

Chevrons or Chevrolets?

"A Look at the Wisconsin Synod's Ministry to Its People in the
Armed Forces, especially During the Two World Wars"

Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Library
11831 N. Seminary Drive. 65W
Mequon, Wisconsin

Michael Woldt
Senior Church History
Prof Fredrich

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The Military Services Committee of the Special Ministries Board (WELS) has as its stated objective "To share the Gospel of Jesus Christ with God's people who are serving in the military." A list of ten guiding policies spells out clearly how this objective is to be met at the present time. As one reviews the present policy and practice of WELS, it becomes apparent that the Synod has chosen chevrolets instead of chevrons to meet the spiritual needs of its people in the military. In other words, the ministry to WELS members in the service is civilian rather than military orientated. Why not use the military chaplaincy? Has the civilian approach been effective? These questions and others will be answered as we look into the history of the Wisconsin Synod's ministry to its people in the Armed Forces.

Lutheran pastors have always been concerned about the welfare of its people in the armed forces. Already in 1776 a German Lutheran pastor named Christian Streit was appointed chaplain for the German-speaking Eighth regiment of Virginia.¹ The Wisconsin Synod clergy were no exception. Information concerning the Synod's early work with military personnel is understandably hard to come by. During the Civil War there were no formal programs set up for this ministry in the small, fledgling German Evangelical-Lutheran Ministerium of Wisconsin. It would, however, be very uncharitable to assume that the Synod's early ministers did nothing for the men in the military. One can ima-

gine many personal correspondences written and individual help offered by the clergy of that time. Certainly other Lutheran groups were not blind to the needs of the men fighting the Civil war. Claus L. Clausen accepted an invitation to serve as chaplain for the Fifteenth Wisconsin, a predominately Norwegian Lutheran group.² The practice of the day seemed to be that if a large group of soldiers were assembled from a particular geographic area, one of the local pastors would follow that regiment into battle.

The first indication of our Synod's formal ministry to the military seems to be around the turn of the century. A pastor named Paul Brockmann from Trinity Lutheran church in Waukesha, Wisconsin, was a commissioned chaplain at Fort Douglas in Utah for five years.³ If there were others, I am unaware of them.

The need for a well-organized, large scale ministry to WELS people in the Armed Forces faced our Synod's fathers with America's involvement in World War I. The Northwestern Lutheran, in 1917, spoke of the great need to serve our Synod's people in the military. "Our boys live together day in and day out, a good part of the time in the same tent or room with infidels, scoffers, and others of that ilk who curse, jeer, and mock at everything that is good and holy."⁴

A large portion of the Lutheran bodies in America cooperated in their work of serving the people in the military. The National Lutheran Commission for Soldiers' and Sailors' Welfare was formed in October of 1917, but for obvious fellowship reasons, our Synod could not participate in its work. To serve its people

in the military, our synod did, however, rely heavily on the work of a larger group, the Missouri Synod. In its 1917 convention, two months after America's involvement in the War, Missouri formed the Lutheran Church Board for Army and Navy. As a fellow member of the Synodical Conference, Wisconsin looked to "big sister" Missouri for the planning and organizing of efforts to minister to those in the military.

The work of the Army and Navy Board was swift and efficient. Before long the Board had appointed camp pastors, camp missionaries, and regular military chaplains. A file was kept on all the Synodical Conference members who were in the military and attempts to keep in touch with them were made. The Board distributed literature which at times included prayer books, pocket hymnals, New Testaments, tracts, and a special monthly publication called the "Lutheran Soldiers' and Sailors' Bulletin." For their part, the Wisconsin Synod agreed to pay one fifth of the cost for the operation and work of the Board. In order to coordinate the efforts of the Board with the Wisconsin Synod, a special committee consisting of three men was appointed by Wisconsin President Bergemann. The Wisconsin men were Rev. O. Hagedorn, Rev. John Brenner, and Mr. Ernest Von Briesen.

During the war years, the Northwestern Lutheran ran articles sketching the work of the Army Navy Board and pleading for support of this work. Most of these articles were authored by Brenner. The members of the synod were not slack in their response. In a 1919 report, treasurer Graebner showed that the sum of \$112,120.49 had been received for the Army and Navy Board.

A final tally reveals that the synod disbursed \$58,434.45 to the Board as the previously agreed upon one fifth of the cost. Most of the remainder of the money wound up on the Church Extension Fund.

Most of the Wisconsin support of the Army Navy Board was financial. However, there were some Wisconsin men who served as camp pastors and camp missionaries. A camp pastor devoted his full time to the military ministry, somewhat of a civilian chaplain who at times lived on the base. A camp missionary was more of a military contact man who gave up part of his time to visit military camps in the vicinity of his congregation. During the course of the war there had been 70 camp pastors, 139 camp missionaries, and 13 regular commissioned chaplains in the army and navy. No Wisconsin men served as military chaplains, A comparison of the Gemeindeblatt and the list of camp pastors turned up three men from Wisconsin. Rev. A.G. Sydow and Rev. A.C. Bartz both served as camp pastors in San Antonio, Texas. The Rev. A. Fuerstenau served as camp pastor of Camp Harry Jones in Douglas, Ariz. Other Wisconsin men served as camp missionaries when and where they were able.

Perhaps one of the reasons there were not more Wisconsin men serving as camp pastors was the language barrier. As strange as it might seem to us today, it was difficult to find men available for the work who were fluent in English, since most preaching was done in the German language.

Another interesting Wisconsin connection is found in the Rev. J. Jeske. At this time Rev. Jeske was ~~connected~~ with the Missouri synod. He was asked to be a military chaplain, since

he was able to handle both German and English. For conscience reasons, Pastor Jeske refused to be commissioned in the army, but did agree to become a camp pastor. He left his congregation in Nebraska and served at Camp Sherman in Ohio. Later, as a member of the Wisconsin synod, his valuable experience and insight would be put to good use on the Spiritual Welfare Commission.

The Army and Navy Board did quite a job in the First World War, but they would have liked to do more. Of the more than 38,000 synodical Conference people who served in the military during the War, about 11,000 of them had gone overseas. Yet only four of the commissioned military chaplains were part of the Expeditionary force. There were no camp pastors overseas. No volunteer assistance to the military chaplains was allowed. In a report to the 1919 Synodical convention, Brenner said, "Dasz wir ihnen keine "Camp Pastors" nach Europa nachsenden konnten, ist nicht die Schuld des Board."⁵

In that same report, it was proposed (and finally resolved by the Synod) that the Board of Trustees should be authorized to take immediate steps in any future time of need to cooperate in a similiar fashion with fellow-believers, and also to appoint committees and spend money to carry this out, if and when necessary. With that report, the matter of serving men in the military seems to take a temporary lull.

The most important development between the two World Wars as far as serving people in the military was concerned centered around the question of fellowship. The disagreement between Wisconsin and Missouri concerning the military chaplaincy already in the '30's was a sign that the two synods were drifting apart.

Before the Second World War involved America, the Wisconsin Synod was already looking into the military chaplaincy question. A "Committee on Chaplaincies" was set up, and in the 1937 convention they asked that the matter received further study and that their report be deferred for two years. They did say, however, that "any pastor entering into such service is doing so without the sanction of the Synod until the Synod has definitely decided in this matter."⁶

In the next convention (1939), the Synod agreed unanimously not to commission any military chaplains. Three reasons were cited. First of all, any pastor could still serve military personnel on a civilian basis. Secondly, the separation of Church and State would be violated in areas such as remuneration and the call. Finally, certain military regulations which governed the chaplaincy would make it impossible to practice sound Lutheran doctrine. These regulations had to do with matters such as conducting "general Protestant" services, opening and closing gatherings with prayer, being responsible for the spiritual needs of all the men in the particular unit served, etc.

The Wisconsin Synod showed agreement on the chaplaincy question. Still there was a need to serve the people in the military. This need became very apparent with the enactment of the Selective Service Act in 1939. America was building up her military strength and all males between the ages of 18 and 35 were required to register for possible military service. On January 30, 1941, the synod took a step to meet the needs of the people in service. It was on that date that the "Spiritual

Welfare Commission, Ev. Lutheran Joint Synod of Wisconsin and Other States, For Men In Military Service" was formed. Pastor E. R. Blakewell was appointed as the Executive Secretary of the commission and Pastor E. Benj. Schlueter its Chairman. The original intention of the Commission was to once again work with Missouri. On March third, 1941, Schlueter and Blakewell attended a meeting of the Missouri Synod's Army and Navy Commission. It was clear after that meeting that Missouri intended to stick with its position that there was nothing Scripturally wrong with the military chaplaincy as it was set up. At the outset of World War II, the Spiritual Welfare Commission was destined to do most of its work alone, without cooperation with the Army and Navy Commission.

Beginning in the residence of Pastor Blakewell on E. Thomas avenue, The Spiritual Welfare Commission began its work. Like the Army Navy Board of the First World War, the Commission kept files of all Wisconsin synod members in the Armed forces. Before the War was over, about 25,000 names would have been recorded. Already in April of '41, 713 names were in the files, and by July, that number increased to 1512. The Commission wrote letters to people in the military, provided them with a packet of religious materials, and supplies them with a daily devotion booklet. During the War years, nearly every issue of the Northwestern Lutheran contained information pertaining to the activity of the SWC. There were appeals for support (the SWC was funded through the Mission Board), seasonal sermons, reminders for pastors to send in names, and personal letters from men who wrote to show their appreciation for what the SWC was doing for them.

The War years were not easy ones for synod president, Brenner. The synod's position on military chaplaincy did not go unchallenged. Letters were addressed to him from a small number of Wisconsin synod pastors who, as yet, were not in agreement. One pastor, Frederick Knoll from Warren, Arizona, asked for the blessings of Brenner and the Synod as he was about to present himself for chaplaincy in the military. Such a recommendation from the church body was necessary. It goes without saying that most of our Missouri synod brethren and people of other Lutheran church bodies could not understand our objections. The government even got into the act. In a letter address to Brenner (March 19, 1943), Chief of Chaplains Wm. Arnold reminded Brenner that the quota of military chaplains requested from our synod was 25. Arnold also made mention that one Wisconsin man had already made application for chaplaincy, after having been recommended by the Army and Navy Board of the Missouri synod.

As the war went on, there seemed to be concern in various areas of the synod that our people in the military overseas were not receiving the best possible spiritual care. On Jan 14, 1944, for example, the St. Croix conference of the Minnesota district sent a resolution to the SWC that they find some "modus vivendi" whereby it would be possible for pastors of our synod to serve in the Armed Forces. Already in 1943, the Wis. River Valley conference of the Western Wisconsin district had suggested that some of our men try to obtain the status of "War Correspondent" so that they would be able to go overseas without being a commissioned military chaplain.

During the time when many questions were being raised over our position on military chaplaincy, Pres. Brenner and others patiently defended the synod's stand. Prof. C. Schweppe, Rev. Wm Nommensen and Rev. Schlueter wrote carefully thought-out and reached papers on the question which were printed and distributed through the SWC. A few of Pres. Brenner's personal correspondence with the Chief of Chaplains, pastors, and others are still available for reviewing in the Seminary library's vertical file. In all the papers and letters, one thing is clear. The teachings of Scripture always came first. Being convinced of Biblical principles, there could be no wavering on the question of a military chaplaincy, no matter how much emotionalism was stirred up by the present war.

The SWC was aware that mailings alone are sometimes not enough. There was a small amount of personal contact with our men in the military. Although we sent no men overseas, the SWC did send out three men who were the equivalent of the World War I camp pastors. Three full-time civilian chaplains were placed where it was thought they would do the most good. Rev. Erwin Scharf, then a pastor in Slinger, was sent to work in Louisiana, Rev. Fred Gilbert served at Camp McCoy in Wisconsin, and Rev. Walter Amacher was called to work at San Diego, California. All other personal work was done on a part time basis by men who were located near military bases.

There was also another sort of personal contact for people in the military. Although Wisconsin could not approve of the chaplaincy program, we were still in fellowship with Missouri. Wisconsin people were at times directed to Missouri men who

were in the military. I have no documented proof of that fact, but it has been substantiated by a number of World War II veterans who are presently members of the Wisconsin synod.

As the war went on, it became apparent that our synod was vindicated in its views that the position of military chaplain would force men to compromise certain principles of fellowship and practice. An article from the Milwaukee Journal, May 30, 1944, relates how a Southern Presbyterian minister in the Navy was ordered to stop preaching repentance and punishment of sin. The commanding officer said, "I will have no hell-fire preaching on my ship." In Jan 20, 1944, the "Christian Beacon" reported a story about a Navy chaplain who was as much as forced to resign because he refused to arrange for dances and intoxicants. He had also refused to advise men on "protection during immoral conduct." That same article contained sworn affidavits which accused Navy Chief of Chaplains, Robert Workman, of saying that anyone who refused the sacraments to people who desired them disqualified himself from the Navy Chaplaincy.

Numerous other articles appeared at that time which praised the cooperation Protestants, Catholics, and even Jews were showing in ministering to each others people. It was not uncommon for Protestants and Rabbis to be carrying rosaries just in case. Rabbis were known to carry crucifixes. It's hard to imagine how a confessional Lutheran chaplain would have been received under such circumstances, when unionism seemed to be the practice of the day.

With the close of World War II, the work of the SWC dwindled.

By the year 1949, the number of military people in its files had declined to less than 1,200. The mailing program of the SWC continued until the next big surge of activity with the outbreak of the Korean War. Again, when the war broke out, two men were called into the field where it was thought they would do the most good. Pastor Luther Voss was called to be a full-time civilian chaplain and served in and around Dothan, Alabama. Rev. Fred Tiefel was called to be missionary and civilian chaplain in Japan.

In the year 1951, the question of the military chaplaincy was again given close study and consideration. A special committee consisting of Rev A.L. Mennicke and Rev. E. Schaller reported to the convention. These men urged that we as a synod do everything possible to make our needs and views known to the government and take advantage of the military chapels which were available for the use of demominational groups not represented by the chaplain.

The next war, Vietnam, brought increased activity for the SWC. In addition to their mailing programs and contact pastors who worked on a part time basis, the SWC began sneding men into the actual areas where the combat was taking place overseas with the blessings and cooperation of the government. Around Christmas time in 1965, Pastor Luther Voss did some work in Vietnam. He was there for 18 months. Other civilian chaplain were called after he left. These civilian chaplains served for a period of one year, taking a leave of absence from their place of permanent call. In all, seven men served in Vietnam during the

course of the war.

Two articles in the notes and news of our WLQ written by Prof. H. Vogel dealt with our civilian chaplain's work. In the first article in 1970, Prof Vogel recorded the successes of the program. He explained how civilian chaplain Hoyer had been able to contact 93 of our men stationed in Vietnam, and 38 of 44 people in Thailand.⁷ He explained how our chaplains were receiving excellent help from the government, and accorded many privileges by the military, such as transportation, use of facilities on base, access to the files of military chaplains, and post exchange rights.

For the most part, the government seemed to appreciate the work of our civilian chaplains. There were still some voices raised in opposition to a program like ours, however. The May 1971 Lutheran Witness carried a statement by Chaplain (Maj Gen) Hyatt which stated that the Wisconsin Synod's experience in Vietnam had proved the civilian chaplaincy would never work. He cited all the help we were receiving from the military as the reason. Prof. Vogel, in his second article on chaplaincy, pointed out that we as American citizens, were only making use of those privileges which were given to others by law.⁸

At the end of the Vietnam war, a survey of our people stationed in Europe was taken by Karl Otto, our last civilian chaplain in Vietnam. This finally led to the call of Pastor E. Renz as civilian chaplain to Europe, a position in which he is presently serving. In 1977, a second man was called to help him with his work in Germany.

The Spiritual Welfare Commission is no longer in existence. For all practical purposes it became part of the Special Ministries Board of our Synod in the year 1975. Files are still kept on all personnel of our synod in the military. Mailings still go out. An intricate system of military contact pastors has been established. Services are held where it is practical and personal contacts are made. The military has shown an over-all courtesy to the requests and needs of our men serving the people in the Armed forces. When requests for aid and assistance are made through the proper channels, it is usually given. A letter, written by Chaplain (Col) James R. Boggs to Mr. A. Woldt, Executive Secretary of the Special Ministries Board is typical of the response most men have been receiving. In this letter, the head of chaplains in Europe writes, "May the Lord continue to bless the work of the Special Ministries Board WELS."

For Scriptural reasons, our synod has chosen chevrons instead of chevrons, civilian chaplains instead of military. The Lord has blessed the work. Working without the restrictions of military commanding officers, our pastors serving the military have been able to reach more WELS people than they ever could if assigned to one particular unit or division. They have enjoyed freedom of movement and freedom of religion which could not be enjoyed under the shackles of the military system. We echo the words of Chaplain Boggs. May God continue to bless the work of the Special Ministries Board WELS as they carry out their work using chevrons instead of chevrons.

END NOTES

- ¹Richard G. Hutcheson Jr., The Churches and the Chaplaincy, p.111.
- ²E. Clifford Nelson, The Lutherans in North America, p. 240.
- ³Clayton Krug, "Ministering to Members in the Armed Forces", p.3
- ⁴"The Northwestern Lutheran" 1917, p. 151.
- ⁵"Proceedings", 1919, p.160.
- ⁶"Proceedings", 1937, p. 55.
- ⁷"Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly", vol. 67, p.136.
- ⁸"Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly", vol. 68, p.200.

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