

THE NORTHWESTERN LUTHERAN 1914-1992:
Seventy-eight Years of Constancy and Change

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"To this end the Northwestern Lutheran endeavors to bring to the Lutheran home articles both instructive and edifying, and to keep our people in touch with the current events in the religious world."(The Northwestern Lutheran v.1 no.1 p.1)

"The purpose of the Northwestern Lutheran as the official periodical of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod is to promote the synod's gospel ministry by providing inspiration, instruction, and information to the synod's constituents as well as to a wider circle of readers."(The Conference of Presidents)

At first glance, these two statements are noticeably different. They use different words. They say a little more or less than each other. But when they are examined closely, it is plain that in essence they say the same thing. Even though these two statements are separated by nearly eighty years, the message contained within them expresses a common desire and purpose.

Overall, I feel that this commonality is indicative of the Northwestern Lutheran as a whole. By this I mean that the parts of the magazine throughout its seventy-eight year history have consistently worked to serve the stated purpose adapted by this, our synod's paper. While obvious changes have occurred on a regular basis throughout these years, none of these changes have unquestionably taken this periodical's sights off of its desired target.

It is my intention to write a history of the Northwestern Lutheran looking in particular at what has remained the same and what has changed. While there are many pieces that could be

pulled together to make up this kind of history (eg. personnel lists, NL's roots in The Gemeindeblatt, the personal views of those involved, etc.), I am restricting myself to the pieces gained by viewing the contents of the magazine itself. In other words, this paper will strive to produce a history of the Northwestern Lutheran which focuses solely on the information gathered from the magazine's own pages. More specifically, this information was collected by viewing every odd-numbered volume and every four issues in those volumes (6-7 total/volume). This overview provided a fair assessment of what made up the contents of this magazine for close to eight decades.

"The Lord our God be with us, as He was with our fathers; let Him not leave us, nor forsake us." 1 Kings 8:57

This quote from 1 Kings is the most constant component in the Northwestern Lutheran. It is rivaled only by the name of the paper itself. This biblical quotation appears in every issue. It represents the unchanging basis in God's Word and the unchanging reliance on that same Word which the Northwestern Lutheran has had throughout the years. Through the survey I completed, I saw clearly that while many elements in the paper have changed, the Word of God has remained in nearly a constant proportion to all other items.

Throughout its history, the Northwestern Lutheran has made use of God's Word most obviously in its regular devotions. Over

the years these devotions have been placed under the headings of "Studies in God's Word", "Mining From God's Word", "The Word For Today" or have been set apart in the paper by a simple Scripture reference (especially during the earliest years). But whatever the title may have been the subject was a specific portion of God's Word. This remained a constant. Characteristicly, they have been written with a great deal of variety. They made use of many different texts and were based on sets of themes at times. They were even written in a series (e.g. when the magazine set out to study a large number of psalms). Whether these devotions were instructional, polemical, or written to give thanks, they were always serving the purpose of the paper: to edify or further the gospel ministry of our Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod.

In addition to what were specifically devotions, God's Word took prominence in this periodical by being the basis for many topical studies. In the early years these studies often dealt with what kinds of doctrine and practice were being promoted in other church bodies. As years passed and our own members were less apt to be reading the Bible on a regular basis (much like the rest of Christendom) these topical studies tended to focus primarily on the questions and concerns of our own synod. In most recent years, the Northwestern Lutheran is characteristicly very "life application" oriented in these studies. Throughout the history of the paper, these studies might not always quote Scripture directly but they will be based squarely on Biblical

ideas and teaching. This fact is what continues to mark the Word as a dominant and unchanging component in our synod's periodical.

The Northwestern Lutheran's interest in the lives of its members and in the events of synod in general has also been a constant over the years. Looking back through past issues, I witnessed an undaunted commitment to synodical news. From the July 7th issue in the very first volume the paper was already reporting on the synod's school system. From this first entry they included pictures of the grounds and buildings to enhance the reader's understanding of what their schools were like. This commitment continued in some way on a regular yearly, if not monthly, basis. In addition to the schools themselves, the paper reported on the students in the schools, making it a habit to publish the pictures of the graduates from our synodical finishing schools. On a synod wide level, the magazine has consistently reported on both district and synod convention news in order to keep people informed. From a more personal perspective, there has always been some news on individual members or pastors from the first issue to the present. Whether it was anniversaries of ministry or notices entitled "With The Lord", the Northwestern Lutheran has kept in touch with its readers, helping its readers to keep in touch with one another.

In order to keep a balance between unchanged and changed which is representative of that balance which exists in the Northwestern Lutheran, it is only fair that the pendulum begin

its swing in the other direction. Based on what I saw in my study of this paper from the first issue to the last, there was far more which changed than did not. Having established the fact that there is an unchanging foundation on the Word it is proper to begin a reporting of the numerous changes which have taken place. I have taken note of change under the following categories: major events, format or physical appearance, and personnel.

In 1913 in Milwaukee, Wisconsin an event occurred that would act as the catalyst towards the establishing of the Northwestern Lutheran. This change was the founding of the first English speaking congregation in the Evangelical Lutheran Joint Synod of Wisconsin, Minnesota, Michigan, and other States. The founding of this congregation marked the beginning of an official shift in our synod from German to English. This was perhaps the most major event on which the Northwestern Lutheran reported because without this event the magazine might not have come into existence. Volume 1, issue no. 1 reports on this shift as the reason for a new synodical publication:

"The publication of an English Lutheran churchpaper has been a long-felt want within the confines of our Synodical body. For years the desire has been expressed - not alone by young and inexperienced men, but by those of years and of wide experience - to offer to a large number of our parishioners a churchpaper written in a tongue more

familiar to them."

From its inception (which in itself was a major event) the Northwestern Lutheran has been reporting on the major happenings that have taken place throughout our synod, the religious community, and the world as a whole.

One of the first events which was reported (from a religious perspective - i.e. God's hand in national and world events) was The Great War, World War I. While the NL did not take a great deal of space out of its then four page periodical to deal with the events of the war, it did touch on the issues which were important to Lutheran Christians at the time.

It was not long until the paper was presented with a much more pleasant reason for reporting. In the 1918 volume the editing committee was pleased to celebrate the twenty-fifth anniversary of the synod's Theological Seminary. This event marked the first twenty-five years in which the synod had been training its own pastors for service. By bringing this major event to the attention of its readers the Northwestern Lutheran was noting and remembering a very large change for our very small church body.

Fourteen years and many issues later, the magazine took the time and space to report on the findings of the Committee on Financial Collections. According to the report, this committee had been formed to deal with the apparent financial difficulties that had presented themselves to our synod. Once the problem was analyzed, the committee set out to make an "every member

canvass". The Northwestern Lutheran reported on this major event. It was a special feature which served to highlight the practice of reporting on financial matters that the paper had begun some ten years before. With this feature, the Northwestern Lutheran helped to promote the healthy stewardship practices of our synodical body.

An article in 1938 reminds its readers of yet another major church event taking place. This article highlighted the work of the "New Hymnal" Committee. Just as today, the Northwestern Lutheran was pivotal in preparing our synod's members for the coming of a new worship tool. Undoubtedly, the production of this hymnal (which would be finished in 1941) caused many questions to be asked. In order to provide answers to those questions, the official magazine of the synod printed hymn verses and wrote various articles on the subject.

The May 5 issue in 1940 was dedicated completely to a recounting of the history of the Joint Synod as a thanksgiving to God for its 90th anniversary. There were few times when the motto of the Northwestern Lutheran (1 Kings 8:57) was so fitting as in that issue. This issue demonstrated that this magazine was fully in touch with the life of the synod and that it had the interests of its members in mind. A major event such as this one deserved special recognition and the Northwestern Lutheran came through.

December 7, 1941 was a day that got everyone's attention including those people on the editing staff of the Northwestern

Lutheran. For a number of years into World War II the magazine reported specifically on the work of the Spiritual Welfare Commission. This was a Commission formed by our synod to see to the spiritual needs of our members who found themselves actively involved in the war. Articles were written addressing the specific problem of fear and loss which so many of our people were facing due to being drafted or to loss of life. In this way the Northwestern Lutheran offered some sincere comfort and hope to all who read it. It also provided the information necessary for our synod to remain united even when not everyone was active in the fighting.

February 17, 1946. This issue of the Northwestern Lutheran commemorated another major event. In keeping with the historical awareness of the synod for which it is the official periodical, this issue remembered the death of Martin Luther. On this day in 1546, the Lord in his mercy had chosen to take his servant home. It was quite fitting that, even four hundred years later, those who confessed what this servant brought to light, should remember the gift of the man who faithfully served his God. The majority of this particular issue was devoted to teaching our members about the valuable gifts which God gave to his church through what this man accomplished.

Eighteen years later another special issue was delivered to the homes of this magazine's subscribers. The September 20, 1964 issue thanked God for fifty years of the Northwestern Lutheran.

Two months later the editors turned their attention to

comforting the family (physical and spiritual) of Prof. J.P. Meyer. By printing the address which was delivered at the funeral service for this man of God, the Northwestern Lutheran was marking the passing of a true blessing to God's church. And yet at the same time it was reminding us of what Professor Meyer gave to his God that would live on, namely the work of his mind and hands in the form of valuable literature.

1976 provided an obvious backdrop for a remembrance of a different kind. Along with all those in our synod, the Northwestern Lutheran observed the Bicentennial of our nation. Different articles in this volume combined to thank God for freedom, to remind us of our duty to God and government under the fourth commandment, and to implore God for his continued mercy and for his grace to permeate the hearts of all in this country who do not believe.

Finally, in 1991, the Northwestern Lutheran fulfilled its role once more as reporter to the synod. As the nation turned to face the facts of war for the first time in many years, this paper did what it had historically done. It pulled its readers together around the Word and reminded them of our Lord's guiding hand at work in the world. It fulfilled its historical role of reporter of major events. As much as things change, they also stay the same.

In the previous section of this report it became evident that while the events in the lives of our people changed, the

fact that they were reported by the Northwestern Lutheran did not. But something that did change during that entire time was the format or physical appearance of the paper itself. Drastic changes have taken place during the seventy-eight year history. These changes, possibly more than any other, have brought greater attention and subscribers to this synodical magazine.

The length of the Northwestern Lutheran was the first appearance related item to change. In 1920 the magazine doubled in length from four to eight pages. This change allowed the Northwestern Lutheran committee to add many more stories and synodical information without sacrificing any devotional material.

The next adjustment came in 1934 when the writers started to fit the articles into more distinctive groupings. The first headings appeared in the November 11th issue. They were: 'Comments', 'Grow In Knowledge', 'Our Synod', 'Wider Field', and 'Announcements'.

Once the headings were used, the idea stuck. Even though the titles varied from decade to decade, the main categories into which the articles fit remained the same. They were: topical (informative), devotional, editorial, synodical news, world news and general announcements (including obituaries, church anniversaries, nominations for call, financial statements, etc.).

The cover, which today is one of the most obvious physical characteristics of the magazine, has historically undergone more change than any other part of the Northwestern Lutheran. In 1914

the cover or front page was not nearly as distinctive as it is now. An emphasis of capturing the attention and curiosity of the reader was clearly not placed upon the cover at that time. In a straight forward "no nonsense" style their first page said what it needed to say. For years it began with a poem by a woman named Anna Hoppe. These poems were usually coupled with either editorial comments or devotions. It was not until 1940 that a picture was first placed on the Northwestern Lutheran's front cover. History has born out the fact that pictures were destined to become the standard for the cover of this magazine.

Therefore, the transition from one style of cover picture to another is something noteworthy. For six years the pictures were done in black and white (as was the rest of the magazine). In 1946 the entire issue was done in purple ink and set the stage for color additions to this paper. Four years later multi-colored pictures found their way to the cover. Soon photographs would follow, even though they remained in black and white for some time. For years, one volume after another featured the photograph of either church windows or a church building on the cover. As I paged through these years it was always interesting to discover which congregation's church building would be there next. I had the feeling that this same sense of curiosity might have compelled some of the magazine's readers to pick up the next issue. In later years, buildings were gradually replaced by people's pictures.

Today, one never knows just what will appear on the cover

next. The cover pictures for the Northwestern Lutheran almost always lead the reader to look inside the magazine by using a photo related to a story. This common journalistic strategy, probably more than anything, has contributed to the great variety of pictures on the covers of this periodical.

Today's Northwestern Lutheran is completely different from the magazine of the past when considering overall appearance. Most of these physical changes can be attributed to technical advances available in the editing and graphics field. Some of the changes can be indirectly related to the advances of quality and style in the whole magazine industry. If the Northwestern Lutheran did not have any competition for readers from magazines like Time, Newsweek, Sports Illustrated, Good Housekeeping, and People, there might be less of a need to keep up to date on style and attractiveness. The quality of editing and layout that readers find in secular magazines is to some extent expected in our periodicals as well. It has been my impression that the staff at the Northwestern Lutheran has done what is necessary to interest its readers in the area of graphics and design without selling out to the glitz and glamour of a secular industry.

The third and final area of change that must be mentioned in this history of the Northwestern Lutheran is the area of personnel. Because the people involved with the magazine have a substantial amount of freedom to work with and shape this publication, I feel it is appropriate to list the changes that

have taken place.

In its beginning years, the responsibility of writing for and organizing the paper fell to a committee of pastors. These pastors were called on to devote part of their time to this magazine. When the job became more than a part-time committee could handle, an editor was called and contributing editors were appointed. This editor was also part-time and worked out of the Publishing House. Even though he had more time to devote to the paper than those before him, the responsibility needed to be reallocated again in 1971. It was at this time that the Northwestern Lutheran received its first full-time editor. A full time editor has been at work putting out the Wisconsin Synod's official periodical ever since.

In conclusion, it is good and important to thank the Lord for this gift from his gracious hand. Throughout its history, the Northwestern Lutheran has continued to be a voice to the people and a voice for the people. It has expressed the truth of God's holy Word and has informed God's people concerning the events in His world. The paper's motto has set forth the prayer consistently for God to be with us as he was with our fathers and God has done just that. If it is God's will may no changes in world events, in style or in personnel stop God's Word from being heard through the Northwestern Lutheran.