
Loehe's Legacy and Borderless Solidarity: Destigmatizing Immigrants in a Xenophobic Nation

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Fifty-one migrants were found dead inside an abandoned tractor-trailer rig in San Antonio, Texas, a few weeks before the 2022 Loehe conference began. According to *The Guardian*, “The discovery in Texas may prove to be the deadliest tragedy among thousands of people who have died attempting to cross the U.S. border from Mexico in recent decades.”¹

In a separate event that took place just a day before the conference began, I lead an online Bible study in advance of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) Churchwide Assembly, and I shared a story about how the Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) communities have been coping with discrimination and xenophobic violence. Reports of hate crimes against AAPI communities have increased since 2020. Since last year Quincy Asian Resources, Inc. (QARI), a resource center for Asian and immigrant residents in Quincy, Massachusetts, has been working on a project named #WhistleAgainstAAPIHate to distribute whistles to seniors. QARI hopes that “a whistle will provide a sense of protection from potential harassment and harm and symbolize that their community is standing with them.”² Most of the Chinese churches in the Greater Boston Area encouraged their members, particularly women, young and old, to take one and put it in their bags or pockets in case they feel threatened as they run errands or just go for a walk.

What have these two cases or incidents to do with Wilhelm Loehe? Issues arising from border crossings and immigrant experiences for the United States in the twenty-first century are vastly different from that of the nineteenth century. Loehe's care, including his direction and strategy for the German immigrants cannot be directly applied to the recent contexts. What does it mean when we talk about Loehe's legacy in terms of his vision

What does it mean when we talk about Loehe's legacy in terms of his vision and mission for the lives of immigrants in the U.S. and beyond? Does his legacy remain relevant to us in a time when the label of “immigrant” is highly stigmatized and even politically charged?

and mission for the lives of immigrants in the U.S. and beyond? Does his legacy remain relevant to us in a time when the label of “immigrant” is highly stigmatized and even politically charged? I will first describe Loehe's approach to immigrants in his time, and then outline issues facing immigrants in the United States. An analysis of this kind should not end in sweeping generalizations about these situations but create a pathway both to interrupt our assumptions and to form new possibilities for ecclesial resistance as well as ecclesial practice in relation to human suffering, dignity, and flourishing.

Boundary crossings: Loehe's mission and German immigrants

Wilhelm Loehe, pastor in the small, Bavarian village of Neuendettelsau, founded the *Gesellschaft für innere Mission im Sinne der lutherischen Kirche* (Society for Inner Mission according to the Lutheran Church) in 1849. In response to the vision of his contemporary Johann Hinrich Wichern, who set up “a social program assisting the poor and needy, especially children, often orphans, of impoverished workers' families in Germany,” Loehe showed no hesitation in addressing the physical needs of the people, but he went beyond that to accentuate and prioritize the spiritual needs

1. “Fifty-one Migrants Found Dead inside Abandoned Texas Trailer Truck,” *The Guardian*, June 28, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/jun/27/texas-trailer-truck-dead-people-san-antonio>.

2. “Whistle against AAPI Hate,” Qari (Quincy Asian Resources, Inc.), accessed July 18, 2022, <https://www.qariusa.org/whistle-against-aapi-hate>.

of these individuals. Klaus Detlev Schulz observes:

Inner mission included the commission of the Lord to the church that the gospel is to be brought to the already-baptized Christians, to those who went to church, those who have fallen away, or those in the process of falling away. . . . According to Loehe, inner mission must be concerned for the preaching of God's word and the proper care of souls before it addresses the physical needs.³

Loehe's idea of inner mission crossed borders and extended to German immigrants in the United States, even though he himself had never set foot on the continent. Loehe developed his vision of caring for German immigrants before the establishment of the *Gesellschaft*. In 1841, Friedrich Conrad Dietrich Wyneken, a pastor based in Fort Wayne, Indiana, wrote an appeal titled "The Distress of German Lutherans in North America," also known as his *Notruf* (distress call).⁴ Part of that letter reads:

While you in Germany know nothing else than that your newborn children be implanted in the kingdom of God through the washing of regeneration, there (in America) the children of your brethren are growing up by the hundreds and are without that which is most essential, baptism . . . I myself have had to baptize at one time twelve or more children of greatly varying ages, often ten to twelve years old. But who gives instruction to those who are baptized? How can the washing of regeneration continue its action, grow, and become powerful when preaching or instruction is missing? Who will confirm the children? Who will determine Holy Communion to them afterward? Perhaps their parents of German extraction are themselves heathen, unbaptized; just imagine—German heathen!⁵

Loehe supported the cause wholeheartedly. As Albert Hock describes, Loehe "made an earnest plea for workers," and a couple years later, "he began publishing a special paper in behalf of America's need for missionaries, *Kirchliche Mitteilungen aus und über Nordamerika*."⁶ It is not surprising to consider Loehe's mission to immigrants as one that strategized around the need and urgency of spreading and preaching the Word of God among German immigrants, specifically Lutherans, a strategy shaped by the revival of pietism.

We need to be mindful, however, that any celebration of the outward movement of pietistic concern—in this case, an emphasis on caring for immigrants—was more complex than we might imagine. The location of Wartburg Seminary, founded to serve

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these immigrant communities, is an example of this complexity. The presence of the seminary in Dubuque, Iowa, starting from its first location on Garfield Avenue to where it stands now, is predicated on the absence of certain communities that preceded it in this place. To be more specific, the current location of the campus is located on the ancestral lands stolen by the U.S. Government and white colonizers from the Sauk, Meskwaki, Miami, Ho-Chunk, Potawatomi, Ojibwe, and Kickapoo peoples. By absence, I mean the loss of agency regarding who one is, as well as where one has inhabited generation after generation. Some of the indigenous communities left because of the expansion of the missionary activities in their land.

In 1844, Loehe planned to bring together inner mission and outer mission with his aim to reach out to the indigenous people. "Would it not be possible, he asked, for a minister of a German Lutheran congregation to be likewise a missionary to the heathen? Could not Christian community life serve as a model to those ignorant of or unaffiliated with Christianity? Preaching and Christian practice could be made to function jointly, could they not?"⁷ The term "heathen," chosen and used by Loehe and his contemporaries, not only reflected a Christian-centric worldview, but also supported a narrow and problematic view of Lutheran identity, especially when "we," who were coming from a certain cultural background prioritized the needs of "us," our very own people, thus legitimizing our concerns and causes. That could easily overshadow the struggles of others and block our vision to see others as equal. The history of Christian missionary practices has infamously demonstrated this repeatedly. German immigrant communities stayed, thrived, and flourished, but the indigenous communities did not.

What then can we say about the Loehe legacy? What does it mean when we say we inherit the Loehe legacy? Loehe's strategy

3. Klaus Detlev Schulz, "Wilhelm Loehe's Missiological Perspective," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 39, no. 1 (February 2012): 32.

4. Albert Llewellyn Hock, *The Pilgrim Colony: The History of Saint Sebald Congregation, the Two Wartburgs, and the Synods of Iowa and Missouri* (Minneapolis: Kirk House Publishers, 2004), 21.

5. Hock, *The Pilgrim Colony*, 21-22.

6. Hock, 22.

7. Homer Reginald Greenholt, "A Study of Wilhelm Loehe, his Colonies and the Lutheran Indian Missions in the Saginaw Valley of Michigan" (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 1937), 63, cited in James M. Kaiser, "Wilhelm Loehe and the Chippewa Outreach at Frankenthum," in *Missio Apostolica: Journal of the Lutheran Society for Missiology* 22, no. 1 (2014): 77.

for boundary crossings certainly met with the limits of his times, resulting in a lopsided vision that failed to affirm the agency of the otherized individuals, that is, the indigenous communities. While we continue to reflect on how mission work undertaken with good intentions could undesirably and unfortunately lead to biased perceptions, we should also move beyond a win/lose dualistic framework. Loehé's work engaged contexts where people were suffering. Caring for those in need was no easy task, especially in situations where people might be hostile to strangers and aliens. The way in which Loehé's spirit inspires us to carry on the ministry of service is important. The legacy continues.

It is even more important that we learn from those past mistakes and are willing to dive deeper into people's suffering, by which I mean different communities suffer differentially based on their identities and relation to the power structures. This step requires us to go into the space where ambiguity, vulnerability, and complexity intersect. All this calls for epistemological, ethical, and praxial changes. Such changes will then instigate radical boundary-crossing attempts that are more attuned to the agentization of the people. People on the move never stops. The immigrant population in the United States is growing again. How does experience, including the experience of immigrants and the experience of working with immigrants, help us to meet the challenges of new immigrants? And how does that encounter inform a new way of being church? These questions matter. And so, the legacy evolves.

Boundaries and the in-between: Challenges facing immigrants in the United States

Immigrants in twenty-first-century United States increasingly face more entangled issues and inequalities. In a previous work on the body of Christ as a borderless space in the face of xenophobia, I argue:

There are many reasons why immigrants choose to leave their home countries. Some move to other countries due to economic hardship, political strife, religious persecution, and natural disasters. Others simply want to pursue their dreams of living abroad. The immigrant identity is unfortunately loaded with negative connotations and generalizations. They are described as poor, dirty, uncivilized, and uneducated. Immigrant becomes synonymous with welfare recipients. Furthermore, their differences in skin color, language, and culture provoke powerful feelings of otherness. Politicians and leaders know how to manipulate public opinion by using hateful rhetoric and blaming immigrants for everything. Calling people "bad hombres," "criminals," "thugs," "drug addicts," etc., is making excuses to get rid of all undesirable ones.⁸

8. Man Hei Yip, "Remembering the Immigrant Experience: The Body of Christ as a Borderless Space to Embrace Our Shared Humanity in the Face of Rising Xenophobia," in Christine Helmer, ed. *Truth-Telling and Other Ecclesial Practices of Resistance* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2021), 115.

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When we employ the lens of intersectionality, it enables us to see that gender, race, class, religious background, and the like are intertwined within the hierarchical and interlocking systems of power and privilege. It is unsurprising that I point out:

Not all races or peoples or cultures are made equal across the United States. Immigrant women are most vulnerable to poverty and exploitation. Hellena Moon points out that white women in the U.S. are taking advantage of "the cheap labor of immigrant women to clean their homes, take care of their children, cook, do the gardening, etc., so that they can have fulfilling, meaningful careers and enjoy leisure time" and the discriminatory practice including but not limited to the insufficient legal protection of immigrant women "reveals the nature of power that sustains, as well as further exacerbates, inequalities among women."⁹ Simply being charitable, such as providing food and clothing to the immigrants, does not address issues of inequity, but obscures widespread socioeconomic and institutional injustice.¹⁰

Unveiling the asymmetries helps us see why negotiating one's identity is made even harder. The fear of the other is not an opinion but shapes the way we know and the way we relate with others existentially and genealogically. Here, I maintain:

The promise of America did not bring equality; as a matter of fact, not everyone had an equal access to economic betterment back then. People were divided along the lines of race, ethnic/cultural background, education, gender, and religious affiliations and the like. We must be alert to the fact that becoming American is not simply about assimilation, but also the endorsement of a few who have the power to define, name, and label the other. Immigrants are allowed to reside in the U.S., but they have been studied, assessed, and put into different categories. It becomes clear that some groups of immigrants enjoy

9. Citing Hellena Moon, "Immigrant Mothers of Color, Pastoral Theology, and the Law," *Pastoral Psychology* 61, no. 3 (June 2012), 349.

10. Yip, "Remembering the Immigrant Experience," 114.

privileged status in society, whereas others do not. Some are thought to be inferior, thus less favorable, and some are considered more dangerous than other groups. The ideology of exclusion is actively at work in the making of the American identity. Paradoxically, xenophobia, the fear and hatred of foreigners, takes place within the nation of immigrants.¹¹

Conceptualizing the immigration crisis in a broader framework becomes urgent and necessary. The issue of immigration cannot be reduced to an option for the church since it is concerned with the struggle against dehumanizing immigration policies. People die because of negligence, inaction, and unjust treatment. People are deprived of their personhood because of hateful rhetoric and action. Therefore, the voice of immigrants needs to be the starting point for the church and for Christian institutions and organizations before going about working with them. By listening to their voices, we will learn tremendously as to how they have ended up taking the path to involuntary suffering. That knowledge will prevent us from making inappropriate judgments or forcing our agendas onto them.

Then, we can juxtapose the people's lived experiences with Loehe's ministry and mission. The act of juxtaposition provides for us a lens to read and re-engage our current contexts through the necessary process of historical imagination. With such a juxtaposition, we can create the intercontextuality that highlights the differences and the similarities between the two situations, thus allowing us to better understand how people see themselves and the world through their own eyes. Their insights and wisdom will inevitably fine tune the overtone of Loehe's conviction and witness to the Christian faith. It will thus help generate continuous and meaningful encounters in our current realities.

Note that the crisis grows in complexity as immigration, racial tensions, and xenophobic violence intersect one another, especially during these times when democracy is seriously under threat. What happens in one context can happen in another. The rise of authoritarianism is not only felt abroad but also at home. A responsible approach to immigration and immigrants can be a countersign to authoritarianism as well as to discriminatory and oppressive policies toward others. An approach that centers on right and just relationships with others will open generative conversations at the global level. We should not lose sight of the global aspect of the Loehe legacy. As we are privileged to serve, we learn to be prophetic in our call to respond to the needs of a changing world. Our identities expand as the legacy evolves.

Reading the Loehe legacy anew: Crisis as an opportunity to reimagine a way forward

Instead of beginning our discussion by specifying what part of Christian identity is in crisis, I began with a socio-political crisis, in particular, the immigration and immigrant issue. An identity

11. Yip, 116.

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crisis cannot be analyzed in isolation or in abstraction. It evolves out of a situation in which it interacts with people and events in their specificity, contemporaneity, and materiality. The way Christians or churches respond to the crisis matters. It says much about who we are. When we are not doing anything, we *are* not doing anything. A socio-political crisis eventually turns into a theological and ecclesial crisis.

Today crises related to immigration, migration, and refugees are asking us to pause and reflect on our way of thinking and acting in witness to the gospel. To mention immigration, migration, and refugee crises is not meant to lump these issues together, dismissing the particularity in each one of them. But since they all involve the movement of people and at times the forced displacement of individuals, how these people live a dignified life in crisis should compel us to think and act wisely and respectfully.

Loehe showed us his way of thinking and acting by being attentive to the cry of German immigrants. Though preaching the Word of God among immigrants remained primary in Loehe's outreach to these communities, there is no reason to doubt Loehe's sincerity in addressing and assisting with the material needs of the people. For instance, according to Matthias Honold's account, "the social situation of so many people in Bavaria and other Germans states was very marginal ... which resulted in more than 200,000 people from Bavaria being able to immigrate to North America. At that time there was widespread pauperism, which meant that a large part of the population was living in mass poverty."¹² For that matter, I trust that Loehe would respect anyone who chose to leave their homeland in hopes of finding a better and more comfortable life. His way of seeing and hearing had informed his way of thinking and acting.

12. Matthias Honold, "From Neuendettelsau to Frankenmuth: In Search of Historical Connections," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 39, no. 1 (February 2012): 53.

What also deserves our attention is that Loehe grounded his way of seeing and hearing in the Word of God. Because of that, human suffering could not be taken lightly, nor human flourishing be driven or guided simply by ideologies promoting the myth of unlimited progress. As Dietrich Blaufuss observes, “in opposition to the Enlightenment, which supposedly brings things into light, Loehe intentionally articulated the ‘Word of God as the ...light [!] which leads to peace.’”¹³ True peace, achieved only by “the person and work of Christ for our relationship with God,” is shared at the Eucharist.¹⁴ Loehe’s way of seeing and hearing shows us a way to be present to the need of the church and the world. More specifically, it is a revelatory way grounded in the Word of God. Loehe’s understanding of God’s Word centered him and guided him to discern the signs of the time. We need such a way of seeing and hearing today to help us be present and pay attention to the need of the church and the world here and now.

The way we see and hear will affect the way we think and act. How we interpret and communicate the Word of God to a particular community—in this case, the immigrant community—becomes an inevitable task for us to discern. It is because the sharing of peace in the liturgy is never merely a ritual act, but a living liturgy that can be known, lived, and experienced with the marginalized and otherized at and around the table.

As discerning the Word of God becomes an indispensable part of spirituality to embody, it is the Word of God that makes us present in the here and now, even at the border and beyond borders and boundaries. Let me say that again, an embodied faith centers one in the Word of God; such an embodied faith flows out naturally from a spirituality that pays full attention to the lived experiences of the people, leads us to inhabit the liminal spaces and encourages us to navigate transitions with others. This form of spirituality expressed through an embodied faith never pretends to think and act in hopes of proving the correctness of one’s theological points of view. The embodiment of the Word of God asks us to let the Word of God change us and form us. To see and hear means at the same time to be open to correction. In other words, there is not a single formula for working with immigrants, particularly around issues of shepherding them and shaping their faith.

While acknowledging the hope and inspiration that Loehe brought through his approach to German immigrants in the nineteenth century, we also need to think about the implications for Lutheranism in our current contexts. Loehe’s influence continues to exist in congregations that trace their roots to immigrant German Lutherans. The continuation of being church, including but not limited to teaching and preaching, in a specific form of German Lutheranism is significant, especially when it comes to remembering the immigrant experience. My pastor friend in Boston holds a German worship service monthly, and I find

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that a valuable practice with the people he serves. Questions that ensue include: How could this kind of grace be extended to other groups that differ in ethnicity, culture, and language? How do we embrace immigrant experiences in our worship and liturgy without homogenizing the experience of people within these communities?

As I have written elsewhere:

Immigrant congregations are not on par with their counterparts of European descents. For congregations that show great eagerness to preserve the legacy of their ancestors primarily from Europe, they tend to measure religious experience by their own standards. They would love to see new immigrant churches to become like them. The otherness of immigrants is thus allowed but regulated through worship and religious events. Some even expect new immigrants to assimilate into American society fully and quickly, and the American (religious) way is understood purely in the framework of ethnic European identities. The promotion of cultural diversity remains a slogan, when there are no meaningful and intentional interactions between different groups of people. Working with ethnic groups or immigrant communities without being willing to sacrifice one’s power proves superficial. Efforts like that perpetuate the implicit bias and prejudice within the ecclesial body.¹⁵

13. Quoted in Blaufuss, “Wilhelm Loehe and Enlightenment Movements,” *Currents in Theology and Mission* 39, no. 1 (February 2012): 57.

14. Blaufuss, 56.

15. Yip, “Remembering the Immigrant Experience,” 114.

Conclusion

We are not “cookie cutter” Lutherans. The Loehe legacy has demonstrated to us a faith that flows out authentically from a spirituality that takes root in the Word of God and affirms the importance of both the spiritual and the physical. Such an embodied faith or embodied form of spirituality should encourage us to understand the constant tension in which people who are immigrants live and to respect their stories, not just collect information about them or objectify them. Making ourselves vulnerable and allowing ourselves to be graced with the presence of the other can broaden our scope of vision so that we see the big picture and create conditions to move forward. The suffering of marginalized and stigmatized communities adds depth to the issue of human suffering; being attentive to their stories and experiences further allows us to see and recognize the multiple forms of witness to the faithfulness of God for the world.

During my re-appointment interview a couple months ago, I shared with the committee that I am the first woman, woman of color, and certainly the first Hongkonger to be called to the position of systematic theology at Wartburg Theological Seminary after more than 160 years. Because of the apostolic witness over those years, the Loehe legacy continues—and it also evolves. It takes on new meanings over time. Indeed, Loehe himself offered a form of witness to the gospel through his way of seeing and hearing, thinking, and acting. The Word of God continues to change us and form us. It is the same Word of God that makes us present to one another. Solidarity across borders is made possible and plausible.

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