying, and it is perfectly natural that he would have said it, but we just were not accustomed to speaking to each other this way across denominational lines, Jim greeted Runcie at the altar as "Dear Brother Robert." Again, today that is not an astonishing line, but it invoked an immediate historical perspective because that was not what was said generally as you met, particularly in formal sessions, with other denomination heads, and Jim meant every word of it.

Almen: Yes. Do you remember the first time you met the Holy Father in Rome? Was that in '83?

Trexler: I think that was '83, and then again in '88. I am pretty sure that is right.

Almen: And then again with Bishop Anderson?

Trexler: No. In '98, Anderson did not meet with Pope John Paul.

Almen: That's right. Oh, that's right.

Trexler: There was the issue of the woman in our delegation.

Almen That woman is bishop.

Trexler: A woman bishop in our delegation. The Pope offered to meet with George privately, and George wouldn't do it, on the basis that this is the church's delegation. It is not me or my delegation. I think the whole group met with everybody else that we intended to meet with, you know, was it DuPrey who was the head of Christian Unity at that point.

Almen: That was before Cassidy, Cardinal Cassidy.

Trexler: Yes. At any rate, he did not meet. So, obviously, none of us met with the Pope on that occasion.

Almen: Of all of the leaders of the churches throughout the world that you have had occasion to meet, is there one that stands out as the most impressive or memorable figure for you?

Trexler: I don't know that I can answer that. I really need to sort of let your mind work through the years, because you are talking about a span of, oh, 25 years or thereabouts. I know I always felt that one of the most genuine was Runcie. He was always so very gracious and seemed at ease with the Lutheran groups and didn't come on to change you, but rather to help you understand them, and for him to understand us. A lot of them I saw in the more conference settings. I mean, you think about LWF types, and LWF assemblies and World Council assemblies. But I am sorry. I will have to work on that.

Almen: It is quite a catalog that you have to page through in a sense of the variety of people in the variety of settings. Of all of the places that you visited, most global mission

areas, as well as ecumenical centers, is there a city, a particular city, or community that stands out with special memories?

Trexler: Yes, there are some of those and there may be some conferences in there, but I remember one afternoon that I was gathering information to write about World Hunger projects, going with Sam Schmitthenner out into a little town in India where they were digging a well by hand, and standing at the top of that well and looking down. I think the article was titled, "72 Feet To Water." By shovel and by little baskets of dirt, there was sort of a circular little roadway that people could get down to where they needed to be shoveling, and also that the dirt could be brought up on the heads of women, primarily. I couldn't believe the kind of industriousness in the wilting heat and yet they were digging that well, and they knew the church was doing it. It was a project of water that this church was making possible for that village in the boiling sun and we got through, after having been up to see the digging in the well, and I came back in the little village and they wanted me to sit. And I talked a little bit with Sam Schmitthenner and with the local pastor. And they brought me something to drink. And I said, "What is that?" And Schmitthenner interjected, "Look, it's buffalo milk. Drink it. It's warm, but it will taste good." He said, "I drink the water. I've already got the parasites. You don't need the parasites so you stay away from it."

Trexler: As I was talking about the wells, and I said that 72 feet to water, and yet this was warm buffalo milk. I told that story many times and everybody always says, "Whew. Did you drink it?" I said, "You bet I did." You needed the moisture. And that's not a very significant thing, and, yet, it was so typical of the kind of things that this church, LCA, ELCA, makes possible on so many different fronts and so many medical stations that people don't know that we do. I mean people in our churches and our congregations don't know that we do. I have one sermon that I have used off and on over the years which is basically just a stringing together of various instances of this sort, or maybe something that we had done in a church in Latvia, or maybe something we were doing with a church in Africa. And, invariably, those kinds of things, when you are meeting people, say "I didn't know we were doing that." Well, to me, that was the stewardship of my life—to make those kinds of experiences known as widely as I could, even beyond the printed page. I always tried to go out and speak and preach whenever there was an opportunity to do something that would expand people's vision of the church. Even when I get invited to preach at dedications in an emergency, I turn it into that. What we are doing here today is historic and memorable and it's important, I tell them. But look at what all else our church is doing—and that you are doing because you are a part of our church. I remember being in Africa when Apollo 13 was in trouble on its journey to the moon and we wondered whether the astronauts could be brought back safely. Well, somewhere outside of Dar Salaam, Tanzania, in a missionary compound where you couldn't see a thing, we were listening to the short-wave radio, battery-powered, about the struggles of these astronauts to get back, and what's being done for them. Just the sheer contrast between where I was then, and the conditions where I was, and what they were doing up there and all the science and all the distance, it was probably as sharp a cleavage between two worlds as I ever experienced. We always had that difference between our culture and where we live and where other people live, but that was so sharply drawn that sometimes you just sit and think and say, "Wow."

Almen: As a young staff member of The Lutheran magazine of the Lutheran Church in

America, do you remember your first international or global mission trip?

Trexler: Oh yes, very vividly, as I said. Those were days when the LCA had a magazine called World Encounter and it was published by the Board of World Missions. They had a deal with The Lutheran that from time to time they would pay the expenses for Lutheran staff persons to travel and then the material would be published in both magazines. I was asked to go to cover our work in Malaysia and Singapore and Indonesia and that was really the first overseas trip. That was in 1969. I remember flying and spending a day or two in Hawaii and did a story about the Lutherans on Oahu, Hawaii, and then flying on and being in a number of cities in Malaysia and, of course, in Singapore, and then in Indonesia. The reason for being in Indonesia was not so much that we had so many of our own people there, but this was a time when there were mass conversions in parts of Sumatra, especially, you know, 1,000 a Sunday, I am told. I don't know if it was really ever that many, but throngs came week after week because, at least the simple explanation was, people would become a Christian because they didn't want to be labeled as Communist. And this is 1969. So I did a story about that. And I did stories in parts of Malaysia that now includes portions of the island of Borneo and it was called Borneo at that time. Well, I guess it was Sabah by that time. I remember being there and sitting in the missionary's home and got mail from home and Emily was telling me that our son Mark has scarlet fever, our second son. And, of course, in those days you didn't phone home like you do now. But then because Singapore is half-way around the world, I came home around the other way and stopped in Rome for a day or two and then came back to Philadelphia. So, oh yeah, I remember that one very vividly. It was the longest one I ever took. It was too long. I think it was like four weeks. Emily thinks it was six. But I never forgot it. I always enjoyed travel and you may or may not know this about me, but when I was in college I was part of a singing group, a fraternity singing group, that sang ballads like the Four Aces and the Four Freshmen and we also did some solo and backup work, you know, Elvis style. We got picked up because we had been on local TV and in different clubs. We got picked up by U.S. Army Special Services. It was in my junior year of college, in the year between my junior and senior years of college, and we spent 90 days with the Army. We gave 87 shows. We were in Charleston, Bermuda, the Azores, Newfoundland, San Francisco, Hawaii, Japan, Okinawa, Korea, right up to the DMZ, and in Guam, and so forth. After that, I guess I had the wanderlust. I still do. So that and then this first missionary trip that came some years later really helped me to understand the world. It helped me understand the church. And it also caused me to make some commencement speeches in which I tried to say to people, "Your education is not complete until you spend three months out of this country. You do need to see not just another culture, but you need to see and hear how we appear to other countries and, you know, you may want to take it with a grain of salt. Okay. But you need to know how we come off. And, of course, that is even more true now, I think, than it was 20 years ago.

Almen: On that military singing tour, did you travel on military aircraft?

Trexler: We did. MATS—Military Air Transport Service. We traveled in old C13 Is that just had the metal rows. They weren't seats, they were just rows along the inside of the craft and, you know, good grief.

Almen: Hour after hour.

Trexler: Hour and hour. Think about it. You are over the Pacific. We stopped at Wake Island to refuel. Nobody thinks about Wake Island these days, but you couldn't get from Hawaii to Japan without doing it in 1958.

Almen: But even in 1969 on that Global Mission trip, that would have been much longer compared to these days, would it not?

Trexler: Yes.

Almen: In terms of connection and refueling?

Trexler: Connections, refueling, and just air speed. They were not traveling at the speed that the 747s do now. Well, things happened with me with the magazine that I would never have anticipated. You heard me say this before, but experiences, both with people and places, and again visions and understandings of the church that you would never have expected, but I would not trade for anything.

Almen: I think there are two things that have in some ways, you know, made me feel a sense of sadness and one is that, in spite of, you know, efforts of many years in the publications and other ways, so many people in our congregations don't seem to have that awareness of how together we are helping to change the world, and how we work in constructive companionship in accompaniment with other churches throughout the world. And then the other point of sorrow is the lack of awareness of being part of them through the vast community of faith within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, but even beyond that. And the kind of tendency of a congregation to see only its own concerns and its own efforts and miss the wider excitement. I think it is important to be excited about the life of one's own congregation, but that wider excitement, and I have pondered over the years what more could be done or needs to be done to help share some of that. The personal stories seem to be the most effective. But that's a sorrow to me that our members have a lot of things to be thrilled about, delighted by. But we seem to have a way instead of focusing on disagreements or controversies. It's a challenge. And I think part of the advantage that we've had, you and I, is being able to see the variety of life throughout the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America in various settings, but then also to see those global connections. And so when we confess the third article in the Creed, there are some vivid images that, you know, automatically come to mind: *In the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church.*

Trexler: You are certainly on target with people in congregations not having a sense of excitement of the kinds of things that they are a part of across the church. I always found that when I preached, as I said earlier, with telling the story. And that's why I usually try to tell stories, and that is when you get the response, "Oh, I didn't know we had been doing that." Well, it is out there but, as we both know, in spite of our best efforts, now whether we are talking about what's been done with Mosaic or with other kinds of media, or with the magazine. You try hard. You work hard. Occasionally, something gets through. But I would have to confess that after being retired here six years now, after leaving the editorship and coming here six, almost seven years ago, and this is in an every home plan congregation here in Hendersonville, and it's an active congregation of a thousand members and there are a lot of people here who are from lots of parts of the world, a lots of parts of the States, I can't remember the last time somebody said to me, "I saw in The Lutheran that..." Or that the

pastor used an illustration from the magazine. People must take the time to make the connection or somehow the connection doesn't jump out at us. I just noticed last night on the Internet, there is a story there about the homes of three workers of the Christian Resource Center, I believe it is called, in Beirut, that had been bombed. And these are not people I know, but I know that center because I have been there, and I wrote about it. Well, I am probably the only person in town that can make that connection and that's okay, but we don't have people who know that we have a ministry in Beirut, much less that the houses of the workers got bombed last night. And you wish you could change that. Change the whole thing. I will, you know, deliberately bring up a certain story in the midst of a conversation, or even in a little class that I might be in, and its always listened to and people are appreciative and then they go on and its not something that they are going to dwell on. I don't know the answer. And, of course, the magazine circulation is probably the lowest in ELCA days, at least. It's what, 350 [350,000], or give or take, maybe not even that much.

Almen: No, below that.

Trexler: Below that. It's kind of sad because you and I both have devoted enormous energies in trying to make it different and yet it doesn't seem to connect. And I must say, even again, after being here six years and realizing how much effort you put into it, and this is a congregation that gets the magazine, you still don't have that much response, at least not that I am aware of. That is a bit sobering. In fact, disappointing, because I figured that people would pay more attention to what we were publishing than I think they are, even though we all know that both, in terms of reading material, as well as all the things that people are doing, that they are not as attuned as they used to be. It was a little disappointing to know you were doing all that, and you were exerting all that energy, and, yet, it wasn't being picked up and noticed.

Almen: Part of it may be that people may read some of that information, but when they see someone tell the story out of firsthand experience, it has that added impact. I know I have been to congregation anniversaries where I have been invited to preach and I will ask for copies of the history and then read as some illustrations a part of the congregation's own history and do a sermon. The response I get almost invariably from at least one person, often more, after the service is, "I didn't know that about us." You know, people do not know their own history and the significance of the ministry of a congregation in a given place, so that challenge of widening vision, I think, is a constant one. You wrote *Anatomy of a Merger* on the process of the Commission for a New Lutheran Church and then *High Expectations* on your history of the ELCA. Were there some significant things that you left out of either book because you didn't think it was time to tell that part of the story?

Trexler: I don't think so. I may have alluded to things and did not tell this or that incident in as much detail as I knew out of deference to people who were still alive, or to the sensitivity of the subject, but I don't think I pulled back on those. Somebody else might have a different opinion. The hardest part that I had to do on any of the two books, was when I decided I was going to do a chapter in *High Expectations* about the leadership style of the ELCA, and then you had to deal obviously with the styles of the presiding bishops, and then a little section on the Conference of Bishops, and also on the Church Council. Those got a little dicey in certain places and particularly with certain people because I had to be honest to myself, and honest to what I thought the circumstances were, even though others may not

share that. I do understand that there is at least one presiding bishop who is not too enamored with what was there.

Almen: Did he convey that to you directly?

Trexler: No, it's been from other people.

Almen: Did you get some written reaction from people?

Trexler: I always got a few. Jim Crumley always wrote me. And he wrote me about those books. Of course, Jim, in his own style, you know, is very pleasant. I got a few e-mails. I am trying to remember the one that had to do with the ecumenical Lutheran-Episcopal struggle. At any rate, I smiled about it because it was one of those things, just like in the magazine, there were one or two lines that say some characterization of the document. But I didn't get a lot of response. I don't know, I may have gotten maybe a dozen letters, but that's not much. But, of course, people don't read books either, any more than they read magazines these days. But I am proud of the two books because they focused on what I think was the, if not the most significant, at least one of the most significant developments of the last part of the 20th Century and certainly in Lutheran circles. And, in the long haul, I think there is material there that will be helpful for people's perspectives and historians perspectives, and that is really what I had in mind. I was not trying to write anything definitive. It is too soon to do that, first of all. But, secondly, it's grist for the mill. And I am glad I was able to do those two. I have no plans for anything after them.

Almen: I think, for example, on the *Anatomy of a Merger*, that provides some very valuable documentation of that process. The minutes of the CNLC are very, very lean, and so, recognizing that, all those notes that I took of the CNLC discussions, writing very fast in incredibly bad handwriting, I gave all that to the Archives because those meetings were not recorded and so the extensive notes are the only, you know, detail of giving some interest to how some decisions were made and so I was delighted with the publication of *Anatomy of a Merger* because it provided some overview of the development of the decisions and, without that, you know, a later historian would be incredibly hard-pressed to figure some of those decisions out and what went into them. And, likewise, *High Expectations* provides that important overview of the early years of the ELCA. I think that will be very valuable to the future.

Trexler: Yes. One of the responses that I have gotten in the last few years on *Anatomy*—now that book is 14 years old now, 15 years old—comes from professors at our seminaries who are trying to find it. They say, "Have you got any copies?" And I have two or three, but I don't have any more that I can share with anybody. But there have been at least two occasions where I have sent copies to a seminary so they could use it as collateral reading for people learning contemporary Lutheran history. I am sorry about that. I mean, that it is not available. I guess it is in their libraries, but it is not available for purchase; whereas *Expectations* is in at least the third printing. I don't know, it may be more. But I know it's at least in the third printing.

Almen: Oh. Very good. We still have a supply of *High Expectations* that when we get inquiries, especially internationally on the early history of the ELCA. I respond and send

them a copy of that from the supply we have.

Trexler: Good. Glad to know that.

Almen: When you were approved as a candidate for ordination and then were ordained for this service in New York State, did you have any inkling that your life would take the turns that it did?

Trexler: No, but I guess I ought to go back really prior to that time and say that, by the time I was a sophomore and junior in high school, I was working for a newspaper in summers and Christmas holidays, the Concord Tribune in Concord, North Carolina, a small town daily. And I worked for them until the summer I finished seminary. It's the only part-time job I ever had and they wanted me to come back each year and I loved it. It was as exciting as it could be and I intended to go on from there and be a journalist. I'd always talked about working for the Charlotte Observer or the Atlanta Constitution. Those were two of the prime papers in the South—still are, as a matter of fact. But when I got to college, I edited a college paper also, decided that there might be a way to do the journalism within church and began to learn about some possibilities. Remember that my dad was a pastor. I began writing a little bit freelance for The Lutheran, and learned that I needed theological education to be able to do the kinds of things that I wanted to do. I wasn't thinking of ordination at that moment. So I finished college and went to Southern Seminary thinking in terms of the education that was there. And then, of course, we all learned that ordination was indeed a ticket that you needed to punch to be in journalism work in the church, even though you had to do three years in the parish. At that point, it was still a requirement. So what happened? I finished seminary and I had a Lutheran Brotherhood graduate scholarship, which I used at Syracuse for the degree in journalism, a graduate degree. I wanted to go to Syracuse, and they found me a call. F. Eppling "Fritz" Reinartz, who was president of the seminary at that time, and Al Beck, who was president of New York Synod, were old friends and they had found this little congregation in Lyons, New York. And so I went there and everybody knew upfront I was going to go to graduate school, as well as be pastor of the church and I did finish the degree at Syracuse, was there another year, and then got an invitation to join the staff...

Almen: Of The Lutheran?

Trexler: Of The Lutheran, yes. In fact, Elson Ruff invited me to join the staff after two years after being in Lyons, but before I had finished the degree, and I didn't want to come. And he said, "You don't need the degree." Yeah, I think I do need the degree, especially since I've got this much time and energy invested in it, and stayed the third year. And there was another opening the next year and he wrote and I went there and, of course, the rest is history. All that is background for saying, no, I did not know what the twists and turns and quirks would be and the people and places, but being part of the staff of The Lutheran, or something similar to that, because I was always in news and features. I was never in creative writing. I was never in radio and TV. And I certainly was not going to get into curriculum writing. I thought that was the dullest stuff there was. But this magazine opening came along and I said I have got to take this opportunity because this is what I trained for, and what I think I would like to do. So, no, I didn't know the quirks and turns and twists, but being part

of the staff and the kinds of things that the magazine did, I did anticipate being part of my future, and I have friends who will tell me—I think I wrote this in an editorial—who will tell me, "When you were in seminary, you said you were going to be editor of *The Lutheran*." Well, I don't know whether I said that, but I might have, in the sense that was all kicking around, it was all stewing, as to know how this was going to play out, but that's the direction. I did not go to seminary to be a parish pastor as much as I did to have background for a ministry in journalism and, of course, it turned out just that way, in addition to having the years in the parish which were very, very seminal and were very important years for me to spend there. I was a PK and, at the time, internships were optional. I didn't intern. I said I grew up in a parsonage. I didn't need to. Well, that's the kind of decisions you make when you are young because growing up in a parsonage and serving a congregation are so vastly different that I really didn't know anything about the congregational life from that side of it. The folks in Lyons, New York, were very generous people and they really provided me with a base, because I don't know how many times over the years I would think about the parish and the people in it and would say to myself, "Now, how do I make [in this case, Kenny] Kenny Seal interested in this story? You know, again, trying to come from where they were, but part of being able to at least think that way, was having had the experience in the congregation. Of course, you also had the congregational life, as well as to take with you into, you know, the national headquarters. That three-year rule was a good rule. I certainly support it, although I think it's sort of vulnerable now, as I understand.

Almen: Yes. There are for certain categories, some exceptions made, Global Mission and then pastor developer and military chaplaincy, but any other exceptions, a huge case has to be made before the Roster Committee will consider it. And there are times that may be stretched a little bit, but it still is a good thing to go through. Is there anything you would like to add to these reflections?

Trexler: Oh, I don't know. I found it a relief from the perspective of six years of not having to deal with the kind of issues, political and otherwise, that you run into in the church. You get so used to the pressures that you don't think about them until they are gone. I was thinking about your coming and I smiled to myself and I said to myself, "There was only one time since I left the editorship that I wished I could have written an editorial." And that was just recently. It was after the '05 assembly and I mentioned this to you the other night, but the way in which we managed to study the issues related to sexuality, the kind of discussions, their nature and their temperance in the sense of people listening and being able to work through and take votes that I think reflected our history. I think they reflected a good sense of our theology and enabled us to finesse that issue in a way that certainly wasn't church dividing, and it could have moved in that direction, but the decisions that were made were the kind that most people in the church can live with. If they don't agree with it all, there is enough there or there is a sense there that it has been dealt with seriously. This is as good as we can do, at least at this point. And it buys us time for the future and it avoids the kinds of things that had been so much front-page news for Episcopalians and Presbyterians, and UCCs, and others. It was a moment; I thought it was a real good moment for the church. And it was kind of a proud moment in the sense of having been able to pull that off. In other words, all the work, the discussions and the vote, and the aftermath, turned out to be a positive experience and that spoke well of the church and spoke well of the people. It spoke well to society that we can deal with these issues and be civil about it and have some sense

of understanding and reconciliation at the end. I always liked to deal with editorials that had a little larger view, or at least some sort of, maybe some historic moment, and I think that was one of those moments for this church and I was proud of what we were able to do. And I would have enjoyed saying so. Particularly after all the kinds of things going back to the Statement on Sexuality back in the '90s, and then all of the time even since then, where this has been such a hot burner issue. This was a good moment. And I wouldn't have been sure we would have had that good moment before it all transpired as the days of the assembly moved along. But I think it would have been fun to have been able to say that. But then again, that is not where I am now.

Almen: You got to say it now, however. You will get a transcript for corrections and adjustments and additions, if you wish.

Trexler: I presume it gets edited, too, in the sense of little bits and pieces here and there that don't further the conversation.

Almen: Yes, and you will have opportunity to do whatever you will find helpful. For the historical record, if you consent, a copyright for this would be held by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Is that acceptable to you?

Trexler: It is.

1. "A great ride," by David L. Miller, The Lutheran. Sept. 1999, pp. 44-45
2. "A fortunate man," Trexler editorial, The Lutheran. Nov. 1999, p. 66