

The Congregational Split of St. John's Lutheran Church in Hancock, MN

Church History 3031
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On June 5, 1960, the voting members of St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church in Hancock, Minnesota, voted overwhelmingly to continue their long-time fellowship with the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, in spite of their pastor's guidance that they should break ties with the synod.¹² They also voted to terminate the call of this same pastor, Rev. Elton Hallauer.³ As a result of this vote, the handful of members that supported Pastor Hallauer continued to be served by him as their pastor and eventually founded their own church, Bethel Evangelical Lutheran Church in Morris, Minnesota.⁴ This paper will seek to trace the background that led up to this event, to describe the event itself, and to show how both congregations moved forward in the aftermath.

I. The Early History – Pastor's Hallauer's Convictions about the Missouri and Wisconsin Synods

Although Pastor Hallauer was talking to his congregation about the issues going on in the Missouri Synod as early as 1956, the early history that led to this vote is really the history of Pastor Hallauer's own monitoring of the fellowship doctrines and practices of the Missouri and Wisconsin Synods and the convictions he developed as a result of this. Pastor Hallauer's early concern over the doctrine and practice of the Missouri Synod, turned into concern over the Wisconsin Synod, led to his own attempts to warn others in the Wisconsin Synod, and finally led him to the conviction that the Wisconsin Synod had rejected Scriptural admonition and should be broken away from according to Romans 16:17, 18.

Pastor Hallauer's concerns over the Missouri Synod can be traced back to his days spent training for the full-time public ministry. In the late 1940's and early 1950's, Pastor Hallauer was made aware of

¹ "Church News," *The Lutheran Spokesman*, October 1960, 14. Hereafter cited as Church News Oct 1960.

² 13 families that followed pastor Hallauer and eventually formed Bethel Ev. Lutheran Church, Morris, MN, to the church council and members of St. John's Ev. Lutheran Church, Hancock, MN, 31 August 1960, in the possession of St. John's Ev. Lutheran Church, Hancock, MN. Hereafter cited as Aug 31 Letter.

³ *A History of Bethel*, A personal document of Pastor Hallauer's. No publication information included, 1. Hereafter cited as *A History of Bethel*.

⁴ *Ibid*, 1.

the fellowship issues going on in the Missouri Synod in various Seminary courses.⁵ Sometime before 1950, Pastor Hallauer attended a meeting at Northwestern Publishing House.⁶ This meeting was held so that the things that were happening in the Missouri Synod could be laid out in detail to the Seminary students.⁷ Pastor Hallauer remembers Professor Reim telling them at meeting, “You men are going to be in the thick of it.”⁸ Pastor Hallauer carried his concern with him about the goings on in the Missouri Synod as he graduated from the Seminary, and after a few years in the ministry received a call to St. John’s in Hancock in 1955.⁹

It wasn’t long after this happened that Pastor Hallauer’s concern grew from being primarily about the fellowship issues in the Missouri Synod to concern that the Wisconsin Synod itself was following an incorrect and new teaching about fellowship. In 1955, Pastor Hallauer attended the WELS convention in Saginaw, Michigan, not as delegate, but as personally funded observer.¹⁰ Pastor Hallauer described that he saw this convention adopt the indictment of the LC-MS (Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod) as a false teaching church body but at the same time fail to terminate fellowship.¹¹ Later on, Pastor Hallauer would say that the majority in the Wisconsin Synod adopted a “new fellowship principle” at this convention.¹²

Pastor Hallauer’s concern over the Wisconsin Synod’s fellowship teaching that he considered to be new and anti-Scriptural led him to attempt to warn the Wisconsin Synod of the error he believed them to be clinging to. This effort started at least as early as the 1956 Minnesota District convention. At

⁵ Reverend Elton Hallauer, written e-mail interview by Andy DeGier, November 2009. Hereafter cited as Hallauer interview.

⁶ Hallauer interview.

⁷ *ibid.*

⁸ *ibid.*

⁹ *History of St. John’s Ev. Lutheran Church, Hancock, MN.* No publication information. This was a document sent to me from St. John’s Lutheran Church that includes the subtitle, “adapted from summaries written by Pastor Martin Bradtke and Pastor Robert Johannes.” Hereafter cited as *St. John’s History*.

¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹ *ibid.*

¹² Reverend Elton Hallauer, *Ten Questions* (Self-published for use at St. John’s Lutheran church, 1960), 8. Hereafter cited as *Ten Questions*.

this convention, there was debate over the issue of whether the Wisconsin Synod should terminate fellowship with the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod.¹³ Pastor Hallauer remembered those in favor of wanting to terminate fellowship arguing that love should lead them to give the Missouri Synod an opportunity to answer the WELS indictment against them.¹⁴ Those on the other side argued that obedience to the fellowship passages should lead them to terminate fellowship promptly.¹⁵ The majority adopted the following statement: “We recommend that the Synod does not at this time terminate its fellowship with the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod.”¹⁶ However, twenty-six delegates voted against this statement, and fifteen of those who voted against it asked for their names to be recorded, including Pastor Hallauer.¹⁷

In Pastor Hallauer’s mind, the situation continued to get worse. On June 27, 1958, a letter signed by the members of the Protest Committee, Wisconsin Synod, was addressed to “The Protesting Brethren of the Ev. Luth. Joint Synod of Wisconsin and Other States.”¹⁸ This letter contained an endorsement of a document that was eventually sent to all pastors and teachers in the synod called *A Report to the Protest Committee*.¹⁹ This document included a statement about the termination of church fellowship that was found to be objectionable by Pastor Hallauer and some other pastors who would eventually sign and distribute a memorial entitled, *A Call for Decision*.²⁰ On February 8, 1959, this memorial was signed and submitted by 28 pastors including Pastor Hallauer.²¹

The statement that Pastor Hallauer and the signers of this memorial found objectionable was:

¹³ *ibid*, 12.

¹⁴ Hallauer interview.

¹⁵ *ibid*.

¹⁶ *Ten Questions*, 12.

¹⁷ *ibid.*, 12.

¹⁸ *A Call for Decision*. A letter, in the form of a memorial, signed by 31 pastors, dated February 8, 1959, and addressed to: The Delegates of the 35th Biennial Convention The Joint Synod of Wisconsin and Other States Assembled at Saginaw, Michigan, August of 1959. This was among Pastor Hallauer’s personal documents. Hereafter cited as *A Call for Decision*.

¹⁹ *ibid*.

²⁰ *ibid*.

²¹ *ibid*.

Termination of church fellowship is called for when you have reached the conviction that admonition is of no further avail and that the erring brother or church body demands recognition for their error.²²

The signers took exception to the phrases "admonition is of no further avail" and "the erring brother or church body demands recognition for their error".²³ They described these statement as "false and unscriptural."²⁴ They rejected equating the action in Romans 16:17, 18 with that of Matthew 18:17 and I Corinthians 5:11-13.²⁵ As a result, they rejected any attempt to accord to human judgment as to when Romans 16:17,18 conclusively applies to an individual or church body or that reaching this judgment requires "a conviction that admonition is of no further avail."²⁶ They considered this type of application of Romans 16:17, 18 to depend on one's "clairvoyance" and "the ability to determine the future fate of admonition."²⁷ They stated that a person is marked, according to the Romans 16 passage, not when:

"admonition is of no further avail," but when the evidence shows that despite admonition the erring has persisted and does persist in holding to his error.²⁸

The signers included their own statement about termination of church fellowship that they considered a "true and correct statement of the doctrinal issue involved."²⁹ It read:

Termination of church fellowship is called for when Scriptural correction has been offered and rejected and the erring brother or church body have continued in their error despite admonition. This is the persistence which distinguishes an errorist (Romans 16: 17, 18) from an erring brother (Galatians 2:11-14).³⁰

Finally, this memorial implored the Wisconsin Synod to accept the validity of this document's confession.³¹

²² *ibid.*

²³ *ibid.*

²⁴ *ibid.*

²⁵ *ibid.*

²⁶ *ibid.*

²⁷ *ibid.*

²⁸ *ibid.*

²⁹ *ibid.*

³⁰ *ibid.*

³¹ *ibid.*

This memorial was considered by the 1959 WELS convention. It was rejected when the convention adopted the Report of Floor Committee 2.³² The convention disavowed the serious and repeated charges made in "A Call for Decision" both with regard to language and content.³³ Pastor Hallauer wrote about this action, "This can be taken only as a rejection of the Scriptural correction and admonition that has been offered over a period of years by many consecrated and concerned brethren in the Wisconsin Synod."³⁴ From this point on, Pastor Hallauer considered the Wisconsin Synod an erring church body which Romans 16:17, 18 applied to.³⁵

There was an attempt by the Synod to resolve this issue with the signers of the memorial "A Call for Decision." On September 22, 1959, Synod President O.J. Naumann sent a letter to these people.³⁶ It announced that a committee had been formed by the Conference of Presidents to discuss with the signers "what Scripture teaches concerning the boundary between the patience which requires a continuance of fellowship and the command in Scripture which calls for avoidance or termination of fellowship."³⁷ The letter urged them not to do anything "hasty".³⁸ Then on January 26, 1960, Minnesota District President M.J. Lenz sent out a letter to the pastors in his district who had expressed concern about the Synod's fellowship principle.³⁹ This letter informed them of the informal Bible study to be held by the Committee appointed by the COP and assured them that the informality would allow people

³² *Ten Questions*, 13.

³³ Reverend Elton Hallauer, to Minnesota District President M. J. Lenz, Delano, 4 February 1960, carbon copy in the personal possession of Reverend Hallauer, 2. Hereafter cited as Feb 4 letter.

³⁴ *Ten Questions*, 13.

³⁵ Hallauer interview.

³⁶ President Oscar J. Naumann, to Pastors, Teachers, and Congregations, 22 September 1959, a letter in the personal possession of Reverend Hallauer. Hereafter cited as Sept 22 letter.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ District President M. J. Lenz, Delano, to Rev. Elton Hallauer, 26 January 1960, copy of a letter that was sent to a number of pastors in the Minnesota District. This letter was sent to Pastor Hallauer and was in his personal possession. Hereafter cited as Jan 26 Letter.

ample opportunity to ask questions.⁴⁰ It was to take place Tuesday, Feb 9, 1960, at 10:00 AM at Pilgrim Lutheran School in Minneapolis.⁴¹

Pastor Hallauer was not entirely happy with this letter that he received. On February 4, 1960, he wrote a letter back to District President Lenz.⁴² In it, ^{by} He questioned why only those who have openly expressed support for "A Call for Decision" have been sent a letter about this meeting when he thought the synod resolutions seemed to have identified a larger audience (all who are sympathetic or perhaps even all pastors and teachers in the synod).⁴³ He asked that his letter be read if he was unable to attend and stated that he would not participate in the informal Bible study, but rather he would be there to argue for the truth.⁴⁴

Pastor Hallauer did end up attending the meeting.⁴⁵ He did not join in prayer fellowship at this meeting.⁴⁶ He listened to what was said at the meeting and became convinced that "that the majority in the synod, at least this official committee, is following the promptings of human reason rather than Scripture alone."⁴⁷

What Pastor Hallauer heard at this meeting may have prompted him to take his next course of action. On February 23, 1960, Pastor Hallauer wrote a letter to Pastor John Raabe.⁴⁸ In this letter, he informed Pastor Raabe that he would not be joining in prayer fellowship at the upcoming Crow River Valley Pastor's Conference.⁴⁹ Pastor Hallauer explained his reasoning. He said, "I do not feel justified in

⁴⁰ *ibid.*

⁴¹ *ibid.*

⁴² Reverend Elton Hallauer, to District President M. J. Lenz, Delano, 4 February 1960, carbon copy of the letter in the personal possession of Rev. Elton Hallauer. Hereafter cited as Feb 4 letter.

⁴³ *ibid.*

⁴⁴ *ibid.*

⁴⁵ Reverend Elton Hallauer, to Crow River Valley Conference Visiting Elder Pastor John Raabe, 23 February 1960, a copy of the letter sent to Pastor Raabe in the possession of Rev. Hallauer. Hereafter cited as Feb 23 Letter.

⁴⁶ *ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Ten Questions*, 13.

⁴⁸ Feb 23 letter.

⁴⁹ *ibid.*

giving the appearance of unity where unity does not actually exist.”⁵⁰ He made the case that there was clearly a difference regarding fellowship issues between the Wisconsin Synod and the protesting pastors, and he explained why he thought the synod was in error.⁵¹ He also informed Pastor Raabe that “Until my congregation becomes fully informed on these matters, I shall have to demonstrate protesting fellowship with the Wisconsin Synod.”⁵²

II. Pastor Hallauer Informs the Congregation of the Situation and Urges Action

After sending this letter, Pastor Hallauer’s attention turned from warning the Wisconsin Synod about the error in fellowship doctrine he believed them to possess to informing his congregation of the situation and urging them to break fellowship with the synod. On February 28, 1960, he sent a document called “Ten Questions” to the members of the congregation⁵³ for them to review on their own at home.⁵⁴ As the title indicates, the document was a set of ten questions with answers following each question.⁵⁵ It contained eighteen type-written single-space pages.⁵⁶ The first five questions dealt with principles of fellowship and used Bible passages to communicate these principles.⁵⁷

Question six asked “What has disturbed the fellowship we have enjoyed in the Synodical Conference?”⁵⁸ The answer to this question contained objectionable things that had happened in the Missouri Synod, including their discussions with the ALC in spite of the ALC’s public statements disregarding a need for agreement in non-fundamental doctrines and supporting the idea of a “wholesome and allowable latitude (difference) of theological opinion.”⁵⁹ It also cited the Missouri Synod’s adoption of the Common Confession, their change in position on scouting, and their

⁵⁰ *ibid.*

⁵¹ *ibid.*

⁵² *ibid.*

⁵³ *Ten Questions*, 18.

⁵⁴ Hallauer interview.

⁵⁵ *Ten Questions*.

⁵⁶ *ibid.*

⁵⁷ *ibid.*

⁵⁸ *ibid.*, 6.

⁵⁹ *ibid.*, 6.

“unionism.”⁶⁰ This answer to question six also accused the Wisconsin Synod of disturbing the true fellowship that was once enjoyed.⁶¹ The biggest point of contention pointed to the 1955 Wisconsin Synod Convention. Pastor Hallauer cited the church union committee as having arrived at a “firm conviction” that “further postponement of a decision would be a violation of the apostolic injunction of Romans 16, 17.”⁶² He stated that the delegates unanimously accepted the preamble, which charged Missouri with persistent adherence to unionistic practices, and that the convention applied Romans 16:17 to them, yet the majority voted to postpone final action for a year.⁶³ Pastor Hallauer also repeated the claim of “A Call for Decision” that stated the WELS had adopted a new fellowship principle, especially with their statement about termination of church fellowship.⁶⁴

The remaining questions dealt with how the protesting pastors have admonished the LCMS and WELS, what the result of this admonition had been, what a Christian is to do in such a situation, and how St. John’s could follow God’s Word in their current circumstance.⁶⁵ The following statements were made:

The Missouri Synod has consistently either disregarded or denied Wisconsin’s charges and admonition; at the same time, her offenses have not only continued, but in many cases have been aggravated.⁶⁶

The Wisconsin Synod, since 1953, has rejected the admonition and protests of its own members by majority vote, has endeavored to defend its unscriptural position with human logic and reasoning, and has disavowed the principles of fellowship taught in the Holy Scriptures, the Lutheran Confessions, and its own Catechism.⁶⁷

Both Missouri and Wisconsin, then, have rejected all Scriptural and Fraternal Admonition.⁶⁸

⁶⁰ *ibid.*, 6,7.

⁶¹ *ibid.*, 6,7.

⁶² *ibid.*, 7.

⁶³ *ibid.*, 7.

⁶⁴ *ibid.*, 13.

⁶⁵ *ibid.*, 10-18.

⁶⁶ *ibid.*, 15.

⁶⁷ *ibid.*, 16.

⁶⁸ *ibid.*, 16.

Teachers, errorists who continue to make propaganda for their error after they have been duly admonished and who try to win followers for their error and who cause divisions and offences by their error, are to be rejected and avoided.⁶⁹

...we can do nothing else but to terminate the fellowship we have cherished for so many years with the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod until she removes the error from her midst in a thoroughly Scriptural and mutually acceptable manner.⁷⁰

With these statements, Pastor Hallauer made it clear to the congregation that he considered God's Word to show that Romans 16:17, 18 applied to the corporate body of the Wisconsin Synod, and that it demanded the congregation's course of action to be to terminate fellowship with the Wisconsin Synod. Pastor Hallauer considered this document to be his warning of the congregation of the inroads being made by false teachers.⁷¹ He thought it appropriate for him to be in a protesting fellowship with the WELS until the congregation had time to digest the information he gave them and ask questions for clarification.⁷²

Pastor Hallauer made his own case to the congregation in his "Ten Questions." However, he did make sure that his congregation was able to hear the Wisconsin Synod's side of the argument. He invited District President M.J. Lenz to come to an open meeting at St. John's to discuss "synodical and intersynodical affairs."⁷³ D.P. Lenz acknowledged this invitation in a letter dated March 16, 1960 and stated that he expected this will include a formal presentation of the synod's position and ample question and answer time.⁷⁴

On April 3, 1960, this open meeting took place.⁷⁵ Pastor Hallauer's notes about the meeting give us an idea of what happened at it. President Lenz and visiting elder Sauer attended the meeting.⁷⁶ The

⁶⁹ *ibid.*, 17.

⁷⁰ *ibid.*, 18.

⁷¹ Hallauer interview.

⁷² Hallauer interview.

⁷³ District President M. J. Lenz, to Pastor Elton A. Hallauer, Hancock, 16 March 1960, in the personal possession of Pastor Hallauer. Hereafter cited as Mar 16 letter.

⁷⁴ *ibid.*

⁷⁵ Aug 31 Letter.

⁷⁶ Reverend Elton Hallauer, personal type-written about the meeting on March 16, 1960 appearing to be in the form of a letter with no date and no specified recipient. Hereafter cited as Hallauer notes.

meeting began with an open devotion from Psalm 19:7-11 and a prayer.⁷⁷ Hallauer spoke first and reiterated how he had found that the Wisconsin Synod had left its old fellowship principles, and once again he advised the congregation to break fellowship with the Wisconsin Synod.⁷⁸ Then District President Lenz spoke and gave the official position of the Wisconsin Synod.⁷⁹ He read "Review of the Commission on Doctrinal Matters" (a 1959 resolution regarding "A Call for Action") and a letter from Professor Lawrenz to the secretary of the group that originally offered the memorial.⁸⁰ Finally, the floor was opened for questions, most of which were directed to D.P. Lenz, but some to Pastor Hallauer.⁸¹

After the open meeting concluded, the church council met.⁸² The church council decided to ask the voters to provide for one or more open meetings where the questions of all who wished to speak would be answered.⁸³ Later on the church council changed this to be a special meeting of just the voters, as opposed to the whole congregation.⁸⁴

This meeting took place on April 24, 1960.⁸⁵ The meeting lasted 2 hours.⁸⁶ Pastor Hallauer read the stipulations of his call and told the congregation that a vote to stay in fellowship with the WELS would be "a vote rejecting my ministry" in your midst.⁸⁷ A few voters stated that they believed the congregation had made up its mind, so they might as well vote now.⁸⁸ However, it was brought up that it might be better to wait until after confirmation had taken place, so the congregation decided to wait

⁷⁷ *ibid.*

⁷⁸ *ibid.*

⁷⁹ *ibid.*

⁸⁰ *ibid.*

⁸¹ *ibid.*

⁸² Aug 31 Letter.

⁸³ *ibid.*

⁸⁴ *ibid.*

⁸⁵ Reverend Elton Hallauer, Hancock, to The Rev. M. J. Lenz, President, Minnesota District, Wisconsin Ev. Luth. Synod, Delano, 25 April 1960, a carbon copy of this letter which is in the possession of Rev. Hallauer. Hereafter cited as Resignation Letter.

⁸⁶ Reverend Elton Hallauer, to Brother Harold and others, 25 April 1960, a carbon copy of this letter which is in the possession of Rev. Hallauer. Hereafter cited as Brother Harold letter.

⁸⁷ *ibid.*

⁸⁸ *ibid.*

until their regular quarterly meeting, to be held June 5, to officially vote on the matter.⁸⁹ At the meeting, Pastor Hallauer informed the congregation of his resignation from the Wisconsin Synod,⁹⁰ which became official when he sent a letter the next day to District President Lenz.⁹¹ The meeting left Pastor Hallauer out of fellowship with the Wisconsin Synod and the congregation still in fellowship with the Wisconsin Synod.⁹² However, Pastor Hallauer remained the pastor of the congregation.⁹³

III. The Congregation Acts and Pastor Hallauer Responds

This result of this meeting meant that the fate of the congregation's fellowship with the Wisconsin Synod and Pastor Hallauer's call would be determined at the upcoming quarterly meeting. This meeting took place on June 5, 1960.⁹⁴ At this meeting, the congregation voted overwhelmingly in favor of continued close ties with the Wisconsin Synod⁹⁵ and rejected the advice of their pastor.⁹⁶ The vote was 35 to 4.⁹⁷ As a result of this vote, the congregation also terminated Pastor Hallauer's call.⁹⁸ The four men who voted in support of Pastor Hallauer were: Kenton Brown, Walter Carstens, Donald DeGier, and William Reiners.⁹⁹ Pastor Hallauer was disappointed over the fact that so few people voted in accord with his guidance. He recently reflected about the result: "Yes, I did expect more. When one speaks God's truth, one expects acceptance of it by those who profess to be God's followers."¹⁰⁰

The next day Pastor Hallauer wrote a letter to St. John's.¹⁰¹ In it, he reviewed his stance, his advice, and the events of the previous night's meeting.¹⁰² He also charged the congregation with

⁸⁹ *ibid.*

⁹⁰ Church News Oct 1960, 14.

⁹¹ Resignation Letter.

⁹² Brother Harold Letter.

⁹³ *ibid.*

⁹⁴ Church News Oct 1960, 14.

⁹⁵ Reverend Elton Hallauer, Hancock, to Communicant Member of St. John's Congregation, 6 June 1960, a copy in the personal possession of Rev. Hallauer. Hereafter cited as June 6 Letter.

⁹⁶ Church News Oct 1960, 14.

⁹⁷ June 6 letter.

⁹⁸ *A History of Bethel*, 1.

⁹⁹ *ibid.*, 1.

¹⁰⁰ Hallauer interview.

¹⁰¹ June 6 Letter.

terminating his call for unscriptural reasons. He said that he hadn't resigned his call and that "God still recognizes me as the shepherd here."¹⁰³ He wrote, "May the Lord in mercy grant the majority a long life, so that they may have sufficient time and opportunity to repent of their sins."¹⁰⁴ He invited any individual who still considered him their God-given pastor to contact him, as some had already done, and he would serve them.¹⁰⁵ He also said he was already planning services for June 12.¹⁰⁶

So how difficult was this decision for people? It seems clear from recent interviews that people on both sides of the issue were firmly convinced that the decision they made was the right one.

Consider the following quotes from members who decided to stay at St. John's:

We never considered leaving the WELS.¹⁰⁷

We were definitely remaining WELS members.¹⁰⁸

Also the following quotes from those who decided to leave:

It was a definite must.¹⁰⁹

It was a clear cut decision.¹¹⁰

¹⁰² *ibid.*

¹⁰³ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ Veree Fox, written mail interview by Andy DeGier, November 2009. Hereafter cited as Veree Fox interview.

¹⁰⁸ Les and Rosella Staples, written e-mail interview by Andy DeGier, November 2009. Hereafter cited as Les and Rosella Staples.

¹⁰⁹ Lorraine Carstens, written mail interview by Andy DeGier, November 2009. Hereafter cited as Lorraine Carstens interview.

¹¹⁰ Donald DeGier, written mail interview by Andy DeGier, November 2009. Here after cited as Donald DeGier interview.

Also when those at Bethel were asked about why it was necessary to leave the Wisconsin Synod, they said the following:

To hold fast to the truth as it was taught in the Bible.¹¹¹

Because we wanted to keep the Word of God in the truth and purity. It states clearly in the Bible what we were to do. Missouri was clearly the erring brother and wasn't going to change.¹¹²

IV. Both congregations move forward

On June 12, 1960, the group of people that followed Pastor Hallauer, which would later become Bethel Evangelical Lutheran Church, conducted their first worship service.¹¹³ The service was held in a two-car garage owned by one of the members.¹¹⁴ Makeshift, backless pews described as "blocks and planks"¹¹⁵ were used.¹¹⁶ This worship service and ones that followed in the next weeks numbered around 25 to 35 people and included the use of a piano.¹¹⁷¹¹⁸ Despite the less than ideal conditions, those who attended were positive about the experience. They offered the following quotes:

Considering the number of worshipers that gathered there, IT WAS GREAT! We had a piano and a pianist, who later was persuaded by her WELS father to leave our group. The two-car garage was filled. The only difficulty was setting up the blocks and planks.¹¹⁹

It wasn't difficult at all. The Lord provided a place to worship... Jesus was born in a stable, so why should it be so hard for us to worship in a garage.¹²⁰

In July of 1960, the future members of Bethel were able to improve their worship situation when they rented a large home southeast of Morris, MN, that served as a parsonage-chapel until June of the

¹¹¹ Lorriane Carstens interview.

¹¹² Donald DeGier interview.

¹¹³ *A History of Bethel*, 1.

¹¹⁴ *A History of Bethel*, 1.

¹¹⁵ Hallauer interview.

¹¹⁶ *A History of Bethel*, 1.

¹¹⁷ Lorraine Carstens interview.

¹¹⁸ Donald DeGier interview.

¹¹⁹ Hallauer interview.

¹²⁰ Donald DeGier interview.

following year.¹²¹ In October of 1960, they obtained a rural school building which could be remodeled to be a house of worship.¹²²

Of course, worship at St. John's wasn't without challenges either. Les & Rosella Staples have noted that one challenge facing the members of St. John's was the need to "reunite the congregation."¹²³ It was important for them to "call a Pastor to shepherd and heal wounds."¹²⁴ However, for Veree Fox, worship basically went on like normal with just fewer people. She stated "because several followed Pastor Hallauer we just had smaller attendance."¹²⁵ Eventually, the wishes of many of the members of St. John's that a new pastor be called were fulfilled. After about 1 year of vacancy, St. John's called Rev. Paul H. Wilde.¹²⁶ Rev. Wilde served as pastor of St. John's from 1960 to 1965.¹²⁷

There were other things that needed to be resolved at the two congregations themselves and between the congregations. On August 31, 1960, the group of people who had agreed with Pastor Hallauer, both the four original families and more that had joined since, wrote a letter to St. John's, officially severing their ties with the congregation.¹²⁸ In this letter they stated that they believed they had the right to the church property according to the St. John's constitution, but that they were not going to fight for it.¹²⁹ In the letter, the action of the St. John's voters on June 5 was described as an "unscriptural course."¹³⁰ It also mentioned their recent calling of a vacancy pastor (a pastor that the signers of the letter considered to have a false position) revealed that the members of St. John's are

¹²¹ *A History of Bethel*, 1.

¹²² *A History of Bethel*, 1.

¹²³ Les and Rosella Staples interview.

¹²⁴ Les and Rosella Staples interview.

¹²⁵ Veree Fox interview.

¹²⁶ St. John's History.

¹²⁷ *ibid.*

¹²⁸ Aug 31 Letter, 1.

¹²⁹ *ibid.*, 2.

¹³⁰ *ibid.*

“determined to continue supporting false teachers and being partaker of other men’s evils.”¹³¹ The letter was signed by 13 families.¹³²

As St. John’s received this letter, it was also receiving letters from various families requesting releases and transfers stemming from the fellowship issues that were being addressed. Between October 19, 1960, and December 4, 1960, the congregation received requests from five families to be transferred or released.¹³³ Three of these families asked to be transferred to LCMS churches.¹³⁴ Two of the families asked to be released, so that they could join the other people who had followed Pastor Hallauer.¹³⁵

On December 12, 1960, at St. John’s annual meeting, the letter in which the group that followed Pastor Hallauer officially severed ties,¹³⁶ as well as the requests for release and transfer, was considered.¹³⁷ The Elders of St. John’s sent a form reply letter to each of the families that had signed the letter declaring a group withdrawal from St. John’s.¹³⁸ In this letter they denied descriptions of the Wisconsin Synod and the members of St. John’s as going against Scripture and both supporting and being false teachers.¹³⁹ However, they acknowledged that the “bond of religious fellowship” between the two “has been broken” and granted all the signers a release.¹⁴⁰ The elders also sent letters to the

¹³¹ *ibid*, 1-2.

¹³² *ibid*, 2.

¹³³ A set of letters and grants of transfer/release containing correspondence between St. John’s Evangelical Lutheran Church in Hancock, MN and various members who requested release or transfer. These letters are in the archives at St. John’s Lutheran Church and verify the facts stated. Hereafter they will be cited as Transfer Documents.

¹³⁴ *ibid*.

¹³⁵ *ibid*.

¹³⁶ St. John’s Ev. Lutheran Church Board of Elders, Hancock, to members who signed a letter declaring a group withdrawal (one letter for each family), 14 December 1960, carbon copies of these letters are in the possession of St. John’s evangelical Lutheran Church. Hereafter cited as St. John’s Reply Letter

¹³⁷ Transfer Documents.

¹³⁸ St. John’s Reply Letter.

¹³⁹ *ibid*.

¹⁴⁰ *ibid*.

families who requested transfers/releases to LCMS churches.¹⁴¹ In these letters, they expressed why there were not happy to do so, indicating the problems that were going on in the LCMS.¹⁴²

Pastor Hallauer wrote a response to the reply letter that was sent to the future members of Bethel.¹⁴³ Pastor Hallauer's response was printed in the "notes and news" bulletin for the service he conducted that following Sunday, December 18, 1960.¹⁴⁴ In this response, he emphasized that "no one attempted to show from Scripture itself that his advice was wrong and misleading, only on the basis of faulty human reasoning."¹⁴⁵ From this point on, both congregations refrained from engaging the other, and concentrated on their own internal matters.

The group that followed Pastor Hallauer eventually became Bethel Evangelical Lutheran Congregation. Seven men met on January 9, 1961 for the purpose of officially organizing the congregation.¹⁴⁶ They also voted officers for their congregation.¹⁴⁷ These men, along with the positions they were voted to, were as follows: Arnold Auel (trustee), Walter Carstens (secretary), Donald DeGier (trustee), Eugene DeGier, Robert DeGier, Rudolph Nissen (trustee), and William Reiners (chairman).¹⁴⁸ The official date on the congregation's certificate of incorporation is January 11, 1961.¹⁴⁹

As time went on, Bethel Evangelical Lutheran Church continued to improve its worship facilities. On June 18, 1961, the renovation of the rural school building, which they converted into a worship facility, was completed.¹⁵⁰ The renovated facility seated seventy-six people and included pews, church furniture, and an antique reed organ.¹⁵¹ On August 24, 1961, Bethel was accepted as a charter member

¹⁴¹ Transfer Documents.

¹⁴² *ibid.*

¹⁴³ Reverend Elton Hallauer, "A Needed Rebuttal," *Notes and News* (a weekly newsletter bulletin printed for members who split from St. John's and continued to be served by Pastor Hallauer), 18 December 1960.

¹⁴⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁴⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁴⁶ *A History of Bethel*, 1.

¹⁴⁷ *ibid.*, 1.

¹⁴⁸ *ibid.*, 1.

¹⁴⁹ *A History of Bethel*, 1.

¹⁵⁰ *ibid.*, 1.

¹⁵¹ *ibid.*, 1.

of the Church of the Lutheran Confession at its convention in Spokane, Washington.¹⁵² On September 3, 1961, the renovated worship facility was dedicated.¹⁵³ St. John's former pastor, Pastor H.C. Duehlmeier, preached the sermon and formally installed Pastor Hallauer as Bethel's pastor.¹⁵⁴

So how did this event affect the members of both congregations going forward? Long-time friends and family members were split apart regarding their worship life. My own great-grandfather stayed at St. John's. His two daughters remained with the Wisconsin Synod. However, his three sons, including my grandfather, were all involved in incorporating Bethel as a congregation.¹⁵⁵ This separation undoubtedly brought with it some difficult feelings and challenges. In spite of this, the members of both congregations that I interviewed generally didn't share any bitter feelings about the people on the other side. Both sides saw something positive resulting from going through this turmoil. They both said that it strengthened their ties with the people who were on the same side as themselves, as the following quotes show:

From members of Bethel:

We became as brothers and sisters in Christ.¹⁵⁶

We became a close knit family, spiritually and in everyday matters.¹⁵⁷

From St. John's:

We had excellent harmony within the congregation.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵² *ibid.*, 2.

¹⁵³ *ibid.*, 1.

¹⁵⁴ *ibid.*, 1.

¹⁵⁵ *ibid.*, 1.

¹⁵⁶ Lorraine Carstens interview.

¹⁵⁷ Donald DeGier interview.

¹⁵⁸ Les and Rosella Staples interview.

Concluding Remarks

The congregational split that happened at St. John's was one of many that happened around this same time. This paper has traced the background that led up to the congregational split at St. John's, described the event itself, and shown how both congregations moved forward in the aftermath. Hopefully, those who read it will add to their knowledge what went on at St. John's in Hancock, and obtain a better grasp for what was going on among the protesting pastors and churches of the Wisconsin Synod that eventually formed the CLC.

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