

John Tietjen, pivotal Lutheran figure, dies: Worked for Lutheran unity

News in the [March 9, 2004](#) issue

John H. Tietjen, a seminary president who led a mid-1970s revolt of moderates against fundamentalists in the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod, and contributed to a three-way merger of Lutheran bodies in 1987, died at his home in Fort Worth, Texas, after a long struggle with cancer. He was 75.

His death on February 15 came only four days shy of the 30th anniversary of the 1974 exodus of students and faculty, including Tietjen, from the campus of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. The next day, classes of Concordia Seminary in Exile (Christ Seminary-Seminex) began at Saint Louis University and at Eden Seminary in Webster Groves, Missouri.

The split widened within the LCMS, resulting in the formation of the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches (AELC) in 1976 by ex-Missouri Synod members, Tietjen among them. He later joined the new Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, which he helped to create.

Briefly an ELCA bishop in 1987 before quitting in an administrative dispute, Tietjen moved to Fort Worth for a pastoral post at Trinity Lutheran Church. Contemporaries praised Tietjen for his articulate views of academic integrity and Lutheran unity in a tumultuous period.

“John Tietjen became the eye of the theological storm in the Missouri Synod because of his commitment to the gospel as the central theological doctrine of Lutheranism,” said Edgar M. Krentz, Christ Seminary-Seminex professor emeritus of New Testament at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago. “Confronted by accusations that the theological faculty of Concordia Seminary taught false doctrine, his theological sensitivity and his personal ethical integrity led to the faculty’s defense,” said Krentz. “Historians of Lutheranism in America will regard John Tietjen as one of the major theologians of the 20th century.”

In the 1980s, Tietjen served as a member of the Commission for a New Lutheran Church, which coordinated the merger of the AELC, the American Lutheran Church and the Lutheran Church in America into the ELCA.

“When the history of 20th-century Lutheranism in America is written, John Tietjen will receive a full chapter, and his name will be etched in memory,” said historian and Century columnist Martin E. Marty, who like Tietjen made the transition from the Missouri Synod to the new ELCA. “His writings on Lutheran unity will remain as references, but it is the effect of his life that will be felt most profoundly and most durably. He did not seek to be controversial, but he was drawn into front-line leadership in the 1970s and played a role in the formation of the ELCA,” Marty said.

Born and raised in New York, Tietjen earned his bachelor and master of divinity degrees from Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, and his master of sacred theology degree and his doctorate from Union Theological Seminary, New York.

The LCMS ordained Tietjen in 1953 in New Jersey, where he served two churches until 1966, when he headed public relations for the Lutheran Council in the U.S.A. In 1969 he became president of Concordia Seminary. The council was formed by the Missouri Synod, the ALC and the LCA to coordinate cooperative work, but the LCMS pulled out eventually over doctrinal disputes.

Tietjen wrote *Which Way to Lutheran Unity? A History of Efforts to Unite the Lutherans of America* (1966) and *Memoirs in Exile* (1990). When Arthur Carl Piepkorn, a Lutheran historian and theologian, died in 1973 while working on *Profiles in Belief: The Religious Bodies of the United States and Canada*, Tietjen saw the four-volume set to its completion and publication in 1977.