

Still Looking for Liberation? Lutherans in El Salvador and Nicaragua

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Abstract. Liberationist Christianity in Central America has faced considerable challenges adjusting to changing circumstances since 1990. Yet the political concerns and economic conditions that animated religious movements for liberation in the region have not disappeared, nor have adherents of progressive religion. Central American Lutherans embody a distinctive dialogue with liberationist religion, one not adequately treated or understood in existing studies focused on religious change and the state. In El Salvador and Nicaragua, Lutherans adapted perspectives from liberation theology through the resources of their own theological inheritance, but both this heritage and they themselves were equally shaped and transformed by their efforts to counter, survive and redeem the inhumanity and political violence of the societies they inhabited. The Lutheran story is an important addition to the current understanding of the diverse ways in which religious communities interacted with theologies and movements of liberation, and engaged with processes of social change in the Central American context.

Keywords: liberationist Christianity, Lutheranism, religious change, revolution, accompaniment, liberation theology

Novel treatments of liberation theology and the legacy of popular Christianity in Latin America are nowadays rare and even considered somewhat passé. In Central America especially, in the absence of the social revolutions and insurgent political movements of the 1970s and 1980s, radical religion now attracts little scholarly interest. The ruthless repression of the liberation wing of the Salvadorean Catholic Church has been well documented, as have the fortunes of Nicaragua's popular Catholic Church, which tracked the rise and fall of the Sandinista national project. However, the attention to leftist Catholic religious groups in the region, and the tendency of some scholars to overestimate the depth, numerical strength and influence of liberation

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theology, *comunidades de base* and the popular Church, has likely exaggerated their subsequent decline in terms of popularity and political significance.¹ Although the region continues to impress as a latter-day burned-over district, this has been the result of competition between non-Catholic groups for new converts, rather than continuing interest on the part of the local population in expressions of what Löwy terms 'liberationist Christianity'.² In 1990 anthropologist David Stoll published a near-obituary for liberation theology and its disciples, finding that evangelical Protestantism in Central America appeared numerically ascendant and theologically more appealing. He noted: 'From what I have seen of contests between the two, born-again religion has the upper hand.'³ Current understanding associates the liberation theology approach with collective political projects, Pentecostalism with separatism and public isolation, and mainstream Catholicism with the rollback of liberation impulses, restoration of hierarchical authority, and more cautious approaches to political action in a very different context.

Stoll's was an important, timely and valid observation, but the impression left of the revolutionary Catholic Church's desultory flight is historically short-sighted. If numbers and trends seem to favour Stoll's thesis, it is prudent for students of religion in Latin America to keep in view a wider range of perspectives, programmes and peoples inspired by social Christianity. Religious traditions of prophetic protest, more recently nourished by dialogue with Marx, did not originate with twentieth-century projects of national liberation, and are not likely to flourish or flounder solely in relation to the short-run political outcomes of the latter. There is mounting evidence that the longer-term impact of liberationist religion is still playing out in the region. Theologies of liberation are being revamped to accommodate new circumstances, and, significantly, purportedly conservative, withdrawn communities of a Pentecostal variety may yet develop forms of social involvement and political engagement that run counter to many predictions.⁴

¹ Daniel H. Levine, 'How Not to Understand Liberation Theology, Nicaragua, or Both', *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs*, 32: 3 (1990), pp. 229–45.

² 'Burned-over district' is a term that was coined by Charles Finney in 1876 to refer to western and central New York state in the early nineteenth century, where waves of religious revivals had left virtually no sector of the population 'unconverted' to some form of Christianity. Michael Löwy's notion of liberationist Christianity outlines a wider frame than liberation theology, referencing movements and communities that preceded formalised theology and later maintained effective organic independence. See Michael Löwy, *The War of Gods: Religion and Politics in Latin America* (London: Verso, 1996), pp. 33–5.

³ David Stoll, *Is Latin America Turning Protestant? The Politics of Evangelical Growth* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1990), p. 308.

⁴ Löwy has concluded expectantly, 'A seed has been sown by liberationist Christianity ... which will continue to grow and flourish in the coming decades, and still holds many surprises in store': Löwy, *The War of Gods*, p. 140. A recent effort to update liberation theology is Ivan Petrella (ed.), *Latin American Liberation Theology: The Next*

Liberationist Lutheranism and Latin America

This article argues that countless Latin American communities continue to nurture religious traditions forged in late political struggles of liberation, yet also embody an inheritance derived from a social Christianity of an older vintage.⁵ They constitute an important part of the complete picture of religious and political beliefs and practices even if they have currently receded from the foreground to the margins. This article explores the implications of this observation through a case study of Lutherans in El Salvador and Nicaragua. Their story of growth, migration and expansion in Central America following the Second World War provides a fresh understanding of the complex developing linkages between religion, the state and civic engagement in the region.

The Lutheran chapter of liberationist Christianity is important for several reasons. Lutheran dialogue with radical religion in the region has been insufficiently documented. Although relatively small in numbers by regional standards, Lutherans inhabit an ecclesial and social space distinct from both Catholics and neo-Pentecostal Protestants who figure so prominently in the extant literature. Both the Salvadorean and Nicaraguan Lutheran churches are relatively young and growing, with memberships of around 20,000 in El Salvador and 8,000 in Nicaragua.⁶ In terms of heritage, theology and polity Lutherans are a historic Protestant church, belonging to a cluster of denominations whose engagement with liberationist Christianity in Latin America has received some study.⁷ However, above all in El Salvador, they have exercised an influence disproportionate to their numbers that has as yet been only dimly understood and appreciated. This is all the more striking given that the region's Lutherans emerged primarily from one of the more politically and theologically conservative branches of Lutheranism in the United States, the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod (LCMS). Their subsequent transformation into a prophetic religious community in intentional dialogue with

Generation (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2005). A fresh alternative look at neo-Pentecostalism in the region is Kevin Lewis O'Neill, *City of God: Christian Citizenship in Postwar Guatemala* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2010).

⁵ Lówy partially summarises this heritage in *The War of Gods*, pp. 27–31.

⁶ Figures are from the Lutheran World Federation directory, available at www.lutheranworld.org/lwf/index.php/who-we-are/people/member-directory; and E. Theodore Bachmann and Mercia Brenne Bachmann, *Lutheran Churches in the World: A Handbook* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1989), p. 492.

⁷ See Gordon Spykman et al. (eds.), *Let My People Live: Faith and Struggle in Central America* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988); Guillermo Cook, *The Expectation of the Poor: Latin American Basic Ecclesial Communities in Protestant Perspective* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1985); and Guillermo Cook (ed.), *New Face of the Church in Latin America* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994).

utopian and liberationist hopes and dreams is therefore of particular theoretical and historical interest. The Lutheran variant of liberationist religion follows its own historical trajectory and carries its own meanings; as such, it also casts doubt on the tendency to dismiss liberationist Christianity as having run its course and on current interpretations of the interplay of religion, the state and political change in Central America and the wider region.

Over time, Lutherans in Central America have displayed notable affinities with Catholics and historic Protestant churches animated by liberationist agendas. But such an outcome was prefigured neither by the heritage of Lutheran Christianity transplanted to Latin America in the nineteenth century, nor by its more immediate LCMS missionary roots in the mid-twentieth century.⁸ The presence of liberationist Lutheranism in the region thus presents something of a historical conundrum. Largely German in ethnic origin, Lutherans who first came to the Caribbean basin during the colonial period, and then in larger numbers to the Southern Cone throughout the nineteenth century, established enclaves isolated from their host societies, expending little energy on outreach while resisting assimilation. The snail's pace of Lutheran evangelisation reflected the Church's overwhelming preference for émigré communities, its disparagement of Latin peoples, and its perception that a predominantly Catholic population had already been won and thus was unreceptive to proselytisation.⁹ When the LCMS, much later, established a presence in Central America, its missionaries sparked interest initially among individuals and communities shaped by earlier Protestant work, and predictably they focused on church planting, preaching and catechetical instruction.

Solving the puzzle of Lutheran liberationism requires an understanding of the specific historical conditions of Lutheran enculturation in Central America during the mid-twentieth century. Equally important is attention to those features of a Lutheran 'tradition' that could potentially service, or even radicalise, a church in the throes of political and social crisis. For sociologist Max Weber, Michael Löwy reminds us, Lutheranism offered, alongside Catholicism, a religious ethic 'in a common opposition' with modern rational capitalist political economies, potentially resistant towards advancing capitalist

⁸ On Lutheran heritage in the region, see the special issue, 'Lutherans Plunge into Latin America', *Lutheran Quarterly*, 22: 1 (1970), for both historical and current perspectives.

⁹ See Hendrik Laur, 'The Skeleton in the Closet: North American Lutherans in Latin America', *Lutheran Quarterly*, 22: 1 (1970), pp. 40–8; Ondina E. González and Justo L. González, *Christianity in Latin America: A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 195–8; and Jan Pranger, 'Lutherans in the World Church: An Overview', in Arland Jacobson and James Aageson (eds.), *The Future of Lutheranism in a Global Context* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2008), pp. 14–6.

values and orientations.¹⁰ Of more immediate usefulness and empirical application to the Lutheran case presented here is Löwy's broad theoretical assertion that the growth and appeal of liberationist Christianity in Latin America depended upon a conjuncture of harsh socio-economic conditions and moral precepts melded into a 'common matrix' of political struggle and ethical purpose.¹¹ Appropriating Löwy's language, one can see how Lutherans '[rallied] to the cause of the exploited [in Central America] ... motivated by their religious culture, Christian faith, and [Lutheran] tradition'.¹²

More concretely, classical Lutheran teaching emphasised service to one's neighbour, ideas of vocation that valued competent work in the world, an egalitarian priesthood of all, and a paradoxical theology evident in ideas of God's kingdom, all of which provided essential resources that made Lutheranism distinctive in the region's religious marketplace while also enabling and justifying its engagement in political struggles.¹³ Parallel to convergent shifts in Catholic belief and practice linked to Vatican II on which Löwy also remarks, ecumenical currents in Lutheranism driven by the creation of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) also profoundly shaped the ideas, personnel and projects that undergirded liberationist Lutheranism in Central America.

Yet the advent of a new brand of Lutheranism was a contested process as Central American Lutherans struggled in the face of day-to-day events during an epoch of revolution, social crisis and political violence. From the countervailing pressures of their religious heritage and life situation, Lutherans in El Salvador and Nicaragua evolved a dynamic identity as people and as a church. Liberationist Lutheranism in Central America may be understood as encompassing three interwoven strands of collective identity and communal consciousness: the first as a people whose *vocation* called them alongside the poor and oppressed; the second as a people *active in history* seeking to shape life-affirming change; and the third a communal ethos where *utopian* standards of justice, peace and inclusion (the kingdom of God) were envisioned and practised as attainable measures of a better society. All three echo themes arising from liberation theology and the lexicon of revolutionary struggle, but their reception and reworking depended upon resources arising from a Lutheran heritage as these in turn interacted with the life circumstances faced by young, imperilled Lutheran communities. As Central American Lutherans worked out these commitments, they developed a far more robust sense of civic and political vocation than their LCMS heritage allowed, imagined or encouraged. Alongside confessional orthodoxy and strict

¹⁰ Löwy, *The War of Gods*, p. 22.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 36–7.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 33.

¹³ As elaborated below, Lutheran teaching about God's kingdom expressed the paradox that the reign of God's justice had already arrived without as yet being fully consummated on earth.

evangelical heritage – that is, an emphasis on grace alone, apart from works – a new kind of orthopraxis, or emphasis on ethical conduct, came to define what it meant to be Lutheran in the contested religious and political terrain of El Salvador and Nicaragua.

Being with the People

*La comunión ... es compromiso y vivencia, toma de conciencia
de la cristiandad, es comulgar con la lucha de la colectividad.
Es decir: yo soy cristiano y conmigo hermano vos podés cantar.¹⁴*

These memorable lyrics of Nicaraguan singer-songwriter Carlos Mejía Godoy's *Misa campesina nicaragüense* took inspiration from the small Christian base community at Solentiname, Nicaragua, in the early 1970s, but came to embody the wider solidarity of Christians committed to the political struggle of Nicaragua's people. Reprinted in the songbook of the Lutheran Church in Central America, the words also signify a Lutheran conversion to the side of *los más necesitados*, the people most in need. Salvadorean Lutheran bishop Medardo Ernesto Gómez Soto, speaking in 1986, described the task of supporting the people as almost second nature. 'Our work and our message [are] tied to the situation in which we live. We have taken the option to serve the poor.'¹⁵ How did he and his Lutheran fellows reach this risky, life-altering decision to be with the people?

By comparison with Lutheran bodies in southern Brazil and Argentina, the Lutheran Church in Central America at the close of the Second World War was virtually non-existent. Following the war, several former German prisoners of war and German-speakers coalesced around ethnic enclaves to form small Lutheran congregations in Guatemala, El Salvador and elsewhere on the isthmus. Preferring cultural isolation and ethnic autonomy like their fellows in the Southern Cone, and smarting from wartime anti-German feeling, they were far better connected with Lutheran missionaries and organisations in Europe and the United States. The LWF organised work on their behalf in 1952, integrating their small numbers into an enlarged Lutheran orbit, but hoped to see them become an integral part of the societies in which they were embedded.¹⁶ Spurred by the political and economic challenges of post-war

¹⁴ 'Communion is commitment and lived experience, being aware of what Christianity is; it means sharing in the group's struggle. It means saying: I am Christian, and with me, brother, you can sing: Comunión de Iglesias Luteranas de Centroamérica (CILCA), *Himnos y cantos* (Managua: CILCA, 2002), p. 113.

¹⁵ Medardo Ernesto Gómez Soto, quoted in Chris Hedges, 'El Salvador: Preferring the Poor', *Lutheran*, 15 Jan. 1986, p. 20.

¹⁶ Christoph Jähnel (trans. Erika Gautschi), *The Lutheran Church in El Salvador* (1st English edition, Tucson, AZ: Servicio Educativo Cristiano, 2009), pp. 85–6, 116–17, first published in German as *Die Lutherische Kirche in El Salvador* (Neuendettelsau, Germany: Erlanger

reconciliation and refugee service, the LWF saw rich potential for advancing religious cooperation and ecumenical outreach from the moment of its foundation in Lund, Sweden in 1947, as it became the foremost vehicle for global Lutheranism. From its inception the LWF not only sought to build an intra-Lutheran ecumene, but also looked towards the broadest possible realisation of global Christian concord. As its subsequent role in mediating Central American conflict also indicates, the LWF in time accepted a much enlarged responsibility for social, economic and political affairs as part of an evolving understanding of its global mission.¹⁷

Other Lutheran communities soon sprouted in Central America under independent LCMS auspices, first in Guatemala, then in neighbouring El Salvador, and later in Panama and Costa Rica. Cooperating at times with the LWF – not always harmoniously, but with growing comity as the 1950s progressed – the Rev. Robert F. Gussick, considered the founder of the Lutheran Church in Central America, alongside other LCMS missionaries, shaped the core mission policies, envisioning an indigenous church of national pastors attentive to local problems and practical concerns.¹⁸ It was expected that self-sufficiency, autonomy and organic growth would follow in short order, thus averting from the outset the emergence of a dependent colonial church. Pastoral training grew from an in-house study centre in Antigua, Guatemala, into a pan-Lutheran, cooperative seminary programme established in Mexico City in 1964. Known as the Centro de Estudios Teológicos Augsburg (Augsburg Centre of Theological Studies, CETA), and later as the Seminario Luterano Augsburg (Augsburg Lutheran Seminary, SEMLA), the innovative programme boasted a consortium arrangement combining Lutheran theological education with critical theory, liberation theology and anti-colonial perspectives. Students took courses in politics, philosophy and sociology through the University of the Americas and the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (National Autonomous University of Mexico, UNAM), and received the critical exposure such offerings entailed.¹⁹ No revolutionary clergy were fashioned, but beginning in 1970 the LCMS

Verlag, 2005). In 1953 the LWF formed the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Costa Rica, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua and Panama, serving primarily German-speakers in these countries: see E. Theodore Bachmann, 'Lutheran Churches in the World: A Handbook', special issue, *Lutheran World*, 24: 2–3 (1977), pp. 314–16.

¹⁷ On the history of the LWF see Jens Holger Schjørring, Prasanna Kumari and Norman A. Hjelm (eds.), *From Federation to Communion: The History of the Lutheran World Federation* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1997).

¹⁸ Jähnel, *The Lutheran Church*, chap. 3, 'Mission in Guatemala', pp. 113–14, 118–19. Gussick began his missionary work in El Salvador and Guatemala in 1947, setting up educational and theological facilities that would allow local people to be trained as pastors or lay leaders.

¹⁹ Jähnel, *The Lutheran Church*, pp. 139–44.

retreated from the seminary project when a conservative turn in the home Church raised theological misgivings about the seminary and the Central American mission enterprise. By then CETA/SEMLA had trained a cohort of young national clergy attuned to cross-denominational partnerships and eager to engage political issues. Among the seminary graduates was Medardo Gómez, a Salvadorean from San Miguel. As the ecumenical window that made it possible was closed, so in 1981 was the seminary, unable to function without the financial resources and personnel provided by the LCMS. However, the religious politics around the seminary would continue to reverberate.

In El Salvador the Lutheran Church grew from a base in rural Pasaquina in the easternmost department of La Unión. As political conditions deteriorated in the 1960s, the first generation of native pastors not yet educated at CETA/SEMLA emphasised social work in the community. Some church members, according to Jahnel, were then in contact with popular political organisations in opposition to the Salvadorean oligarchy. Gussick and his colleagues promoted political awareness and activism as crucial to improving people's daily lives, positions consistent with Luther's insistence on institutional improvement and the Christian's calling to discharge good works in the world. The Church inaugurated humanitarian work for native-born refugees when the so-called Soccer War (1969) led to the expulsion of Salvadoreans living and working in adjacent Honduras.²⁰ During the 1960s the Church also branched out into the urban centres of San Salvador and San Miguel. In 1970 the promise of an autonomous national church reached fruition when the Iglesia Luterana Salvadoreña (Salvadorean Lutheran Church, ILS) was formed, although it continued to receive financial subsidies from the LCMS. At the instigation of several women lay leaders in 1972, Gómez accepted an invitation to serve the Iglesia Luterana de la Resurrección (Lutheran Church of the Resurrection) in San Salvador, becoming head pastor the following year.²¹ Although LCMS missionaries had paved the way, they could never have foreseen events, nor prepared Gómez and the ILS for the clarion call to support, comfort and protect the people that rang out during the following decade.

Political events increasingly impinged on the Church of the Resurrection in the late 1970s. In alliance with the landed oligarchy, El Salvador's military and organised vigilante forces resisted all efforts at land reform and began to terrorise peasant communities seeking changes in governance and land tenure patterns. The murder of Jesuit Father Rutilio Grande by death squads in 1977

²⁰ Roberto Pineda, 'Iglesia luterana salvadoreña: nuestra experiencia pastoral', available at www.sappiens.com/CASTELLANO/articulos.nsf/Politica, 8 July 2010.

²¹ Gómez's arrival in San Salvador is described briefly in Pineda, 'Iglesia luterana salvadoreña'.

for his part in supporting peasant mobilisation in the parish of Las Aguilares punctuated this stage of the conflict and converted the country's leading churchman, Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero, to the side of the people's struggle for liberation.²² A surging population of homeless and displaced people streamed into urban areas seeking protection; some began to show up on the doorstep of San Salvador's Church of the Resurrection. As refugee numbers burgeoned, government officials approached the Church and asked it to expand its relief work.²³ Lacking resources, church leaders nonetheless agreed to purchase land on the outskirts of San Salvador, creatively diverting funds that Norwegian Church Aid had donated for a different purpose. Fifteen miles north of the capital in Nejapa, the ILS opened a refugee settlement in early May 1982, offering its residents faith and hope – *Fe y Esperanza*, as the camp was named. Some 400 refugees arrived that day from the nearby rural communities of San Vicente and San Sebastián, many of them gathered together and escorted to safety by church workers. Hundreds more found refuge there in the following months and years, primarily women and children and a few older men. Cecilia Alfaro, a native of Mexico and one of the earliest church volunteers at the camp, remembered lying in bed at home thinking about the refugees huddled at the camp. Asking herself what she was doing in the relative safety of her own home, Alfaro gathered her belongings and went to live with the refugees, hers a literal and complete illustration of the Church's deepening commitment to support the poor and dispossessed.²⁴ Refugee services were administered through Socorro Luterano Salvadoreño (Salvadorean Lutheran Aid, SLS) and were coordinated by Victoria Cortez Rodríguez, a church member, social worker, and educator at the National University of San Salvador.²⁵ SLS provided relief, rehabilitation, job training and medical services at the Nejapa camp, and also in urban San Salvador and several additional neighbouring locations.

Knowledge of the situation of El Salvador's Lutherans had by now travelled well beyond the confines of the LCMS. During a 1983 tour, US-based Church relief officers spoke favourably of SLS's achievements, their presence reflecting a growing concern among Lutheran aid organisations and churches in the

²² Romero's transformation is conveyed in a series of poignant vignettes in María López Vigil (ed.), *Piezas para un retrato* (San Salvador: Universidad Centroamericana, 1993), pp. 89–98.

²³ These events are recounted in Jahnel, *The Lutheran Church*. See also 'Una iglesia solidaria y profética', *Lidio*, 16 Sep. 2004, available at www.cven.net/canales.php?ver=misiones&file=show&sid=160; and two accounts by Gómez: see Medardo Ernesto Gómez Soto (trans. Mary M. Solberg), *Fire against Fire: Christian Ministry Face-to-Face with Persecution* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1990); and Gómez (trans. Robert F. Gussick), *And the Word Became History: Messages Forged in the Fires of Central American Conflict* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1992).

²⁴ See Alfaro's story in 'Una iglesia solidaria y profética'.

²⁵ Edgar R. Trexler, 'Uprooted in El Salvador', *Lutheran*, 18 June 1986, pp. 5–7.

United States and Europe. Alongside Norwegian Church Aid, an agency of the Norwegian government, Lutheran World Ministries (the US office of the LWF) and Lutheran World Relief (LWR) expanded financial and logistical backing for the ILS's refugee services.²⁶ In the preceding decade the LWF had undergone momentous shifts in mission and consciousness as it embraced the need for global dialogue with revolutionary movements shaped by Marxian thought and elevated the importance of socio-economic service and development projects in the third world. Of particular significance was the decision that the LWF took in 1977 at its meetings in Dar es Salaam to censure member churches in South Africa and Namibia for their complicity in the policy of apartheid and to remove them from LWF's membership rolls.²⁷ As indigenous Lutherans in Central America adopted an expanding, prophetic social commitment, LWF leaders were thus readied to be allies in their struggle.

Gómez frequently observed that the Church's work constituted a natural response to the gospel's call to serve the people. He explained matter-of-factly, 'The needs were so pressing that out of our Christian commitment we had to do something to change the situation of that person crying for help.'²⁸ The work, he clarified, was not political; the Church had not taken sides in the civil war. 'There is no Marxist political line to what we do', he insisted.²⁹ Nonetheless, the ILS's work with refugees and orphans linked the Church with the Salvadorean Left in the oligarchy's mind, and led to a barrage of threats and assaults against Church members and property alike. Amidst the chaos that followed the assassinations of Archbishop Romero and four US nuns in 1980, part of an upsurge in political murders, the ILS made common cause with the relief activities and human rights work of the Catholic Church and other socially minded Protestant groups, foremost among them the Episcopal Church and the Iglesia Bautista Emmanuel (Emmanuel Baptist Church, IBE) of San Salvador. In 1983, taking up Romero's prophetic commitments, the ILS, led by Gómez, joined ecumenical collaborations, such as Diaconia, that coordinated services for the country's war victims, displaced and homeless.³⁰ For his courageous defence of the poor and homeless and his persistent advocacy of human rights, one Church leader characterised Gómez as the 'heir to the mantle of Oscar Romero', a view that found resonance with Phillip Berryman when he interviewed Gómez in 1990.³¹ Gómez's defence of

²⁶ Jerry Aaker, 'A Cup of Water', *Lutheran Standard*, 18 March 1983, pp. 10–12.

²⁷ See Schjørring, Kumari and Hjelm (eds.), *From Federation to Communion*, chap. 9, and summary of the Sixth Assembly held at Dar es Salaam, pp. 397–402.

²⁸ Medardo Ernesto Gómez Soto, quoted in Phillip Berryman, *Stubborn Hope: Religion, Politics, and Revolution in Central America* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994), p. 170.

²⁹ Medardo Ernesto Gómez Soto, quoted in Trexler, 'Uprooted in El Salvador', p. 7.

³⁰ Jahnel, *The Lutheran Church*, pp. 42–4.

³¹ Jorge Lara-Braud, quoted by Bill Dexheimer in Gómez, *Fire against Fire*, p. 58; Berryman, *Stubborn Hope*, p. 171.

the poor must only have intensified the political Right's impression of the ILS as engaged in dubious if not nefarious work as sympathisers with the state's political enemies, and indeed, events would seem to indicate that it did.

Gómez survived detention and torture in 1983 and suffered the assassination of his long-time friend and colleague from San Miguel, David Fernández, at the hands of the Salvadorean army in 1984. ILS church properties withstood repeated bombing attacks through the 1980s. In late 1989 threats became so frequent and grave that Gómez went into hiding outside the country for an extended period. Fellow workers confronted detention, death threats and exile. For example, in November 1983, hearing that death squads had marked her for elimination, Victoria Cortez fled to safe haven in Sandinista Nicaragua, part of a larger Salvadorean diaspora that grew to over half a million people by the end of the conflict in 1992. Those in Nicaragua dispersed to various communities, most intending to return home when political conditions allowed.

Escalating threats and reprisals against the ILS generated advocacy work in the United States through multiple political channels. They also led directly to LWF and LWR staff placements in San Salvador designed to act as protective buffers for Gómez, Church leaders and refugee workers. Gómez viewed these efforts as indispensable to his own improbable survival through the ILS's long ordeal lasting into the 1990s. Among national Lutheran bodies in the United States, the American Lutheran Church (ALC) in particular allocated organisational resources to defend the ILS's work and to inform and enlist the support of home congregations. But ALC overtures were institutionally constrained by the continuing formal partnership of the ILS and the LCMS, even though the fabric of these two organisations' relationship was considerably frayed by this time, if not yet torn apart.³²

Under political and physical attack at home, the ILS also faced waning support from the LCMS mother Church in the United States. Despite a theological break in the mid-1970s, leading to schism and a rival missionary organisation known as Partners in Mission (PIM), the LCMS continued to provide financial support for the ILS – but with it came growing pressures to conform politically and theologically. According to Christoph Jähnel, the LCMS dispatched new 'theologically correct' missionaries to Central America in the early 1970s, and already, while he was still working in Guatemala, Gómez was labelled a communist sympathiser whose political errors and heresies had to be curbed.³³ Similar pressures recurred, growing sharper in

³² See, for example, 'Work of AELC/PIM in Central America', memo, Lutheran World Ministries Collection, Series LWM 3/2, Box 1 (Chicago, IL: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America Archives, 21 March 1983).

³³ Jähnel, *The Lutheran Church*, pp. 154–6.

the 1980s as the ILS became more deeply committed to socio-political engagement. But the ILS's formal independence as a national church provided a basis for resistance despite the LCMS's hold on the purse strings: there were no longer permanent LCMS missionaries stationed in El Salvador. Gómez certainly heard advice to focus on proclamation of the word in time-honoured and Western Lutheran fashion, and to back away from social and political activities or any appearance of such. But hearing a different call, living under quite different conditions and in a radically different cultural milieu, the ILS steadfastly resisted pressures to follow the style of Lutheranism of the home Church, and eventually severed formal ties. Having originally received ecumenical, critical and interdenominational training under LCMS sponsorship, Gómez inquired: 'why do they now force us to be out and out Missouriian?'³⁴ Theological differences were interlaced with divides of culture, politics and national experience. As Gómez remarked curtly at a Caracas conference in 1986, 'We in El Salvador and Guatemala are Salvadorans and Guatemalans, not Germans.'³⁵

Evidence nonetheless indicates that Gómez made every effort to maintain affiliation with the LCMS for as long as possible. Though it may seem counter-intuitive, the ILS wished to retain the good graces, and with them the financial support, of the Missouri Church. Gómez's disposition, too, was one that much preferred comity – that is, a relationship of mutual respect and civility – over conflict in the interests of maintaining Christian unity and fellowship.³⁶ The LCMS, despite growing estrangement, had after all given life to the ILS, while its earliest missionaries such as Gussick had been full partners in support of an indigenous church committed to a holistic gospel presence in Central American society.³⁷ When the final break came in 1986, the rupture was compensated for by political support and religious community proffered by a global Lutheran network composed of the LWF and allies in LWR, the German Evangelical Church and Norwegian Church Aid, and by growing solidarity with denominations such as the American Lutheran Church and the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches, the group that split off from the LCMS in 1976. The ILS fittingly became a member church of LWF in 1986. Growing ecumenical consciousness and the support of Lutheran communities around Latin America also made a signal difference as they extended solidarity, affirmed unity in common cause and suffering, and in

³⁴ Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 143.

³⁵ Quoted in Daniel Cattau, 'Latins become "People's Church"', *Lutheran*, 4 June 1986, p. 18.

³⁶ Telephone interview with Kenneth Mahler, former Central American missionary with the LCMS, PIM and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 1 July 2009.

³⁷ It is important to point out that the LCMS also utilised its political channels to advocate for Gómez and Dr. Angel Ibarra in 1983 when they were detained by Salvadorean security forces, Ibarra for well over six months.

the case of the Lutheran church in exile established in Nicaragua, dispatched pastoral leadership.

It was in 1984 that Victoria Cortez gathered a small group of Salvadoreans beneath the physical and figurative umbrage of a mango tree and formed a Salvadorean church in exile in Nicaragua. She later recalled, 'More than 25,000 refugees arrived in Nicaragua, which received them in poverty but with friendship.'³⁸ The uprooted community numbered around 50 members with origins in the ILS and its social programmes.³⁹ Seeing the needs of a displaced, wounded and downcast people, Cortez determined to continue with them the work begun at SLS in a new setting. The group was joined by native Nicaraguans interested in supporting the newcomers. They had to listen carefully to the people's troubles, Cortez observed, in order to practise a *pastoral de acompañamiento*, a ministry of accompaniment 'in accordance with the reality that the refugees were living'.⁴⁰

Cortez shepherded the fledgling community, building upon her training and experience with SLS. The community acquired a farm property outside Managua to tend to the growing number of Salvadorean war wounded in its midst. The facility housed a workshop where injured combatants, who might have difficulty finding employment, learned artisan skills and produced items for sale in area markets.⁴¹ Some had been Frente Farabundo Martí de Liberación Nacional (Farabundo Martí Liberation Front, FMLN) partisans in El Salvador, some sympathised with the struggle, and others were neutral or non-affiliated, but nearly all knew the trauma of violence and loss. The experience of Ana María is probably quite typical.⁴² Both her husband and mother were killed in El Salvador and she left with a profound sense of abandonment and hopelessness, feeling even the punishment of a wrathful God. At first, Cortez remembered, refugees were enveloped in a permeating sadness.⁴³ Walking alongside those like Ana María meant sharing their grief and pain, but embodied too a community of belonging and wholeness. The church in exile sought to restore refugees' sense of dignity and self-regard. In Ana María's case, newfound hope and purpose replaced fatalism and led to a

³⁸ Victoria Cortez Rodríguez, 'A Church of Faith and Hope', in Jacobson and Aageson (eds.), *The Future of Lutheranism*, p. 91.

³⁹ Iglesia Luterana de Nicaragua Fe y Esperanza (ILFE), *Del éxodo a la esperanza*, film in author's possession; Jerome Nilssen, 'Making Sense out of Nicaragua', *Lutheran*, 15 Feb. 1984, p. 7.

⁴⁰ ILFE, *Del éxodo a la esperanza*; and Cortez Rodríguez, 'A Church of Faith and Hope', p. 91.

⁴¹ Interview with Kenneth Mahler, 1 July 2009; and interview with Mark Lester, former Maryknoll priest and current staffer at Casa de Estudios Jaime Mayer, Center for Global Education, Managua, 11 Sep. 2008.

⁴² Ana María's story is told in Ilo Utech, *El reino de Dios: utopía de los pobres* (Managua: Universidad Luterana de El Salvador and Iglesia Luterana de Nicaragua, 1991), pp. 97–100.

⁴³ Interview with Victoria Cortez Rodríguez, Managua, 7 Sep. 2008.

new image of God. 'God is not indifferent to all the suffering that occurs in El Salvador and that the people now experience', she explained. 'Injustice and oppression are contrary to the Kingdom of God because the Kingdom signifies life, not death.'⁴⁴ The refugees' sorrows, adjustments and losses were difficult to bear, but everyone shared the same lot – even Cortez, herself an escapee from El Salvador's violence.

The term *acompañamiento* (literally, accompaniment) referenced by Cortez carried different nuances in the Central American people's struggles for liberation. For missionaries, Church-related relief organisations and political allies entering the region, it encapsulated their basic philosophy of providing assistance alongside local leaders and communities, favouring solidarity and mutuality over domination or imposed direction.⁴⁵ Internally its genesis seemingly harks back to the conversion of Archbishop Romero in 1977 to the people's cause.⁴⁶ Cortez's use of the term is by no means accidental: the ILS quite consciously adopted the language of accompaniment from Romero following his death, as an apt descriptor of the work into which the Church was growing. Gómez, who as a youth knew Romero in San Miguel and received catechetical instruction from the prelate before converting to Lutheranism, came to see in Romero's life, prophetic work and martyrdom a model for the ILS's social and political witness. At the same time, accompaniment – being with, walking alongside and caring for the people in need – could be made to fit comfortably with a core teaching of the Lutheran heritage, something deeper than a mere reflex response to liberation movements in the region. Accompaniment blended with the classic Lutheran teaching to serve one's neighbour, as Ilo Utech, a Brazilian Lutheran church worker in Nicaragua, observed in quoting Luther's paradoxical description of the Christian life in *Essay on Christian Freedom*: 'The Christian is free lord of all, subject to none. The Christian is the servant of all, and is subordinate to all.' Utech's rendering of Luther meant that a Christian could not in good conscience observe the injustices and suffering among Salvadoreans and Nicaraguans and stand idly by, doing nothing. A Christian's freedom to

⁴⁴ 'Todo el sufrimiento que pasa en El Salvador y que pasa el pueblo ahorita no es indiferente a Dios. La [injusticia] y la opresión no están acordes con el Reino de Dios porque el Reino es vida y no muerte'. Utech, *El reino*, p. 100.

⁴⁵ Kenneth Mahler came to accompaniment as a preferred approach to missionary presence and purpose through exposure to Catholic liberationist currents in Panama. He illustrates the concept vividly via the story of a missionary colleague in India who learned from a local that, figuratively, he had to surrender the driver's seat of the ox-cart completely and without qualification to local people no matter how bumpy or uncomfortable the ride became.

⁴⁶ Berryman suggests that the term 'acompañamiento' was first used by Archbishop Romero to refer to the pastoral work of '[standing] by the people' who had taken up a 'political option' in the people's struggle. See Berryman, *Stubborn Hope*, p. 173.

serve his or her neighbour became a practical imperative to answer human needs.⁴⁷

On the other hand, the generic, unspecified Lutheran heritage of service to one's neighbour as a response of gratitude for divine grace was directed in Central America specifically towards oppressed social groups, above all the poor. Both Gómez and Cortez thus affirmed the commitment enunciated at Medellín's First Latin American Conference of Bishops in 1968, indicating that the Lutheran Church in El Salvador and Nicaragua had taken the 'preferential option' to serve the poor. Much like the commitment Romero had made to be with the people in their political struggle, the Salvadorean Lutheran church in exile accompanied a refugee community, continuing in Nicaragua the work initiated at Fe y Esperanza in El Salvador. Gómez remarked: 'In Latin America, this work often entails the right of the poor to protest the conditions under which they live. I believe it is the duty of the church to help support this protest.'⁴⁸ But again, as Gómez repeatedly stressed, such a commitment grew from the Church's prophetic role, not from any political programme per se: 'we feel a commitment to help the most needy people of our country', he stated.⁴⁹ Mary Solberg, who worked alongside members of the Resurrection Church in the mid-1980s representing the LWF, while fully recognising the political dimensions of the ILS's work, affirmed that 'the [ILS] was not [acting] for political reasons but for the sake of the gospel'.⁵⁰ Likewise, Cortez asserted that the good news of Jesus, lived in action and in history, liberates but cannot be reduced to the formal contours of a theology of liberation. Jesus healed the sick, fed the hungry and raised the dead, Cortez explained, and so must the Church today. Such work was for her the equivalent of gospel deeds – *trabajo diacónico* – and not so much the intentional application of a political or social agenda stemming from liberation theology; and it was as vital to the gospel as the spoken word in sermon, scripture and Lutheran liturgy.⁵¹

Lutherans in El Salvador and Nicaragua responded to social and political crisis by making use of those resources at hand that promised to answer best the needs present around them. What evolved was a pragmatic weaving together of Lutheran traditions of service and good work in the world with ideals of liberation, community organisation and crisis intervention. The practice commonly known as accompaniment gave practical and theological

⁴⁷ Utech, *El reino*, p. 97.

⁴⁸ Quoted in 'El Salvador: Preferring the Poor', p. 20.

⁴⁹ Quoted in Carol Becker Smith, 'Chilstrom visits Central America', *Lutheran*, 28 Sep. 1988, p. 24.

⁵⁰ Interview with Mary Solberg, former LWF staffer in El Salvador, St. Peter, MN, 25 Feb. 2010.

⁵¹ Interview with Victoria Cortez Rodríguez, 7 Sep. 2008; Cortez Rodríguez, 'A Church of Faith and Hope', pp. 93–4.

expression to the group's evolving sense of what it meant to be Lutheran in Central America even while its enactment dramatically changed the group's individual members. Being with the people amidst travail, social upheaval and dramatic change also heightened community members' awareness of history and their own role in its unfolding.

Making History

*Un pueblo que camina por el mundo, gritando ¡ven Señor! Un pueblo que busca en esta vida la gran liberación.*⁵²

The associated traumas of civil war, political persecution and flight turned Lutherans in Central America into, literally and figuratively, a people on the move. Thus the lyrics 'A people that journeys through the world', also from a song in the Central American Lutheran book of worship, reflect an important related facet of the group's self-understanding. God's people are represented as active in the world. They seek divine intervention in this world rather than the next, and they are partners with God in social change for they seek great liberation *in this life*. These ideas represent core motifs of a liberation outlook, but again their origin and growth among Lutherans followed a unique logic and historical pathway.

Experiences of persecution, peregrination and exile, as well as close proximity to political watersheds in Salvadorean and Nicaraguan history, imparted to Lutherans an acute sense of immediate participation in events of momentous change. Bishop Kenneth Mahler, Lutheran missionary of long standing in Central America, recognised this shift in consciousness as he worked alongside the Salvadorean exile community in Nicaragua during the 1980s. The exiles were among churches 'involved in radical change', he pointed out, and they followed a theological perspective that 'plunks Christians in the middle of history again'.⁵³ Mahler's view of the Lutheran community in Nicaragua bore the unmistakable imprint of his own exposure to progressive currents at work in the Catholic Church of Central America and his conversion to a church of the poor, a process that commenced when Mahler arrived in Panama as a missionary with the LCMS in 1963.⁵⁴

Catholic priests, religious, students and lay workers started, most conspicuously in the 1960s, to experiment with new forms of Christian community in Latin America in order to put into practice stances promulgated at the Second Vatican Council. The most crucial were deepening

⁵² 'A people that journeys through the world, crying out, Come Lord! A people that looks for great liberation in this life.' CILCA, *Himnos y cantos*, p. 95.

⁵³ Quoted in Berryman, *Stubborn Hope*, pp. 201–2.

⁵⁴ Mahler's first exposure to Central American realities came in the early 1950s when he worked with Robert Gussick in Guatemala as part of a seminary internship.

of lay participation in church life and a call to address more vigorously social injustice and economic inequality. These commitments helped to spark the formation of Christian base communities in the region. Amidst considerable variety, the core distinguishing features of base communities were active lay leadership, strong commitment to political organisation, presence in poor barrios and disfranchised villages, studied reflection focused on *concientización* – that is, the development of social and political consciousness – and a generally informal, uncertain and sometimes troubled relationship with the official diocesan structure. The purposeful application of pedagogical principles developed by Paulo Freire to advance literacy and community empowerment among peasants in north-eastern Brazil encouraged members of base communities to read and interpret biblical passages through the prism of immediate experience and daily life. This approach rendered scripture fresh and newly powerful, and in particular, as Mahler noted, urged members to move beyond their experience of oppression – which marked them as passive victims – to accept a view of themselves as capable protagonists of change, as shapers of history or at least as authors of their own collective destiny.

Strictly speaking, neither ILS congregations nor the Salvadorean church in exile in Nicaragua were Christian base communities. Base communities were not exclusively a Catholic phenomenon to be sure, as some Protestants adopted their form and style, but their genesis and growth depended primarily on innovations within and around the Catholic Church. Indeed, the Lutheran churches in Central America predated the ecclesiastical experimentation of base communities. Bishop Cortez, for her part, eschewed the designation of ‘base community’ as an appropriate appellation for the Iglesia Luterana de Nicaragua Fe y Esperanza (Nicaraguan Lutheran Church of Faith and Hope, ILFE). Lutherans, she asserted, have their own heritage, forms and traditions.⁵⁵ Luther’s notion of the priesthood of all believers in particular promoted a keen sense of historical participation. For Central American Lutherans, application of this axiom has contributed to a strong democratic polity at the core of church life. Thus the daily work of the congregations and its various ministries has been carried substantially through the efforts of *pastores laicos* (lay ministers), whose leadership roles have been rich, varied and indispensable. One lay minister with the ILS, a day labourer, commented in this regard: ‘the creed of the Lutheran Church is quite wonderful; it is a dogma that says that we all may have a part’.⁵⁶ Of equal if not greater importance is the fact that emphasis on democratic participation has empowered women as church and community leaders both in the ILS and ILFE bodies, widening

⁵⁵ Interview with Victoria Cortez Rodríguez, 7 Sep. 2008.

⁵⁶ Dimas Jesús Aparicio, quoted in Jahnel, *The Lutheran Church*, p. 215.

the Church's social influence and making available female talents and energies often disparaged, ignored or rejected by traditional cultural practices and expectations.⁵⁷ The examples of Victoria Cortez, founder and bishop of the ILFE, and Cecilia Alfaro, who succeeded Cortez as coordinator of SLS when Cortez fled to Nicaragua in late 1983, reflect the prominent and assertive roles that women played in the ILS and ILFE communities.⁵⁸ Access to leadership roles for women certainly marks an important overlap of social spaces created by Lutheran communities in El Salvador and Nicaragua with those of many Catholic base communities. Women's leadership in the Lutheran case expressed the tradition's commitment to a priesthood of all, which in turn enhanced the idea that community members were involved in the arc of historical change.

Points of convergence between (Catholic) base communities and Protestant groups such as the Lutherans are probably more important than precise nomenclature or the specifics of church configurations. Like many base communities that nourished popular Catholicism, Lutherans in Central America evolved a distinct sense of re-enacting the life ways of the Apostolic Church. They came to identify closely with biblical narratives that seemed to validate their experiences, accounts that could directly and dramatically frame the community's own stories. Luther's guiding doctrine of *sola scriptura* thus became for later followers in Central America a potent basis for envisioning themselves as active and alive in history. It reflected, too, a communal ethos that, protestations of Gómez and other church workers notwithstanding, made Lutherans a genuine threat to the temporal authorities. Their growing confidence as a people with the capacity to influence contingent political events squarely challenged the military junta and death squads through their profound commitment and readiness, even if at great personal cost, to resist force, violence and the status quo that political authorities sought to preserve.

Suffering and persecution, Gómez pointed out, curiously produced the inverse of their intended outcomes. Certainly when threats grew too loud or reprisals too severe, hiding or flight followed, but there was also a reflex of solidarity and communal support. 'When we have suffered the most ... it would have been logical for everyone to leave the church and go into hiding,

⁵⁷ Interview with Victoria Cortez Rodríguez, 7 Sep. 2008; and Utech, *El reino*, chap. 4, 'Una pastoral que siembra signos del Reino de Dios'.

⁵⁸ Women's roles encompassed ordination, formal status as pastors, deacons and bishops, and leadership roles as lay ministers. Gómez's spouse received ordination as a deacon through the ILS, which led to a final rupture with the LCMS in the mid-1980s, according to Kenneth Mahler. Anna Peterson remarks on the progressive stance of the Salvadorean Lutheran Church on gender issues and its acceptance of female leadership in '“The Only Way I Can Walk”: Women, Christianity, and Everyday Life in El Salvador', in Anna Peterson, Manuel Vásquez and Philip Williams (eds.), *Christianity, Social Change, and Globalization in the Americas* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001), p. 38.

[But instead, more] people began to come to church', Gómez said.⁵⁹ The beleaguered pastor understood the people's resilient courage and greater interest as akin to 'the experience of the first Christians who found that persecution fortified the church'.⁶⁰ Gómez's sermons similarly urged listeners to read parallels between past and present – for example, making a link between US intervention in El Salvador and the Romans' occupation of Israel. Salvadorean exile Ana María illustrated how the Nicaraguan community found solidarity not only through mutual support but via identification with the narrative of Jesus' passion: 'We have all lived intimately with death, for that reason we feel very close to Jesus since we are so much like him.'⁶¹ A discourse celebrating the life and witness of those who died in the struggle as martyrs and heroes of the faith closed a circle of meaning that explicitly linked history with current events. Like early believers who sacrificed themselves for the cause of their faith, so too had fellow Lutherans shown themselves to be true martyrs whose faith and courage in action would not be lost to history but would grow even bolder in the lives and memories of the survivors. On the eve of his own exile in December 1989, Gómez reminded those gathered to mourn the lives of six Jesuit priests who were brutally slain in November 1989 along with a housekeeper and her daughter:

These men were heroes of the faith, the people's martyrs. Their martyrdom will not be lost; the people will take up the testimony [they left to us]. They are brothers and sisters who will never die, but will live forever ... *they will rise again in this people* to whom they offered their youth, their energies and their very lives.⁶²

His eulogy unmistakably joined hands with Catholic brothers and sisters, binding the work of Lutherans with a wider religious and political struggle to change the course of Salvadorean society while intentionally adopting language that Archbishop Romero himself used on the near-eve of his own death.⁶³

The archetypal exodus story playing on themes of oppression, bondage and liberation probably narrated best the churches' own participation in events charged with great danger but also with great meaning. Theologically the idea of people as historical subjects built squarely upon that of 'the Liberator God,

⁵⁹ Medardo Ernesto Gómez Soto, quoted in 'El Salvador: Preferring the Poor', p. 20.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ 'Todos nosotros hemos convivido con la muerte, por eso sentimos a Jesús tan familiar, pues somos tan parecidos a él'. Quoted in Utech, *El reino*, p. 97.

⁶² Medardo Ernesto Gómez Soto, quoted in 'Lutheran Bishop Medardo Gómez Speaks out in El Salvador', *World Encounter*, 1 (1990), p. 23, emphasis added.

⁶³ See Vigil (ed.), *Piezas*, p. 370, where Jorge Lara Braud recalls Romero's response to questions posed by Mexican journalists in March 1980 about threats against his life: 'Si me matan, resucitaré en el pueblo salvadoreño.' ('If they kill me I will rise again in the Salvadorean people.')

who burst into Egypt's and the world's history taking the side of the slaves, [moving them] to become subjects of their own history'.⁶⁴ Documenting its own story in like fashion, the ILFE explicitly used the language of exodus to give meaning to its members' flight from El Salvador, situated alongside the salvation history of Israel – even if Nicaragua as a destination did not flow with milk and honey.⁶⁵ Nonetheless, fraternal welcome and residency in Nicaragua in the mid-1980s afforded the exiles a vantage point from which to witness at close quarters the unfolding of that country's revolution, which they viewed with optimism and hopefulness. Their political enthusiasm likely mirrored the sentiments of one group of Salvadorean refugees who 'referred to the Nicaraguan government when they described the works of Jesus today', the Nicaraguan government having 'offered them refuge from the death and terror of El Salvador, [and] provided them with land, technical assistance, low-interest loans, and markets for their produce'.⁶⁶ Such a perspective derived special potency from its knitting together of the gospel message, Sandinista revolutionary policies and people's direct witness of or participation in these events, in this case as recipients of hospitality and government assistance.

When Salvadorean exiles began returning home from Nicaragua and Honduras in the late 1980s, it was as though a cycle of salvation history had reached completion. Salvadoreans had lived out, not just metaphorically but personally and tangibly, the truth contained in biblical narratives of exile and restoration, of enslavement and liberation, and their sojourn served to collapse the distance separating text and experience. They had themselves become one with the story, experiencing their own salvation history. As one Salvadorean *catequista* put it, 'We are a pilgrim people ... going through our own exodus, building up God's kingdom. We dream of the day when this Kingdom would take root in our own tiny country.'⁶⁷

In the shadow of considerable fear and continual danger, the return trek to earlier abandoned and destroyed villages in places such as Panchimilama, San José las Flores, Guarjila, Los Ranchos and Santa María took place under the watchful eye of church workers and supporters from abroad as well as members of the ILS community. The company, fanfare and witness surrounding these homecomings marked them as moments of transcendent historical significance for those who participated.⁶⁸ Salvadoreans in Nicaragua

⁶⁴ Centro Ecumenico Antonio Valdivieso, 'Nicaraguan Revolutionary Christians Face the Crisis of Civilization' (New York: Circus Publications, 1991), p. 15.

⁶⁵ ILFE, *Del éxodo a la esperanza*.

⁶⁶ Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer, *The Politics of Compassion* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1986), p. 3.

⁶⁷ Quoted in Bill Dexheimer, 'Catequista', *World Encounter*, 2 (1989), p. 21.

⁶⁸ Repatriation stories were reported in the Lutheran press; see Jacqueline Boynton, 'A Steer for San José', *Lutheran*, 28 Sep. 1988, pp. 12–14; Herbert W. Chilstrom, 'Baptized into Suffering', *Lutheran*, 12 Oct. 1988, p. 41; Bill Dexheimer, 'Going Home', *World Encounter*, 1 (1988), pp. 8–11; 'Resettlement in El Salvador', photograph, *Lutheran*, 1 June 1988, p. 37.

joined the repatriation process, including members and associates of the Lutheran church in exile who, in 1990, were assisted to the Honduran border by Kenneth Mahler and other church leaders. As it happened, Mahler, Ilo Utech and Victoria Cortez determined to follow the community back to El Salvador, but events quickly intervened as several small base communities whose support had evaporated in the Sandinista electoral defeat of February that year sought their assistance. Agreeing that there was no other option but to help these politically isolated and vulnerable communities, Utech, Mahler and Cortez responded positively.⁶⁹ Events in Nicaragua had taken a surprising political turn but had also produced conditions ripe for the formation of the ILFE, not as a base community but as a new church that gathered up the remnants of several base communities that were no longer viable. In this manner the first expression of an indigenous Lutheran church in Nicaragua sprouted in Masaya, just south of the capital city of Managua.⁷⁰ In both communities of faith, the ILS and the ILFE, a commitment to acting boldly in history, to making a difference, in echo of the catequista cited above, pivoted on a powerful vision of a better human society and a utopian conception of the kingdom of God.

Towards a Lutheran Utopia

*Cultivar los valores nuevos nacidos en la utopía Cristiana de una sociedad futura, liberada, con condiciones económicas, sociales, políticas y culturas que viabilicen la construcción del Reino.*⁷¹

Penned by Bishop Gómez, these words depict the kingdom of God as both present and future in classic Lutheran paradoxical fashion. If the values of the kingdom already exist to be planted, the kingdom perforce must somehow be present. By contrast, that these same values are not yet fully manifest in society indicates that the kingdom is not yet fully realised: the kingdom of God is already but not yet, as Lutherans and other Christians are given to say. Gómez meant to praise the outlook of a young Brazilian pastor in Nicaragua (Ilo Utech) as worthy of emulation, but he also articulated a distinctive feature of a Lutheran vision of liberation for Central America. The kingdom of God had not arrived, or had arrived only imperfectly; it was a work in progress, one still very much under construction.

⁶⁹ Kenneth Mahler recounted this story to me.

⁷⁰ Interview with Victoria Cortez Rodríguez, 7 Sep. 2008; 'Lutheran Church Now in Nicaragua', *Lutheran*, 28 Nov. 1990, p. 33.

⁷¹ 'To plant new values born from the Christian utopia of a future, liberated society whose economic, social, political, and cultural conditions make possible the building of the Kingdom [of God]': Utech, *El reino*, p. 4.

Among the enthusiastic rank and file of Nicaragua's base communities, many understandably (if naively) expected the kingdom of God to follow in short order the 1979 ouster of the Somoza dictatorship.⁷² We know that instead, a woeful decade of worsening political turmoil, economic distress and enervating warfare ensued. There was very little in the immediate experience of Salvadorean Lutherans to lead them to think or imagine that God's peace and justice had come into full flower on earth – that the ILS and ILFE churches might still find ample room for a utopian vision of a better society thus strikes one as more than a bit puzzling. After all, the Lutherans and the communities they fashioned and accompanied in both El Salvador and Nicaragua had suffered inordinately as a consequence of their efforts to discharge a gospel seeking justice for the downtrodden and marginalised. Were they misguided, futile dreamers, facing reprisals, even extermination, for a cause that had scant hope of implanting itself? This is one of David Stoll's key explanations for the apparent popularity of born-again, Pentecostal religion over voices urging liberation in the region. So, what tangible hope or real potential for positive change inhered in the utopian vision that grew among Lutherans?

Some years ago Daniel Levine reminded us that we fundamentally mistake utopian frames, even religious ones, when we limit them to mere wishful thinking – that is, projects without practical connection to any real, concrete reward. Rather, he pointed out, they derive their vivid hope and considerable attraction from the expectation of real changes in the unacceptable social and economic conditions towards which they are directed. To apply his comments regarding liberation theology to Lutherans, '[their] utopian dreams draw their energy and force of conviction from real nightmares of poverty, inequality, injustice, and violence'.⁷³ Ilo Utech recognised this very point as he looked to the power of kingdom values in Nicaragua in the late 1980s:

The kingdom of God is reason for joy – it is good news for the poor and for Christians committed to the cause of the poor and persecuted. It provides the impetus and strength to continue the struggle in the present world. The kingdom is utopia for them because it offers the possibility of building a world where hunger, unemployment and insecurity do not exist.⁷⁴

⁷² On millenarian expectations in the Nicaraguan base communities, see Roger Lancaster, *Thanks to God and the Revolution: Popular Religion and Class Consciousness in the New Nicaragua* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988); Manzar Farooq, *The Catholic Church and Social Change in Nicaragua* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1989); and Rosario Montoya, 'Liberation Theology and the Socialist Utopia of a Nicaraguan Shoemaker', *Social History*, 20: 1 (1995), pp. 23–43.

⁷³ Daniel H. Levine, 'Considering Liberation Theology as Utopia', *The Review of Politics*, 52: 4 (1990), p. 605.

⁷⁴ 'Para el pueblo pobre y los cristianos comprometidos con la causa de los pobres y perseguidos, el Reino de Dios es motivo de alegría, es una Buena Nueva. Es ánimo y fuerza para continuar la lucha en el mundo presente. Para estos el Reino es utopía porque se trata de la posibilidad

Behind Utech's words one detects a world view open to struggle and eager to promote a better world in the present, fired by the promise of a utopian kingdom at whose centre the poor find their needs met and their dreams fulfilled.

In no sense, then, did Lutherans' utopian commitment to God's kingdom float in an ethereal space distant from daily life on the ground. Mindful of the costly, sacrificial witness of word and deed exemplified by Lutheran cleric Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and of the German Confessing Church's determined resistance during the period of National Socialism, Gómez moulded the ILS to be, similarly, a church in the world. Recalling his seminary studies, Gómez identified Bonhoeffer as critical to 'developing a liberation theology': '[We] passionately debated with our professors and fellows students about Bonhoeffer's letters from prison ... and the resurrection, and understood the resurrection not only in a physical way, but rather the deep significance of the resurrection for actions.'⁷⁵ Thus anchored in action, in praxis, the creation and development of the Fe y Esperanza camp, provision of medical and social services, resettlement work, accompaniment of refugees back to their home villages, community gatherings and celebrations all took on a visible expression that participants and recipients could behold, appreciate and seek to further. If these actions fell short by a wide margin of reaching the utopian goals of enduring peace, social inclusion and economic justice, they nonetheless represented genuine steps forward. Even so, small, incremental achievements were also tenuous, ambiguous, sometimes barely detectable, and uncertain, as often are signs of progress in history.

At the deepest level, reprisals against the community were of great consequence because they threatened to scatter the physical existence of the body gathered – that is, they threatened to undo evidence of human community commensurate with kingdom values. For this reason the ILS reached a spiritual and psychological nadir in 1989 and 1990 when Gómez was exiled for several months in Mexico and Guatemala. He had greatly feared the destruction of the community, and he told the people upon his return: 'I've discovered evil's strong tendency to destroy hope. We must not permit them to kill our hope nor destroy our solidarity. We must work together and remember there will come a time when everyone will see that those who have fallen, the martyrs, are the seeds of justice.'⁷⁶

de construir un mundo en donde no haya hambre, desempleo, inseguridad etc.': Utech, *El reino*, p. 89.

⁷⁵ Quoted in Janel, *The Lutheran Church*, p. 143.

⁷⁶ Medardo Ernesto Gómez Soto, quoted in David L. Miller, 'Gómez Goes Home', *Lutheran*, 11 April 1990, p. 20.

Lutheran efforts were directed both at turning back inhuman forces of violence and inching towards a utopian kingdom that affirmed life and human dignity. Once more Levine's commentary regarding liberation theology in general resonates with the particular vision that drove Lutherans' work in Central America: '[It] is realistic by virtue of its commitment to work with individual and collective needs, and to do so within history, here and now.'⁷⁷ In this way Lutheran activism and hopeful participation in projects for change – a church in the world – drew a direct line between engagement in history and the advance of a Christian utopian society.

In another sense, however, realisation of a utopian kingdom was, and is by Lutherans' own admission, in Central America as elsewhere, always limited, partial and incomplete. Concrete manifestations of justice, human cooperation and social harmony represent not so much the kingdom of God as fully present but more the *signs* of that kingdom, a kind of down payment on a utopia that can only be achieved in totality at some point in the future. As Gómez insisted in 1988, 'The kingdom of God has *signs* in this world ... However, the will of God is not completely fulfilled in this life, and we are still imperfect.'⁷⁸ The kingdom is present and certain, but its unfolding is ultimately a divine prerogative since human repentance is never quite complete: human imperfection is seen to thwart the kingdom's full blooming. Central American Lutherans in this way followed quite closely the paradoxical teaching of conventional Lutheranism where the kingdom of God is concerned. As expressed in a pamphlet produced by the Salvadorean Lutheran Synod to summarise the Church's theological understandings:

repentance paves the way for a practice that aims at God's kingdom: a practice of love for the forlorn, of a growing awareness for the blind, of justice for the majority of the people, of liberation for all oppressed people, of dignity for the marginalized, and of a secure life for the poor.

With all these things, we construct the signs for the kingdom of God. In doing this, we will never build up God's Kingdom in complete perfection, because as human beings we are not perfect, but sinners. Whenever we do something, we can become better, but we will never come to completion.⁷⁹

One can yet behold how the Lutheran sense of utopia rooted in God's present but still-coming kingdom served as a powerful catalyst for action and commitment, one all the more salient and with potentially greater impact in the context of Central American realities. But in contrast to utopias that Levine explicates as engaged in the real world, that of Lutherans in Central

⁷⁷ Levine, 'Considering Liberation Theology as Utopia', p. 618.

⁷⁸ Medardo Ernesto Gómez Soto, quoted in James Henneberger, 'In Touch with Life and Death', *World Encounter*, 3–4 (1988), p. 12, emphasis added.

⁷⁹ See Jähnel, *The Lutheran Church*, appendix 2, 'Documents and Pictures from the Lutheran Church in El Salvador', pp. 330–1.

America is perhaps not wholly practical since it diverges from other utopian formulations both in its degree of political humility and in its expectation of final consummation in history as the work of God's own hand. Echoing a phrase of Archbishop Romero, Lutherans acted as 'prophets of a future not [entirely] their own'.

Such historical limitations of a Lutheran utopian vision may have rendered it, curiously, even more compelling and powerful for those in its embrace. We have already seen that for Central American Lutherans, conversion to God's realm meant taking the side of the poor, the oppressed and the exploited in a socio-economic context where such had been the lot of the large majority. To be on God's side and to pursue the justice of the kingdom of God, Lutherans were called to support the disfranchised and socially marginalised. Scattering the seeds – or signs – of this utopia planted genuine hope and sometimes generated tangible changes in Central American society. But not ultimately being fully responsible for, or capable of, its achievement also allowed a measure of freedom in the work that sustained the hope and faith needed to march onward. Had this not been so, figures such as Gómez, Cortez, Alfaro and Ibarra would likely have succumbed to those who wished to destroy them and the signs of a utopian kingdom they sought to plant. Indeed, such a paradoxical utopian vision may help students of the period to begin to recognise and understand the steadfastness of those Lutherans who pursued it amidst violent recrimination and murderous hostility.

What Salvadorean and Nicaraguan Lutherans experienced as signs of the kingdom thus pointed both to visible outcomes of events and actions in which they had a hand, and to an unseen kingdom of peace and justice to which their hopes and dreams were anchored. Certainty of God's kingdom beyond immediate events and circumstances sustained them in the darkest hours and assured them of God's presence through chaos and strife. One of Luther's memorable metaphors of the Christian in the world is that of a rose beneath thorns, whose way of living prompts scandal and social rejection but whom 'all the suffering and opposition of the world cannot stop', as Utech observed, 'because they are certain of God's accompaniment'.⁸⁰ Signs of the kingdom that gave concrete expression to hope, and thereby sustained the people in duress and hardship, finally had to include as well religious symbols and rituals that adumbrated a promised liberation.

Such symbolic representation of the people's hope for salvation and deliverance is powerfully illustrated in Bishop Gómez's story of the 'subversive

⁸⁰ 'Lutero ... decía que el cristiano vive en el mundo, como una rosa bajo las espinas, o sea la vida del cristiano provoca rechazo y escándalo en la sociedad. Pero, todo el sufrimiento y oposición del mundo no lo abate, porque está seguro del acompañamiento de Dios': Utech, *El reino*, pp. 84–5.

cross'.⁸¹ In 1989, the people of the Resurrection Church fashioned a large cross upon which members wrote down sins of the community such as social injustice, greed, violence, violation of human rights and exploitation of women. They placed it at the altar as a reminder of society's failures and their own, but also as a marker of conversion to a new, better life. In the nationwide government crackdown that autumn, military authorities invaded the sanctuary and removed the cross as subversive, a sign of political scandal implicating the church in oppositional activities. The cross's removal occurred in conjunction with the arrest of several foreign and Salvadorean church workers. Gómez, then in hiding, escaped arrest and soon went into exile. Through the political intervention of the US ambassador, the exiled cross was eventually restored to the community, as was Bishop Gómez, who returned in April 1990 after four months' absence. Remarkably, Gómez reported, the very symbol that scandalised the authorities had been placed inside military barracks and even the presidential palace, there to bear witness to another kingdom. The restoration of the cross and the pastor came at a critical juncture in the community's history and must have produced a renewal of the people's hope that was more than symbolic. But the 'subversive cross' also captured clearly for a moment the powerful vision of a converted people that pointed unmistakably to a new utopian way. 'This cross is even more special to us now', claimed Gómez. 'Its presence nourishes us; it symbolizes the hope of liberation.'⁸²

As war-weariness set in and hopes for peace grew amidst the continuing political violence, the ILS persisted in utopian designs to liberate Salvadorean society from mayhem and death and bring it into life. Especially crucial as the country nudged towards a process of peace negotiation, political reconciliation and final reckoning were the efforts of Gómez and the ILS to bring to light, and to account, a seemingly endless train of political murders and human rights violations. Confronting legal barriers of official impunity and denials by a government-dominated press and US officials, and still facing threats and reprisals, the ILS opened its own office of human rights in 1988 to assist the independent research already being carried out by Tutela Legal.⁸³ Formally sanctioned and recognised by the offices of the Archbishop of San Salvador in 1978, Tutela Legal's investigative and advocacy efforts came under increasing government fire as the civil war lurched towards conclusion and political accounting loomed on the horizon.⁸⁴ When Romero's successor, Archbishop

⁸¹ See Medardo Ernesto Gómez Soto, 'The Subversive Cross', *Lutheran*, 8 Aug. 1990, p. 47.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ See Jahnel, *The Lutheran Church*, pp. 216–17.

⁸⁴ Tutela Legal (Legal Protection) began as a project of Catholic lay lawyers in 1975 under the name Socorro Jurídico (Legal Aid), and later received the official recognition of Monsignor Romero as an archiepiscopal institution; see Legal Aid Service of the Archdiocese of San Salvador, *El Salvador: One Year of Repression* (Commission of the Churches on International

Rivera y Damas, decided to remove the archbishopric from the recently established National Debate for Peace spearheaded by Salvadorean churches and civic organisations, ostensibly to maintain its neutrality in the negotiation process, the Lutheran Church, with Gómez taking a prominent part, stepped into the breach.⁸⁵ In time the LWF lent its organisational weight to spur the momentum of the Salvadorean peace process, a role it also played in adjacent Guatemala.⁸⁶

In a different though no less difficult political landscape in Nicaragua, the ILFE emerged to make its mark in Nicaragua's dreary post-revolutionary period. One knowledgeable observer praised the Church for its enthusiastic willingness to answer to human crisis with alacrity and purpose as other religious organisations ignored dire social needs and impoverishment. When Hurricane Mitch devastated the entire region in 1998, the ILFE assisted communities in northern Nicaragua hit hard by floods and landslides. Out of this social evangelism sprouted several mission congregations along the Honduran border.⁸⁷ Sizing up the comparative significance of the Lutheran presence in Nicaragua at the time of Mitch's devastation, Dominican religious Mery Arias observed:

Some church institutions have an indifferent and conformist outlook, but [the Lutheran] tradition ... keeps its faith alive by remembering the words of Jesus when he *says* to us: there is a new commandment of 'love', a commandment of which Luther also reminded us when he *said*: 'If they told me that the world was going to end today, the first thing I'd do would be to plant an apple tree.'⁸⁸

By 2008, according to Bishop Cortez, the ILFE had representation in 45 separate locations in the country.⁸⁹ In a 2006 study, Manuel Ortega Hegg and Marcelino Castillo remarked on the striking recent growth of the ILFE

Affairs, World Council of Churches, 1981), originally *El Salvador: del genocidio de la junta militar a la esperanza de la lucha insurreccional*, p. 5. See also Leigh Binford, *The El Mozote Massacre* (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 1996), pp. 121–4, 229; Tutela Legal, 'Recording the Terror: El Salvador's Tutela Legal', in Marvin E. Gettleman, Patrick Laceyfield, Louis Menashe and David Mermelstein (eds.), *El Salvador: Central America in the Cold War* (revised and updated, New York: Grove Press, 1986), pp. 247–53; and Mark Danner, *The Massacre at El Mozote* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), pp. 164, 170–1, 279–80.

⁸⁵ See Tommie Sue Montgomery, *Revolution in El Salvador: From Civil Strife to Civil Peace* (2nd edition, Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995), pp. 209–10; and Jahnel, *The Lutheran Church*, pp. 39, 217–19.

⁸⁶ Schjørring, Kumari and Hjelm (eds.), *From Federation to Communion*, pp. 342–3.

⁸⁷ Interview with Mark Lester, 11 Sep. 2008; author visits to Lutheran communities in Somotillo, Chinandega, Nicaragua, 17 Sep. 2008, and Somoto, Madriz, Nicaragua, 18–20 Sep. 2008.

⁸⁸ Mery Arias, 'La familia luterana en el mundo', *El Nuevo Diario*, Managua, 31 Oct. 1998, available at <http://archivo.elnuevodiario.com.ni/1998/octubre/31-octubre-1998/opinion/opinion4.html>, emphasis added.

⁸⁹ Cortez Rodríguez, 'A Church of Faith and Hope', p. 92.

throughout Nicaragua. They explained the ILFE's positive reception among the Nicaraguan people as owing to its intentional ecumenical respect for Catholicism and other Protestant denominations alongside its diverse and active *programas sociales* in the country's communities.⁹⁰

The political crisis in Honduras that began in 2009 provided a different but equally significant perspective from which to judge the evolving social attitudes and commitments regnant in the ILS and the ILFE alike. Both churches publicly supported the legitimacy of President José Manuel Zelaya and formally repudiated the coup that removed him from office.⁹¹ They quite understandably viewed these events as an unacceptable portent of retreat from the emergent if fragile democratic practices they had fought so hard to win in the immediately preceding decades.

Legacy of Liberation

*Los pobres siempre esperan el amanecer
de un día más justo y sin opresión,
los pobres hemos puesto la esperanza en ti, Libertador.*⁹²

The movement of history can be ungenerous. Since 1990, global events have seemingly relegated the appeal of liberationist Christianity to a fleeting chapter of revolutionary upheaval in Central America's wider evolution, as nothing but an aberrant pause in the region's slow, painful and uneven integration into the capitalist global economy. The dissolution of the socialist bloc dramatically reduced economic and political options. Religious options narrowed under the aegis of the new evangelism of the Roman Catholic Church, while the growth of Protestantism everywhere was due to the meteoric rise of evangelical Pentecostalism. When revolutionary movements lost power, as in 1990 in Nicaragua, or sued for peace, as in El Salvador beginning in 1989, the popular Church lost some momentum and became in some sense a political orphan. But the religious status quo antebellum was not restored, as the Lutheran chapter of liberationist Christianity reveals. Lutherans in the region today inherit a three-fold legacy of liberation: called to the side of the dispossessed and excluded; intent on making a difference in history; and impelled by a utopian vision linked to a divine order of peace, justice and reconciliation. As

⁹⁰ Manuel Ortega Hegg and Marcelino Castillo, *Religión y política: la experiencia de Nicaragua* (Managua: Ruth Casa Editorial, CASC-UCA, 2006), pp. 205–6.

⁹¹ Obispa Victoria Cortez, Carta Pastoral, Managua, 2 July 2009, author email correspondence; see also '28 de septiembre: condenamos cierre de medios y violencia en Honduras' and 'Manuel Zelaya: de presidente a prisionero', under 'Sala de Prensa', available at <http://premper.info/iglesia-luterana/>, 10 July 2010.

⁹² CILCA, *Himnos y cantos*, p. 95.

heralded in the community's music, Lutherans continue to wait for the dawn of a new day, 'a day more just and without oppression'.

Nevertheless, there is no gainsaying that liberationist religion and those sustained by its insights and inspirations entered a period of decline after 1990. In 1995 Stoll and Levine noted that the empowerment of civil society in the region through religious innovation had not easily translated into real power at the grassroots, thereby producing a certain disarray, disillusionment and sense of failure.⁹³ They concluded that the mechanisms, organisations and processes of civil society formation shaped by religious change simply required more time to develop the human resources necessary to create a wider political impact. At its core, they argued, this entailed social trust accumulated from sustained practical impacts in people's daily lives. From these social barriers to political change at the grassroots, together with the altered social and political conditions noted earlier, has naturally come a reevaluation and reorientation of liberationist theory and practice. While efforts are under way in this direction, it is difficult as yet to know how well they will sustain civic organisational life and whether they will produce practical and permanent results in Latin American communities.

Historical resources of continuity, identity and heritage are also critical in this regard. While change is inevitable, it is rarely if ever complete or absolute. The tides shift pebbles and grains of sand along the shoreline, but do not obliterate them or wash them all away. What residual traces of liberationist Christianity can be found in history's subsequent rearrangement? James C. Scott offers the memorable and provocative image of a ship that founders on a reef built up so gradually and imperceptibly over such a long stretch of time that no one notices it until it is too late.⁹⁴ Scott had in mind quiet, subtle, everyday forms of ideological resistance, which he examined empirically in a case study of a Malaysian village he called 'Sedaka', but his essential insight may well one day be applicable to religious communities such as the Lutheran ones analysed in this article. This will depend on the extent to which robust ecumenical dialogue among religious groups inhabiting different social, political and economic locations in the region – for instance, among Lutheran and Pentecostal traditions – grows and enables shared religious-ideological understandings around the stubborn social and economic challenges facing their societies.⁹⁵ For Scott, long-term *quiet resistance*

⁹³ Daniel H. Levine and David Stoll, 'Religious Change, Empowerment, and Power: Bridging the Gap in Latin America', *Journal of Iberian and Latin American Studies*, 1: 1–2 (1995), pp. 1–33.

⁹⁴ See James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), p. xvii.

⁹⁵ Jahnel describes ecumenical conversations under way in the ILS community, a point I observed during visits with ILFE groups in 2008; see Jahnel, *The Lutheran Church*, pp. 285–8.

captured both the theoretical and empirical dimensions of his findings; how quiet and how resistant Lutherans prove to be through the ecumenical encounter with others now under way remains to be seen, but there is every reason to expect that they will continue to amplify their voice in the coming years.

Phillip Berryman once wondered about ‘the enduring legacy of liberation theology and the kind of pastoral work’ it produced. Would its tenets have permanence or would they prove to be the evanescent work of a single generation?⁹⁶ The Lutheran experience considered here strongly indicates something greater than a fleeting, ephemeral impact for religious perspectives linked in some way to a liberationist outlook. Although it began life as the outgrowth of a US Church increasingly shaped by conservative impulses, the Salvadorean Lutheran Synod and its direct offshoot in Nicaragua grew an ecclesial identity and a communal consciousness formed in the social, cultural and political spaces that their communities inhabited. Lutherans in these countries manifested over time important commonalities with progressive Catholics as well as both mainline and evangelical Protestant groups, but elaborated their own position among these others as crisis engulfed the region. As summarised by one ILS church leader, ‘We were born as a conservative church but have been converted into a prophetic spiritual sensibility. Our current ecclesiastical and theological identity enables us to be a church that synthesises evangelical, Lutheran, and Latin American concepts and [to be a church committed to] social-political involvement.’⁹⁷

The political conditions of revolutionary upheaval in El Salvador and Nicaragua provided fertile ground upon which the seeds of classic Lutheran teaching could be sown. Planted originally by innovative LCMS missionaries, they increasingly yielded a liberationist harvest. The earliest LCMS church workers participated themselves in this transformation, encouraging a rethinking of Church practices, programmes and priorities in light of people’s everyday concerns. As the home Church over time grew distant and alienated from what the ILS was becoming, it sought to arrest its offspring’s transformation and independence. By then, however, it was too late: liberationist Christianity had persuasively reinterpreted the ILS/ILFE’s experience of exile, persecution and suffering in ways that orthodox Missouri

Earlier, Edward L. Cleary underscored the potential impact of ecumenical dialogue for societal change as well as for both theological and political convergence, in ‘Protestants and Catholics: Rivals or Siblings?’, in Daniel R. Miller (ed.), *Coming of Age: Protestantism in Contemporary Latin America* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1994), pp. 205–31.

⁹⁶ Phillip Berryman, ‘Is Latin America Turning Pluralist?’, *Latin American Research Review*, 30: 3 (1995), pp. 118–19. ⁹⁷ See Pineda, ‘Iglesia luterana salvadoreña’, author’s translation.

Synod Lutheranism no longer could. The promise of human if not national liberation, most visibly in the option to serve the poor, added a crucial dimension of orthopraxis to Lutheran orthodoxy. The solidarity of other Lutheran bodies in Europe, the United States and Latin America, which responded in a spirit of ecumenical fellowship and critical support, proved vital as national leaders and workers in Central America rhetorically and practically linked up the option to serve the poor with the more prosaic Lutheran calling to serve one's neighbour. The Lutheran synthesis with utopian liberationist designs, radical in its own way, was wedded neither to a discrete political ideology nor to a revolutionary programme – nevertheless, Lutheran communities were able to fashion social and theological resources that sustained thousands through cycles of crisis, violence and loss, and to engage in projects that made a concrete difference in people's daily lives. In the process they discovered themselves afresh and fashioned a valuable heritage for the future, where one anticipates, judging from the recent past, that they will continue to look for and work towards liberation.

Spanish and Portuguese abstracts

Spanish abstract. El cristianismo de la liberación en Centroamérica ha enfrentado retos considerables al ajustarse a circunstancias cambiantes desde 1990. No obstante, las preocupaciones políticas y las condiciones económicas que estimularon a los movimientos religiosos de liberación en la región no han desaparecido, ni tampoco los adherentes a la religión progresista. Los luteranos centroamericanos representan un diálogo particular con la religión de la liberación, que no ha sido tratado adecuadamente ni entendido en los estudios existentes que se enfocan en el cambio religioso y el Estado. En El Salvador y Nicaragua los luteranos adaptaron las perspectivas de la teología de la liberación a través de su propia herencia teológica, aunque tal legado – y ellos mismos – fueron igualmente configurados y transformados por los esfuerzos en contrarrestar, sobrevivir y redimir la inhumanidad y la violencia política de las sociedades que habitaban. La historia luterana es una adición importante al actual entendimiento de las diferentes formas en que las comunidades religiosas interactuaron con teologías y movimientos de liberación, y se involucraron con procesos de cambio social en el contexto centroamericano.

Spanish keywords: cristianismo de liberación, luteranismo, cambio religioso, revolución, acompañamiento, teología de la liberación

Portuguese abstract. O cristianismo de libertação na América Central enfrenta desafios consideráveis para ajustar-se às conjunturas desde 1990. No entanto, os anseios políticos e condições econômicas que inspiraram os movimentos religiosos pela libertação na região não desapareceram, tampouco os adeptos da religião progressista. Luteranos da América Central incorporam um diálogo distinto com a religião liberacionista, fato que não é adequadamente considerado ou compreendido nos

estudos existentes focados em mudanças religiosas e do estado. Em El Salvador e Nicarágua, luteranos adaptaram perspectivas da teologia da libertação a partir dos recursos de sua própria herança teológica, mas esta herança, assim como eles próprios, foram igualmente moldados e transformados pelos próprios esforços ao opor-se, sobreviver e compensar a desumanidade e violência política das sociedades onde viviam. A história luterana é um acréscimo importante ao entendimento atual das diversas maneiras pelas quais as comunidades religiosas interagiram com teologias e movimentos de libertação e como engajam-se em processos de mudança social no contexto da América Central.

Portuguese keywords: cristianismo de libertação, luteranismo, mudança religiosa, revolução, acompanhamento, teologia da libertação