

Attracting attention

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [September 22, 1999](#) issue

Tina Brown, celebrity editor of *Talk*, previously of the *New Yorker*, was welcoming writer Alexander Chancellor at a dinner party in New York. "Chancellor failed to rise to the occasion." Then, writes Stephen Robinson, "Brown pinged her glass with her spoon, a sound guaranteed to lower the spirit of a British guest at any American table."

Ping! I perked up, and winced. Until reading this in the *Times Literary Supplement* (June 11), I didn't know that Brits' spirits were lowered by pings on glasses, even if Britisher Brown was doing the pinging. I felt embarrassed and chagrined because the night before I had been at an ecumenical banquet in Denver toasting the presiding bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, H. George Anderson. Spirits were high, for earlier the ELCA had voted to enter into full communion, including exchange of ministers, with the Episcopal Church. To get guests' attention, I pinged on a glass. It worked.

I thought back: were any Britishers there? I didn't think so. Of course, Episcopalians were present. I wondered, might my ping have offended them? I was identifying these Anglican Communion folk, whose forebears have been settling in North America since 1607, with England. So I may have been thinking that the APF (anti-ping factor) was carried genetically. My worry was ill founded: Today's Episcopal Church is likely to have as many Schmidts as Smiths, Brauns as Browns, Koenigs as Kings. There's been leakage of children of Continental Lutherans to the Episcopal Church at least since General Muhlenberg, the son of America's Lutheran patriarch, switched.

And why should I think that my uncouth "ping" represents all of Lutheranism? Whatever sounds the Icelandic, Norwegian, Danish, Swedish, Finnish, German, black and Hispanic Lutherans might favor, they are not mine. I am, oxymoronically, a Swiss Lutheran. We of Swiss Reformed descendance probably should be using cowbells or cuckoo clocks to get attention.

My apologies to those whose spirits my ping lowered. You can see we have much work ahead. It was easy for Lutherans to find creedal consensus with the Episcopalians and to agree on "word and sacrament." Finding ways to share "oversight" was a bigger gulp. It demanded two years of inquiry, and we may need some seasons before we are all comfortable with it. But both "faith" and "order" issues are duck soup compared to relating habit and custom across our boundaries. (The two churches remain autonomous; both are allowed their idiosyncrasies.)

We learned that lesson also when we voted for full communion with the Moravian Church. Theology and order were easy in that case, too. But one voting member wanted to know what a Moravian "love feast" was, no doubt seeking reassurance that we would not be entering into full communion with orgiasts. We'll have to learn the Moravian customs, too.

As I read of how spirit-lowering a "ping" can be, I wondered: How do Episcopalians bring assemblies and banquetees to order? Answer: they bless:

The Lord be with you.

And also with you.

That's the all-purpose holy silencer in both communions. I don't know when that greeting came into common use in both cases, but it works. It's sacral, abrupt, nonintimidating, focusing. Splendid. But Lutherans still ping on their glasses to get attention. Do Episcopalians? I'll find out.