

# The Breaking of Church Fellowship

A History of the Events Surrounding the Removal of Pastor Darald Gruen  
From the Pastoral Ministry at Faith Evangelical Lutheran Church, Antioch, Illinois.

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**The Breaking of Church Fellowship: A History of the Events Surrounding the Removal of Pastor Darald Gruen From the Pastoral Ministry at Faith Evangelical Lutheran Church, Antioch, Illinois.**

God promises blessings to his people when they follow his Word. He held out such blessings to his people before they entered the Promised Land. “If you fully obey the LORD your God and carefully follow all his commands I give you today, the LORD your God will set you high above all the nations on earth. All these blessings will come upon you and accompany you if you obey the LORD your God” (Deuteronomy 28:1).

God promises the same to his people, the Church, today. When Christians follow God’s will, God blesses them. God’s will in matters of Christian fellowship, positively speaking, is “do it.” Join together with fellow Christians. “Work together for the truth.” Christians fellowship together, then, each time they gather to worship, pray together, send out a missionary, train future ministers, and the list goes on. The Christian heart so desires such an intimate connection with fellow believers. Psalm 133 tells us, “How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity! It is like precious oil poured on the head, running down on the beard, running down on Aaron’s beard, down upon the collar of his robes. It is as if the dew of Hermon were falling on Mount Zion. *For there the LORD bestows his blessing, even life forevermore.*”

God’s will in matters of Christian fellowship, negatively speaking, is “don’t do it” with those not in doctrinal agreement with one another. One Christian does not practice church fellowship with another when they do not agree on a teaching found in God’s Word. First an agreement based on God’s Word must be reached. This is God’s will for his Church “by schisms rent asunder, by heresies distressed.” When God’s people follow God’s will concerning the practice of fellowship, he will bless them as seen in the words of Psalm 133.

The Biblical doctrine of Church fellowship has been the topic of much debate throughout the history of the church. This remains especially true in today’s church. Many church bodies have adopted an unbiblical fellowship doctrine that emphasizes the “do it” at the expense of the “don’t do it.” Few churches practice true church fellowship. By the grace of God, the WELS has held to this doctrine over the years. Its position on fellowship, however, has been a source of criticism and controversy.

This is true even within the WELS. Early in 1995 a doctrinal controversy concerning church fellowship emerged in the congregation of Faith Evangelical Lutheran Church, Antioch,

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Illinois. Former WELS Pastor Darald Gruen disagreed with the WELS position on church fellowship. He objected primarily to the WELS doctrinal statements concerning fellowship made in the *1970 Doctrinal Statements of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod*. This disagreement put him at odds with the synod and with his associate pastor, Greg Hermanson. The congregation soon too became involved as one of their shepherds struggled with his own view of this doctrine.

Until this time Faith Evangelical Lutheran Church had had a quiet but rich history. It began in 1947. This steadily growing congregation, which numbered 952 baptized members in 1993, had also witnessed first-hand the blessings of their gracious God. This faithful congregation had held to God's Word throughout its history and had carried out the Great Commission. In a brief church history written recently, Faith Lutheran's faithful, confident hope shines through the words. The controversy that engaged the congregation for over 1 year appears as only a small blip.

Faith Ev. Lutheran Church's history begins at Peace Ev. Lutheran Church of Wilmot, WI. In 1947, Peace approved to form a daughter congregation with their members in Antioch, IL. They organized this new mission that met in the Legion Hall and gave it the name Faith Evangelical Lutheran Church in 1951. It was truly a step of faith. Pastor Rudolf P. Otto served both congregations for nine years. The very next year this small mission raised \$6,000.00 to purchase two acres of land on Main St. for its new home. They immediately turned their attention to the need for a church building and so in 1955 they built and dedicated their first church building. Five years later they built a parsonage and called Pastor Marvin Otterstatter as their first resident pastor. He served them until he accepted a new call in 1964. They then called Pastor David Ponath. The Lord led the members of Faith to take another step of faith in organizing a Lutheran Elementary School. It began in 1970 in the church basement. They called teacher Lloyd Tieg to be their first principal. The following year, 1971, Pastor Ponath accepted a new call and so Faith called Pastor Kent Schroeder. God blessed this little congregation in many ways. They soon had to enlarge the church and build a school. They built a two-story building in 1973, trusting that as they began in the first story, God would bless them and they would soon be filling the second story. They continued to call teachers as the school grew. Principal Tieg served until 1977 and then they called Principal Lloyd Essmann who served until 1978. Pastor Schroeder accepted a new call and left Faith in 1977. After a year-long vacancy, they called Pastor Darald Gruen. He also served as Faith's principal for one year

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during a vacancy. The growth came quicker than they expected. They finished the second story of their school in 1979, giving them another four classrooms. In that year they called teacher Melvin Schwartz to be their new principal. Six years later, in 1985, the Lord moved them to call their first associate pastor, Gregory Hermanson, from the Seminary's graduating class. Faith called teacher Richard Baumgart from their staff to be the next principal when Mr. Schwartz stepped down from that portion of his duties. Faith took another big step of faith in 1993 when it purchased 25 acres of land for relocation for three-quarters of a million dollars. *Pastor Gruen resigned in 1996, leaving a one-year vacancy.* Faith called Pastor Aaron Christie in 1997 from the Seminary's graduating class. God richly blessed Faith with growth and with the ability to pay off the mortgage in 1999. They then moved to plans for building a new church and school. God continues to bless his children beyond measure. Glory be to his name. (Taken from a "Brief History of Faith Evangelical Lutheran Church")

By God's rich blessing, Faith Evangelical Lutheran Church had grown to the point where it needed two shepherds. Its growing numbers even led the church to begin the work of planning and building a new church and school facility. In the midst of this background the doctrinal controversy broke.

As can be expected with such a doctrinal controversy, the church was challenged. Pastor Hermanson and the members of Faith each had to turn to God's Word to discover once again the truth. They had to turn to God in confident prayer and trust that he would carry them through such stormy times. As promised, the congregation would soon again discover that in all things God certainly "works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose" (Romans 8:28). This congregation as with all gathering of believers would not be torn from the loving hand of their Savior. He would carry them through this trying period with his blessing. The members of Faith Lutheran Evangelical Church would come away from this time with a deeper appreciation and understanding of God's truth.

Pastor Darald Gruen was born on June 24, 1947. He is married and is the father of seven, three adopted. He graduated from Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary in 1973. While there he was very studious and faithful to his Lord. He had a zeal for ministry that carried through his years as a pastor. He received his first call out of the Seminary to St. Peters Lutheran in Sturgeon Bay, Wisconsin. Pastor Gruen was installed into the public ministry in this large congregation

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numbering over a thousand baptized souls on June 24, 1973. Pastor Gruen served there as an associate of Pastor Baganz from June of 1973 until March of 1978. When he began there, Pastor Gruen continued in his zeal. He held strictly to the doctrine as he was taught in his days at the Seminary. Interestingly while there, he became frustrated with his associate pastor who was described as loose on the doctrine of church fellowship. (Gruen later used his experience at St. Peters as an example of diversity in the WELS on the doctrine of church fellowship.) Even though Pastor Gruen was concerned about the doctrinal stance of his associate pastor, he considered Pastor Baganz to be a great preacher.<sup>1</sup>

In 1978 Pastor Gruen received a call to Faith Evangelical Lutheran Church and he began his ministry there on April 2, 1978. He was its fifth called pastor. Once again he continued in his zeal for ministry. He also continued to teach faithfully according to the doctrine he was taught at the Seminary.

Pastor Gruen's faithfulness and love for his congregation was evident to its members. The author of this paper for one grew up at Faith and was instructed by him in Catechism. As far as could be told, Pastor Gruen was generally well liked and respected by members of all ages and backgrounds. Another student of his once commented,

Pastor Gruen did more than just teach a good class. He is a role model, a true Christian, and someone who always has, and always will hold my respect and the respect of my family... He showed such reverence for Scripture... And we students learned respect for Scripture, for him, for one another, for ourselves, and for other Christians.<sup>2</sup>

Another member once wrote,

Pastor Gruen has inspired us to not only attend worship services, but participate in an information course and Bible study. His unyielding faith and inspirational teachings and counseling's have made our personal growth in faith a reality. His intelligence never ceases to amaze us and he remains humble. His faith, patience and knowledge have made him a great teacher. His devotion to our Triune God makes him an inspiration to lead those around him to God's Grace. God has truly blessed our family by bringing us to this remarkable man who has touched our lives and our hearts.

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<sup>1</sup> Much of the material in this paper comes from an interview with Pastor Greg Hermanson on 30 March 2001.

<sup>2</sup> This quotation was taken from a personal letter concerning the matter. Many letters and documents appearing throughout this paper cannot be publicly found. These papers are referenced throughout without further citation unless otherwise noted. Copies of these can be found in the author's personal files. Please contact him if you would like more information.

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Pastor Gruen had many friends at Faith Lutheran. His love for his people can also be seen in the fact that many members from Faith left with him to start a new congregation following this doctrinal controversy.

As mentioned, Pastor Gruen had been faithful to the doctrines of the Bible as taught by the WELS. This included the doctrine of church fellowship. Attached to this paper is a copy of a handout that Pastor Gruen gave to his confirmation class. He notes the distinction between the “invisible” church and the “visible” church. He correctly points out that “not only Lutherans are going to heaven,” a point of WELS teaching which he seems to forget later in his ministry. He briefly outlines the history of the Church with its various doctrinal problems to show how so many different denominations exist in the world today. Most importantly, Pastor Gruen at first recognized the danger of false doctrine. He emphasized “love and compassion” for those blinded by false doctrine, but he also emphasized a serious need to hold to the truth and avoid error and its promoters, most notably in the area of communion practice.

Pastor Greg Hermanson graduated from Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary in 1985. His first call into the public ministry was to Faith Evangelical Lutheran Church that same year. He is married and is the father of three. Just out of the Seminary and according to his personality, Pastor Hermanson often “went with the flow.”<sup>3</sup> Pastor Gruen was the experienced pastor and Pastor Hermanson followed his lead. For example, in his preaching, Pastor Gruen always used a free text style without a pericope. Sometimes he would run a series based on a theme or portion of God’s Word. Pastor Hermanson also then worked without a pericope. When the controversy broke, however, Pastor Hermanson naturally became a leader opposing Pastor Gruen’s new doctrinal stance.

Over the years serving with Pastor Gruen, Pastor Hermanson noticed some questionable tendencies in his ministry prior to Pastor Gruen’s doctrinal problems. Pastor Hermanson described Pastor Gruen’s ministry as one filled with “tangents.”<sup>4</sup> Pastor Gruen had certain pet projects and beliefs that often took his focus away from a Gospel-centered, Great Commission-minded approach to ministry. Many of these were likely well intended on the part of Pastor Gruen, yet they seemed to consume his time. In Pastor Gruen’s preaching style, he often thought

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<sup>3</sup> Hermanson interview, 30 March 2001.

<sup>4</sup> Hermanson interview, 30 March 2001.

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of a message he considered important and then went in search of a fitting text. Over the ten years they worked together, Pastor Hermanson noted a move from doctrine to emotion in Pastor Gruen's preaching. The author of this paper as well can attest to seeing Pastor Gruen choked up or in tears in his sermons on more than one occasion. Doctrinally, Pastor Gruen was a promoter of fasting and an active prayer life. Evidently these received a major emphasis in his ministry to the point where the congregation recognized a difference between Pastor Gruen and Pastor Hermanson on these teachings. Pastor Hermanson "by default was the antithesis" to Pastor Gruen.

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Pastor Gruen for a time also began teaching a Bible study called the "Philosophy of Christian Womanhood." In it he greatly emphasized the submission of a wife to her husband even if the husband is sinfully wrong. She was to submit to win him over. Pastor Hermanson was forced to talk to him about this class. Pastor Gruen agreed to stop. Later, however, Pastor Gruen began a *private* Bible study with only a few men along the same lines called the "Philosophy of Christian Manhood." Because of its private nature, Pastor Hermanson did not see it as necessary to voice any objections to this Bible study. He did, however, note this as a "humanistic" teaching and a tangent in Pastor Gruen's ministry.<sup>6</sup>

One of the more time-consuming tangents with which Pastor Gruen was involved with during his ministry at Faith was the adoption of orphans from Ukraine. He helped coordinate this with Pastor Shep formerly of the ELS. On January 28, 1992, 124 orphan children came to America. 60 ended up with families associated with Faith Lutheran.<sup>7</sup> Pastor Hermanson was unaware of this adoption effort at Faith led by Pastor Gruen until the last moment. Pastor Hermanson saw this as a "real example of two pastors acting independently."<sup>8</sup> He expressed regret that this was one example of others where these two associate pastors carried on separate ministries.

The adoption effort became a major challenge for the congregation to handle. Pastor Gruen's time was consumed. He took the lead in these adoptions and hoped the congregation would follow and assist. This resulted in three trips to the Ukraine for him. The congregation also was forced to make decisions on how to keep and educate these orphans. Pastor Gruen's pet

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<sup>5</sup> Hermanson interview, 30 March 2001.

<sup>6</sup> Hermanson interview, 30 March 2001.

<sup>7</sup> Information gathered from a web article entitled "The demand for Ukraine's most precious resource: The Ternopil Case," by Khristina Lew. It can be found at <http://www.ukar.org/lew01.htm>.

<sup>8</sup> Hermanson interview, 30 March 2001.

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project became an obligation of the congregation. While obviously his efforts came from a heart of love, his focus was at least partially removed from the duties of his call as pastor. The congregation had split views of Pastor Gruen and his actions throughout this adoption effort.<sup>9</sup>

Here also many in the congregation began to notice the change in Pastor Gruen, which led to the doctrinal controversy later. While in the Ukraine on his trips, Pastor Gruen was amazed at the devotion and reverence that the Eastern Orthodox Christians displayed. He was aware of the false doctrine of Eastern Orthodoxy, but their spirit led him to bemoan the weak spirituality of American Christians. Later, this observation shows up as a criticism of the WELS that he attributes to its doctrinal stand on church fellowship. At this time Pastor Gruen began wearing an ecclesiastical collar like the pastors in the Eastern Orthodox churches of Ukraine.<sup>10</sup> Again, this is evidence that Pastor Gruen's ministry at Faith was full of tangents.

The influence of church bodies outside of the WELS is noteworthy in the ministry of Pastor Gruen. Northern Illinois has a major influence from Evangelicalism through Moody Bible Institute and its radio programs. Pastor Gruen would compare people's reaction to Evangelical preachers to that of WELS Lutherans. He had a zealous desire for that same response in his own people.<sup>11</sup>

A final tangent of Pastor Gruen worth brief mentioning involves the issue of home schooling.<sup>12</sup> Throughout his years at Faith, many member families, including the Gruen family, home schooled their children. This too was an issue the congregation had to deal with. Pastor Gruen was a leader in promoting home schooling and acceptance of it by non-home schoolers. He seemed to be concerned that families that home schooled were somehow discriminated against. He worked on their behalf. This too tended to redirect his focus from his calling as pastor.<sup>13</sup>

In 1994 Faith Lutheran numbered 958 souls. In 1994 already, five families left the congregation (15 confirmed members and 1 unconfirmed—all asked for peaceful releases. None specified where they were going). Later, two families transferred to other WELS congregations.

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<sup>9</sup> Hermanson interview, 30 March 2001.

<sup>10</sup> Hermanson interview, 30 March 2001.

<sup>11</sup> Hermanson interview, 30 March 2001.

<sup>12</sup> Hermanson interview, 30 March 2001.

<sup>13</sup> Much of this paragraph are personal observations from the author who was directly involved with this point.



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In 1995 Faith Lutheran church numbered 944 souls. In part the loss of souls on the membership rolls at Faith Lutheran represent the beginnings of this doctrinal controversy.

Because of its large size as mentioned Faith was involved in a major building project. Its pews were crowded to the point where people turned away when they arrived for worship. Its school enrollment was outgrowing the capacity of the school building. The parking lot was overcrowded and there was little room for Sunday morning Bible classes. Pastor Gruen had been a leader in this project for which land had been purchased in 1993 but was still in the planning stage. Pastor Gruen's doctrinal problems, however, forced him to back off from this effort. When the controversy later broke to the congregation, issues concerning the building project were put on hold until the controversy ended.

Pastor Gruen's disagreement with the WELS doctrine of church fellowship broke quietly in January of 1995. The congregation in the main was unaware of this except for a few close friends of Pastor Gruen. On January 10, 1995 Pastor Gruen sent a paper to his fellow pastors in the Southern Conference of the Southeast Wisconsin District. The paper attacked the WELS, its pastors and the WELS doctrine of church fellowship.

It seems that Pastor Gruen had been mulling over this issue for quite some time. His hand seems to have been forced at this time by a sermon preached at Faith by Pastor Hermanson. Pastor Hermanson had noticed that during his years in ministry at Faith, neither pastor had ever chosen to preach on the doctrine of fellowship. So, in November of 1994, he did. As mentioned, the congregation (and Pastor Hermanson as well at this time) was unaware of Pastor Gruen's struggles with this doctrine, but a few close friends in the congregation knew. After hearing Pastor Hermanson's sermon, one man, who was aware of Pastor Gruen's beliefs, encouraged him to publicly speak out about his disagreement with the WELS. This man also wrote to Pastor Hermanson concerning his disapproval of the sermon and withdrew from the congregation. He seemed to think that a pastor or synod should not be too dogmatic about much in God's Word because Scripture is a "deep mystery."<sup>14</sup> It is unclear whether this man's opinions were directly his own or if he was influenced by Pastor Gruen and merely in agreement with him. What is clear and will be shown later is that Pastor Gruen makes a similar argument in defense of his position.

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<sup>14</sup> Information taken from a letter written by Pastor Hermanson to this man in response to his withdrawal from the congregation over this issue dated 25 January 1995.

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In January, Pastor Hermanson followed up his sermon on fellowship with a Bible study on the same subject. This was partly in response to the letter that the man had written to Pastor Hermanson to announce his withdrawal to the congregation. Pastor Hermanson presented the Bible study by simply walking through all the pertinent Bible passages. Pastor Gruen took exception to this. Privately, he accused Pastor Hermanson of setting him up to look like the bad guy and heretic.<sup>15</sup>

Pastor Gruen's letter to his fellow pastors in the Southern Conference began with "The Parable." In the parable a father, who represents God, has five adopted sons. William, who represents the WELS, is one of the adopted sons. He is described as "intelligent and academic," but also proud and loveless, "smarter and morally superior." Whenever there was any dissension in this family, William felt he was always right and judged his brothers' hearts "as being evil and corrupt." Pastor Gruen continues, "Never did it seem to enter William's mind that the differences were all within the range of what is tolerable or that the differences were due to mental limitations." The father's (God) heart is grieved by his son and he warns him.<sup>16</sup>

This letter needs to be analyzed in depth to understand the position of Pastor Gruen. Over the next year and a half, his main argument changes little. This paper could be characterized as a very emotional appeal with little or no Scriptural support attempted. His later papers move to the point where he at least attempts to offer his Scriptural basis, but he always reverts back to his emotion-based arguments.

The letter continues on after the parable. Pastor Gruen realized that he would be in a minority position. He wanted to outline the mistakes of the WELS, as he perceived them. He seems to have a somewhat low regard for his brothers in his conference, that they might not even give him an ear. So he began the section of this first paper, entitled "Our Mistakes," with this plea, "My brothers, listen carefully to what I am about to say. Do not harden your hearts in anger until you hear everything I wish to share with you."<sup>17</sup>

Pastor Gruen for some time had been concerned about how the WELS, especially its pastors, treated those Christians and churches outside of its fellowship. "For several years now

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<sup>15</sup> Hermanson interview, 30 March 2001.

<sup>16</sup> All the information in this paragraph and the following are taken from Pastor Gruen's paper to the Southern Conference dated 10 January 1995.

<sup>17</sup> 1st letter, p.2, 10 January 1995.

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my heart has been concerned about the attitude that we have toward our fellow non-WELS Christians...treating them incorrectly... Our hearts are too proud and unloving.”<sup>18</sup> For some time Pastor Gruen had been involved in Bible studies with non-WELS pastors in Antioch. Pastor Hermanson did not know the nature of these. It is possible that they could have been done without the breaking of church fellowship.<sup>19</sup>

Pastor Gruen emphasized over and over in his arguments that Scripture presents only a doctrine concerning fellowship that deals with the “Una Sancta.” We confess this “Una Sancta” in the Apostles Creed when we say, “I believe... in the Holy Christian Church, the communion of saints.” All believers share in common a faith in Jesus that lies in each individual’s heart. This unity goes across denominational bounds. The Bible teaches that such faith is “invisible,” since only God can read the heart. Therefore, orthodox Lutheranism teaches that the Church is “invisible.” In the “visible” church, however, distinctions can be made based on confessions, the statements of belief of a believer and his denomination. When there is disagreement between Christians or church bodies, lines of fellowship are drawn according to the Scriptures. Pastor Gruen saw no basis for this in the Bible. He attacked the WELS teaching on this subject and the attitudes of its pastors. “Our first mistake is that rather than emphasizing the oneness that we have with all other repentant believers in Jesus Christ, we emphasize the differences. And this is wrong.”<sup>20</sup> Pastor Gruen continually encouraged his fellow pastors to ignore or at least downplay doctrinal differences with other Christians. What follows naturally, then, is a desire for all types of fellowship with other Christians.

Along with his problem concerning the WELS doctrine of church fellowship, Pastor Gruen had problems with the clarity of Scripture. The WELS holds that the Bible is the clear teachings of God. His people can know every teaching that is necessary for salvation and Christian living because God has seen fit to clearly present everything they need to know. Pastor Gruen denied this. This is typical of any error in doctrine. False doctrine never runs in a vacuum. Other doctrines always seem to fall with the initial false doctrine. Pastor Hermanson never clearly saw this problem in Pastor Gruen until the controversy of church fellowship came out. Yet, in retrospect, he saw signs of it earlier. Pastor Hermanson related a conversation in which Pastor Gruen had earlier in their ministry together questioned the eternal nature of hell

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<sup>18</sup> 1st letter, p.2, 10 January 1995.

<sup>19</sup> Hermanson interview, 30 March 2001.

<sup>20</sup> 1st letter, p.2, 10 January 1995.

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because the Scripture only talks about it in a *couple* of places. Because of this and the nature of God's love, Pastor Gruen thought the WELS might be wrong in this doctrine.<sup>21</sup> Pastor Hermanson saw this error progress in Pastor Gruen. It is evident in this first paper.

It is my opinion that Jesus knows that differences of thinking will happen because these disciples are different people. Thus he does not say, "All men will know that you are my disciples if you have 100% uniformity in doctrine and practice." Rather he says, "All men will know that you are my disciples if you love one another" (John 13:35).

Pastor Gruen pits love against doctrine. He makes truth subjective. He suggests that God's Word is not necessarily clear and is open to various interpretations, each of which perhaps contain a bit of truth. In a later letter to Pastor Joel Gerlach dated June 27, 1996, Pastor Gruen writes, "Since we all now 'see but a poor reflection' and since we now all 'know in part' (1 Cor. 13:12), I believe that it is quite possible that no pastor and no visible church body is 100% correct in everything it says and does. But at the same time our Father is gracious and transcendent." Time and again, Pastor Gruen uses this argument to refute the WELS doctrine of church fellowship. According to Pastor Gruen, no Christian can be certain if he correctly believes everything the Bible teaches. Moreover, the WELS cannot be certain if it teaches God's Word correctly. With this uncertainty, Pastor Gruen argues, the WELS is in no position to deny fellowship with other Christians or church bodies.

In the paper, his emotional arguments continued. He attacked his training at the Seminary, which he had at one time valued and worked at zealously. He seemed to take that same zeal now and turn it to promote his new ideas. "All I have been taught is how to fear and distrust them [Christians and pastors of other denominations]... We treat them with a coldness and a distain that our heavenly Father must find repulsive."<sup>22</sup> His attacks continued and became more pointed at the hearts of his fellow WELS pastors. "Whenever we have a difference with another church body, we automatically assume that we are 100% correct and that the other church body is in error."<sup>23</sup> The WELS, he argued, should be careful not to push its doctrines too far. The truth is "usually somewhere in the middle"<sup>24</sup> where both sides of a disagreement in doctrine are right to a certain degree. According to Pastor Gruen, the WELS has taken Lutheranism that had

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<sup>21</sup> Hermanson interview, 30 March 2001.

<sup>22</sup> 1st letter, p.3, 10 January 1995.

<sup>23</sup> 1st letter, p.3, 10 January 1995.

<sup>24</sup> 1st letter, p.3, 10 January 1995.

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fought so valiantly against the infallible pope of Rome to set itself up and its teachings to far. He sarcastically called the WELS an “infallible synod.”<sup>25</sup>

In all of Pastor Gruen’s arguments against the WELS doctrinal stance he comes up short when it comes to Scriptural backing. One of his favorite emotion-based arguments is the supposedly telltale statistics: If the numbers are not good, the doctrine must not be either. This shows up in his three papers and his other correspondences. The statistics prove the WELS cannot have everything correct. “Tell me why it is that we have in our Lutheran schools so many zealous first graders and so many angry and rebellious eighth graders.”<sup>26</sup> Here are some statistics he points to: the WELS has only a 44.8% worship attendance; 6000 less people are in worship on an average Sunday over last decade, a period in which the synod collectively spent over \$1 billion. Elsewhere, Pastor Gruen points out that WELS Lutherans only constitute perhaps 0.0003% of all Christians in the world.<sup>27</sup> If this is so, he argues, what makes the WELS so right and everyone else so wrong? His paper continues with very pointed attacks at the character of WELS pastors and leaders. He makes this emotional plea: “How many of us really believe in the depths of our hearts that, if Jesus were walking the earth incognito today, he would join the WELS?”<sup>28</sup> He concludes the section entitled “Our Mistakes” with this slanderous statement about WELS pastors: “Go to the Baptist, Pentecostal, and Methodist ministers in town and ask them what the WELS pastor is like. Chances are they have never even met the WELS pastor face-to-face, and if they have, chances are that they will say that the WELS pastor has a snobbish, self-righteous, proud attitude and that the WELS pastor will have nothing to do with them – period.”<sup>29</sup> As Pastor Gruen’s relationship with pastors of other denominations grew, as Pastor Gruen became more and more influenced by Christian denominations outside of the WELS, his relationship with his own synod and fellow pastors seems to have soured. Pastor Hermanson expressed a regret that he and Pastor Gruen had spent little time together in Bible study.<sup>30</sup> Perhaps Pastor Gruen lacked a close, working relationship with his fellow WELS pastors where they would share the Word with each other in study. Perhaps this helped to push Pastor Gruen down the road to his error in doctrine.

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<sup>25</sup> 1st letter, p.3, 10 January 1995.

<sup>26</sup> 1st letter, p.3, 10 January 1995.

<sup>27</sup> Pastor Gruen’s 2<sup>nd</sup> Letter dated 11 August 1995.

<sup>28</sup> 1st letter, p.3, 10 January 1995.

<sup>29</sup> 1st letter, p.4, 10 January 1995.

<sup>30</sup> Hermanson interview, 30 March 2001.

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Pastor Gruen used the next section of this first paper to outline “The Pain We Have Caused.” First, we hurt the heavenly Father who, according to Pastor Gruen, understands that his children will have different ideas, but he wants them to get along. Second, we hurt ourselves because we fail to show love. Third, we hurt ourselves because we are not open to new ideas (e.g. Christian music). Fourth, we hurt ourselves because we focus on the WELS and doctrine rather than Jesus.<sup>31</sup>

Pastor Gruen had moved from his early ministry where he stood staunchly in line with WELS doctrine to a point where he had a spirit of ecumenicism.

I have listened to Christian radio. I have heard Baptist and Evangelical Free pastors preach about Jesus as their Savior and Lord in ways that were stunning and that deeply touched my heart. I can sincerely say that I have learned a lot from them... You see, centuries ago all the different denominations could treat each other as enemies and get away with it. But that doesn't work anymore. And that is because some people of insight have started a movement in which the unifying element is Jesus and his blood, not each point of doctrine. Churches that treat each other as enemies or with cold indifference will increasingly be recognized for their lack of love.<sup>32</sup>

Pastor Gruen saw a bleak future for the WELS if it continues to hold to its doctrine of church fellowship. He saw promise in a spirit of ecumenicism.

In a section of the paper entitled “Changes That Need To Be Made” he outlined how the WELS can be salvaged. The WELS needs to repent. It must emphasize unity rather than division, recognize a child of God by faith rather than pure doctrine, and understand that all Christians are children of God, regardless of denomination. It needs to practice this spirit of fellowship, embracing each other in love, as a way of working toward doctrinal unity without compromising the truth. WELS pastors must go out and meet and study with non-WELS pastors. The WELS needs abandon its unit concept of fellowship.<sup>33</sup> These arguments of Pastor Gruen continue throughout this controversy.

His final observations and condemnations of the WELS come in his last section, entitled “How Will The Story Of WELS End?” “I believe that the fullness of God’s blessings are being withheld from us because 1) we teach Jesus more as an intellectual system or a ticket to heaven

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<sup>31</sup> 1st letter, p.4, 5, 10 January 1995.

<sup>32</sup> 1st letter, p.7, 10 January 1995.

<sup>33</sup> 1st letter, p.7-10, 10 January 1995.

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and not as much as a real being with whom we can have a mystical union, and because 2) we treat our brothers and sisters in the Lord incorrectly.”<sup>34</sup> He closes the paper by outlining his doctrine.

For of this I am convinced.

- 1) All truly repentant believers in the blood of Jesus are our brothers and sisters in the Lord, whatever their denomination.
- 2) We are to do all that we can without compromising the truth to uphold the unity of the body of Christ.
- 3) In dealing with others, we must remember that they are not emotionless robots, but human beings with limited minds and heart-felt emotions. Remember to deal kindly and gently with them.

It's what our Father wants.<sup>35</sup>

Pastor Gruen uses this paper to voice his displeasure with the WELS. It provides a good outline of his basic argument throughout the controversy. An overall evaluation leaves the reader with only emotion-based arguments. Many of his fellow pastors of the Southern Conference were concerned with the pointed attacks he made at the hearts of WELS pastors. The stage was set. A private struggle with the doctrine of church fellowship was now revealed, not necessarily publicly at this time, but to his fellow pastors. The Southeast Wisconsin District now had to deal with this issue.

Pastor Gruen's letter came as a shock to many. Few members at Faith were aware of the paper. Pastor Hermanson was shocked by the first letter.<sup>36</sup>

His fellow pastors responded quickly. Shortly after he issued the paper, he had a meeting with Pastor Berg, his circuit pastor, a Pastor Peters and Pastor Hermanson. They recognized immediately that Pastor Gruen was fairly set in his new doctrinal stance. They knew of his Bible studies with non-WELS pastors in Antioch. They knew that his opinions were obviously different from that of the WELS and they advised him to resign immediately. Pastor Gruen was

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<sup>34</sup> 1st letter, p.11, 10 January 1995.

<sup>35</sup> 1st letter, p.12, 10 January 1995.

<sup>36</sup> Hermanson interview, 30 March 2001.

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offended at this suggestion.<sup>37</sup> In fact, according to Pastor Jeske who was on the district praesidium, throughout these meetings over the next year and a half between Pastor Gruen and various pastors, especially the District Praesidium, Pastor Gruen seems to have been intent on forcing the synod to remove him from the ministry of the WELS rather than resigning so that he would appear to be a victim.<sup>38</sup> At this time the circuit pastors also began a Bible study on the doctrine of church fellowship.

In January and February of 1995, the district praesidium held two personal meetings with Pastor Gruen. The District President was Pastor Rutschow of Good Shepherd in Downers Grove, Illinois. Pastor Huebner of Grace in Milwaukee and Pastor Jeske of St. Marcus in Milwaukee were also on the praesidium. They dealt with Pastor Gruen throughout this controversy. One member of the Board for Lay Ministry commented to the author that he considered their dealings with Pastor Gruen “compassionate but firm.” Pastor Hermanson had a similar evaluation.<sup>39</sup>

At the first meeting, the district praesidium met only with Pastor Gruen. At the second meeting, they included Pastor Hermanson so that he would be aware of the developments. From the beginning, the praesidium asked for Pastor Gruen to provide Scriptural proofs for his arguments, but he never supplied any. Emotion and reason remained his primary weapons.

Some time passed between these meetings and the next major developments, perhaps to let the dust settle. The congregation remained in the dark regarding this paper and these meetings. Between February and January of 1995, the only document that is to be found was a letter from Pastor Hermanson to Pastor Gruen responding to his paper. It is dated April 3, 1995. He expresses many concerns to his associate pastor including his attack on “several specific teachings of Scripture” and the “low impression” Pastor Gruen had for his brothers in the ministry. While Pastor Gruen seemed to pit love against doctrine, Pastor Hermanson correctly recognized, “What kind of love is willing to deny the truth?”

Pastor Hermanson truly was a blessing from God to his congregation throughout this ordeal. He too grew in his faith and ability as he struggled with this dark point in his own ministry. He defended the clarity of Scripture. “Since when is our different life experiences a

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<sup>37</sup> Hermanson interview, 30 March 2001.

<sup>38</sup> Information gathered from a brief phone call to Pastor Jeske on 24 April 2001.

<sup>39</sup> Hermanson interview, 30 March 2001.



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license for false doctrine, or isn't there false doctrine anymore, just different doctrines?" He was a humble servant of God even as he staunchly defended the truth.

Please don't try to make me feel guilty for remaining faithful to the word of God, or imply that (it) is impossible. Yes, my human logic tells me, how can I be right and all these other ones be wrong? I must be wrong and they must all be right. But then I look back into God's Word for what is right and until I'm convinced by that Word that I am wrong, I must uphold what it says much like Noah and Luther.

He certainly did this as he dealt with Pastor Gruen. At this time, however, other than this letter and the second meeting with the district praesidium, Pastor Hermanson tried to remain out of the controversy and to allow the praesidium to work this out.<sup>40</sup>

Pastor Hermanson admitted that he grew and changed throughout this time. He realized quickly that he had to learn a lot more about the doctrine of church fellowship. When such a situation hits so closely, God's Word tends to have so much more meaning as it is studied. He learned how "seemingly little doctrines" do have a major impact on the life of a Christian. He came to the conclusion that "there is no such thing as a little doctrine."<sup>41</sup> He also regretted that his relationship with his associate pastor had been lacking in communication. With his new associate, Pastor Aaron Christie, he has expressed a new joy in his working relationship.<sup>42</sup>

As their shepherd, Pastor Hermanson found that his own love for his people grew. He had a new desire to be able to better teach doctrine in general to his people. He now saw the congregation more as his family whose concerns were also his concerns. As they were hurting through this ordeal, a genuine care for them grew in him. He learned the importance of listening to the congregation's questions. He learned to analyze the congregation's reaction to any doctrine, so that he could address their needs.<sup>43</sup>

The doctrinal controversy with Pastor Gruen definitely impacted the ministry of Pastor Hermanson. Emotionally it was devastating. Over the year and a half, Pastor Hermanson turned from a "wide-eyed optimist" to being "more cynical." At times, in the heat of the battle, resignation was a real option. Life under the microscope, as the congregation watched him closely as the other side in the controversy, wore on him and likely his family as well. Thankfully, Pastor

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<sup>40</sup> Hermanson interview, 30 March 2001.

<sup>41</sup> Hermanson interview, 30 March 2001.

<sup>42</sup> Hermanson interview, 30 March 2001.

<sup>43</sup> Hermanson interview, 30 March 2001.

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Hermanson's fellow circuit pastors encouraged him and focused his attention on Scripture for comfort and to keep his sanity. Normally less outspoken by nature in his ministry, Pastor Hermanson learned throughout this controversy that occasions arise when he does have to make a stand and speak. He would no longer allow things that bothered him to continue, assuming that they would go away on their own. Now when he is bothered, he speaks up. He also knew, however, that there were times when he simply had to faithfully let the Lord work everything out.<sup>44</sup>

On August 11, 1995, Pastor Gruen wrote a second letter to his fellow pastors in the Southern Conference. Like the first letter, only a few close friends in the congregation were aware. He allowed them, as confidants, to proofread it. Apparently he did not send it out until September 1<sup>st</sup>. Pastor Rutschow had asked Pastor Gruen to decide where he stood doctrinally. By this date, he admittedly had not. In this paper, he advances some of his ideas, especially his opinion of the "Una Sancta." He does not appear, however, to know where he truly was doctrinally. He wrote a letter to Pastor Rutschow on September 1<sup>st</sup> that stated, "No, Dave, I have not absolutely landed. The only truths upon which I have absolutely landed are the clear truths of God's inspired Word. This letter represents my current thinking. However, I realize that my heart is sinful and my brain is limited in intelligence and culturally bound. Therefore, I am open to discussion and the guidance of others."

His second letter makes many of the same points as the first. In general, throughout his arguments over time, Pastor Gruen moves from emotion to logic with some attempts to use Scripture. His second paper took the form of three questions that he attempted to answer.

- I. Isn't it possible that, in our zeal for correct doctrine, we have misunderstood a basic principle of Scripture thereby leading to an incorrect approach to our brothers and sisters in the Una Sancta?
- II. Isn't it possible that, in our zeal for correct doctrine, we have made incorrect exegeses and application of various passages with the result that we restrict spiritual fellowship beyond Scripture's restrictions?
- III. Isn't it possible that, in our zeal for correct doctrine, we have fallen from a balanced evangelical theology into a fundamentalistic theology?<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Hermanson interview, 30 March 2001.

<sup>45</sup> 2<sup>nd</sup> letter, p.1, 11 August 1995.

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Nothing much needs to be said about this paper, since it continues along the same vein as the first. He stresses the size of the WELS compared to the Christian Church, the *Una Sancta*, at large. He again reemphasizes that the WELS cannot avoid contact and cooperation with 99.9997% of Christianity.<sup>46</sup> This time, as mentioned, Pastor Gruen attempts to incorporate Scriptural passages mostly to promote his own interpretation of the *Una Sancta*. He points especially to Ephesians 4:2-6, 11-15. Here Paul reminds the Ephesians of their “unity of the Spirit.” He does no exegesis of the passage. As mentioned regarding his preaching, he often had a message and went in search of a text. Here, he had a doctrine in mind, looser fellowship principles, and he went in search of a supporting text. He ignored the rest of God’s Word which warns Christians against false doctrine. He downplayed the importance of doctrine and the harm that comes from error. He only wants a spirit of ecumenicism based on his definition of love. “True spiritual fellowship exists between all truly repentant, born-again believers in Jesus Christ by virtue of belonging to the same family, by virtue of having the same Father. Thus true spiritual fellowship is not based upon uniformity of doctrine” (Underlining is his).<sup>47</sup>

Even though Pastor Gruen attempts in this letter to take a more apologetic tone to his brothers in the Southern Conference for his attacks on the WELS in the first letter, these attacks continue. The WELS has merely derived its own doctrinal system from God’s Word based on its Germanic heritage.<sup>48</sup> Later, he compares WELS pastors to Pharisees. He accuses them also of hypocrisy.<sup>49</sup>

He also again attacks the unit concept of fellowship. With this the WELS does not distinguish between the various forms of worship whether it is prayer, communion, or formal worship and preaching in matters of fellowship. Pastor Gruen sees a difference in these. He promotes an opinion that Christians can cross confessional lines in some forms of worship but not others. He argues that prayer with a Baptist is a far cry from allowing a Baptist to preach in our pulpits.<sup>50</sup> Interestingly, this argument did not reflect Pastor Gruen’s true belief, or he changed yet again following his removal from the WELS. According to an article in the *Antioch News*, a

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<sup>46</sup> 2<sup>nd</sup> letter, p.2, 11 August 1995.

<sup>47</sup> 2<sup>nd</sup> letter, p. 3, 11 August 1995.

<sup>48</sup> 2<sup>nd</sup> letter, p. 3, 11 August 1995.

<sup>49</sup> 2<sup>nd</sup> letter, p. 8, 11 August 1995.

<sup>50</sup> 2<sup>nd</sup> letter, p. 4, 11 August 1995.

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local paper, dated November 5-11, 1999, Pastor Gruen was planning a joint service with two Baptist congregations.<sup>51</sup>

Pastor Gruen's second question in this paper accuses the WELS of faulty exegesis in Romans 16:17,18, which is often called the "sedes doctrinae" passage of fellowship in the WELS. He promotes an idea that says this passage is only applicable to those Christians disobeying the principles Paul lays out in chapters 14 and 15 concerning weak and strong Christians. Romans 16:17,18 then can only be used like Matthew 18 to excommunicate people "who by their actions prove that they have no faith in their hearts."<sup>52</sup> For Pastor Gruen, this passage cannot be used to separate from other believers who disagree in doctrine. Here he also attacks the WELS exegesis of 2 John 7-11 and Matthew 7:15. In this section he never attempts to provide his own exegesis. He merely offers suggestions that fit his arguments.

The second letter really does no more than to prove that over seven months Pastor Gruen was still holding to his new teaching. He was no longer in agreement with the WELS on the doctrine of fellowship and other doctrines. This he admits in his concluding remarks that also summarize his goal in this matter.

Dear brothers, I do love you and I do love our church body. It's where I came to know Jesus as my Savior. It's where I am *most uniformly in agreement* with doctrine... But, we must, in all honesty, reexamine ourselves and the way we treat fellow Christians in other bodies. We are wrong in the way that we have walled ourselves off... We actually believe that it is against our heavenly Father's will that we pray or worship with them?! (Italics added)

I plead with you, get to know some Baptist and Evangelical Free pastors or others who genuinely believe in Jesus as their Savior. Don't just deal with the public confessions of their church—get to know them as real people, as brothers in the Lord, as friends... And when you do, you will see again that the Kingdom of God is not a matter of doctrines and laws, but it is a personal relationship with the living God through Jesus Christ.<sup>53</sup> (Underlining is his)

Pastor Gruen's goal was a reexamination of Scripture. This certainly happened as the district praesidium and his own congregation dealt with his errors. The truth of Scripture again showed

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<sup>51</sup> "Lighthouse beams hope", by Michael H. Babicz, p.A4. *Antioch News*, November 5-11, 1999.

<sup>52</sup> 2<sup>nd</sup> letter, p. 4, 11 August 1995.

<sup>53</sup> 2<sup>nd</sup> letter, p. 10,11, 11 August 1995.

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itself. By now Pastor Gruen was clearly set in his thinking. He certainly no longer agreed with the WELS in doctrine.

Forced to strengthen its stand by this paper and subsequent events, the praesidium focused on these points of his second letter: it affirmed and was stronger than the first letter; it called the unit concept of fellowship “unscriptural;” it suggested that the WELS current close Communion practice was too close; it urged learning from and praying with heterodox clergy.<sup>54</sup>

The praesidium’s first response was to begin another Bible study with Pastor Gruen in September.<sup>55</sup> On September 19, the praesidium met with Pastor Gruen in Milwaukee. The members of the praesidium asked him questions to seek clarification on what Pastor Gruen actually believed. Pastor Gruen reassured the praesidium that the letter was issued only at a pastoral level and that his own congregation did not know about it.

The praesidium continued in its effort to deal compassionately but firmly with Pastor Gruen. There were certain points that Pastor Gruen raised in his letters with which they could agree. They expressed their sympathies and regrets. They were willing to give Pastor Gruen even more time to study and discuss this doctrine with them. They promised to continue to advise Pastor Gruen on how he should best deal with this situation. They were concerned about the offense that Pastor Gruen was causing among his fellow pastors by the tone that his letters often took. They were concerned as well that the congregation would soon know about the matter. Finally, they expressed a hope that Pastor Gruen would work with the praesidium and keep it informed.

Whatever happened in that September 19<sup>th</sup> meeting, Pastor Gruen felt compelled to tell the Church Planning Council at Faith about the events of the past nine months. Again, here we see a lack of communication between the two associate pastors at Faith. This time it was only Pastor Gruen’s fault; Pastor Hermanson had no idea this announcement was coming.<sup>56</sup> On September 21, Pastor Gruen told the Church Planning Council the following details of the past months: he informed them of the two letters and the subsequent meetings with the praesidium. Even though it was not true, Pastor Gruen told the Council that the Praesidium gave to him an

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<sup>54</sup> From an outline made by the praesidium for a presentation to the Church Planning Council and Board of Lay Ministry At Faith on September 27, 1995.

<sup>55</sup> Hermanson interview, 30 March 2001.

<sup>56</sup> Hermanson interview, 30 March 2001.

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order to “recant.” He also informed the Council that he thought that he would very likely be suspended from WELS. This seems to support the thought that Pastor Gruen was seeking to be removed from the WELS to avoid having to resign.

The Church Planning Council was also taken by surprise. It acted quickly, however. The Council’s actions throughout this ordeal should be commended. They acted wisely without making a quick judgment. The executive committee of the Council requested through Pastor Hermanson that the district praesidium meet with the Church Council. They wanted a full explanation of both sides of the issues. They sought guidance in what process they needed to go through to handle this surprise development in the history of their congregation.

Immediately, the executive committee, headed by Dennis Dretzke, met. It placed Pastor Gruen on a leave of absence for the remainder of the year so that the issues could be sorted out. They did this in spite of the fact the Pastor Gruen had requested them to sit on the issue and not let the congregation find out. The executive committee, however, was convinced they could not keep this matter from the congregation. When this matter broke to the congregation, naturally there was shock. “The one place they felt real secure was church, and now that is in trouble.”<sup>57</sup>

In the months that followed, the Board of Lay Ministry and the Church Planning Council at Faith held a Bible study on church fellowship with both pastors. These Bible studies had the feeling of a debate. Pastor Gruen on leave of absence and Pastor Hermanson presented the two sides. They agreed not to interrupt the other. Some of the board members wanted to know how to apply the principles in practical situations. Ultimately, the Board and the Council agreed with the synod.<sup>58</sup>

The months of Pastor Gruen’s leave of absence were trying on the congregation but allowed the members time to deal with the matter. Unfortunately, during his leave of absence Pastor Gruen insisted on being visible at church, causing some discomfort. He really had little to do with his time off. At this time, Pastor Hermanson sensed some polarization in the congregation. He explained that the congregation was well mannered to each other, but everyone seemed to be walking carefully on “pins and needles.” It was naturally a very stressful time for the members at Faith.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Hermanson interview, 30 March 2001.

<sup>58</sup> Hermanson interview, 30 March 2001.

<sup>59</sup> Hermanson interview, 30 March 2001.

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Only six days after Pastor Gruen's shocking announcement, the executive committee's request was met. The praesidium met with the Church Planning Council and the Board of Lay Ministry at Faith on September 27. The praesidium was very impressed with the congregation's leaders. They thought they were handling the matter well. Both Pastor Hermanson and Pastor Gruen attended the meeting. Pastor Gruen was very emotional as usual.<sup>60</sup>

The praesidium gave a chronology of the events surrounding the doctrinal controversy. Apparently some time between Pastor Gruen's shocking announcement and this meeting he had written a letter to the praesidium asking for certain freedoms in his ministry. "I need the freedom...

1. "...to practice an evangelical close communion in which I am free to give the Lord's Supper to people whom I believe can correctly receive the sacrament regardless of their synodical affiliation."
2. "...to pray with any Christian I choose to pray with."
3. "...to allow non-WELS organists and soloists at such services as funerals and weddings."
4. "...to talk about what is holy, good and right in non-WELS pastors and churches, the freedom to distinguish between some prophets who have some errors and false prophets."
5. "...to deal with each human according to his/her need as a precious soul won by the blood of Jesus regardless of his/her synod or denomination."<sup>61</sup>

The praesidium presented these five requests at this meeting. It informed the Council and the Board that Pastor Gruen had not been forbidden to talk about the good and right in non-WELS clergy and churches. He had not been forbidden to distinguish between prophets whose teaching is in error in some points and prophets whose entire teaching is in error. He had not been forbidden per se to deal with people and their needs who are of other denominations. Pastor Rutschow reassured the congregation's leaders that Gruen was not "in trouble" with the praesidium, nor did they question his love for his synod. He had not been ordered to recant, nor had he been threatened with suspension by the praesidium.<sup>62</sup>

The praesidium made it clear to the congregation where the matter stood in its eyes. The members of the praesidium were primarily concerned that the nature of Pastor Gruen's two letters

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<sup>60</sup> Hermanson interview, 30 March 2001.

<sup>61</sup> Information taken from a handout given at the presentation by the praesidium to the Church Planning Council and Board of Lay Ministry at Faith Evangelical Lutheran Church, Antioch, on 27 September 1995.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

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had caused offense and division between him and his fellow pastors. The praesidium was still finalizing its own recommendations to Pastor Gruen on how to deal with this. As before, it reassured the congregation, that it was willing to continue to study and discuss these issues with Pastor Gruen.<sup>63</sup>

The Board of Lay Ministry considered Pastor Gruen's five requests to the praesidium to be very significant. The Council had planned a meeting at Faith for October 8<sup>th</sup> to inform the whole congregation of these new circumstances. Pastor Gruen was worried that his five statements had been worded poorly so on October 4<sup>th</sup> he mailed a letter to the praesidium requesting that they bring his revised five questions to the congregation. The revisions were insignificant. It is not certain which version was presented to the congregation on October 8<sup>th</sup>.

On October 7<sup>th</sup>, the Board for Lay Ministry sent a special letter to the congregation to make it aware of the issues that the meeting would discuss on the 8<sup>th</sup>. It informed the congregation that the Board would be holding the previously mentioned Bible studies with both pastors so that they could come to their own conclusions based on Scripture. They made the congregation aware that the meeting on the 8<sup>th</sup> would be simply informational. They would tell the congregation what had transpired, but no debate would be entertained. Finally, they requested that the congregation pray for Pastor Gruen and the congregation.

The meeting was held on October 8<sup>th</sup>. The congregation was informed why their pastor had been placed on leave of absence. Pastor Gruen agreed that this was necessary for the time being. At this meeting, Pastor Gruen was very emotional. In an emotional tirade, either at this meeting or perhaps a later voters' meeting on November 12<sup>th</sup>, he claimed that he had "laid on the floor at the altar... Why can't I commune an LC-MS woman?" His emotions tried to override the facts. Later, Pastor Hermanson had to call him on this inappropriate behavior. From then on Pastor Gruen became more factual and less emotional.<sup>64</sup>

On October 13<sup>th</sup>, Pastor Gruen once again wrote his fellow pastors in the Southern Conference. This time the letter was short. He wrote it to inform his fellow pastors that he was withdrawing his second letter because it was premature. This was probably on the advice of the praesidium. He informed them that he would be meeting with the praesidium in a Bible study on

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<sup>63</sup> Information taken from a handout given at the presentation by the praesidium to the Church Planning Council and Board of Lay Ministry at Faith Evangelical Lutheran Church, Antioch, on 27 September 1995.

<sup>64</sup> Hermanson interview, 30 March 2001.



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the doctrine of fellowship. He also admitted that he had not yet come to any final conclusions on the matter and requested their prayers.

Here again there seems to be some down time in the events surrounding this issue. Again, the dust could settle. Time was obviously taken to study the doctrine. On October 24<sup>th</sup>, District President Pastor Rutschow sent Pastor Gruen a doctrinal outline of the WELS position on fellowship. This seems to be the basis for the Bible study.

The congregation was able to use this time to reflect on the matter. For many, this time seems to have been profitable as they studied God's Word and prayed for his guidance so that each member could make informed judgments. For example, one member wrote a letter to Dennis Dretzke (Executive Director), Duane Kellor (Chairman for the Board), Pastor Hermanson and Pastor Gruen on November 8, 1995. She had taken time to dig into God's Word. She had also reviewed the "Doctrinal Statements of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (1970)." Because of her background in LC-MS she had a particular interest in this matter. She approved of the leave of absence that the Council had place Pastor Gruen on. She came to the conclusion that she could not agree with Pastor Gruen.

As members, we are asked at the time of confirmation or affirmation of faith to declare before God that we believe and hold to all of the teachings of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod. Are individuals allowed to become members if they state that they do not believe in the teachings we hold to be true? Can we have confidence in the teachings of our synod if our pastor, who has spent years in the study of Scripture and the synodical teachings, does not believe what he is teaching? The questions will always remain, no matter how strenuously it is denied, that if he doubts this one doctrine, what other doctrines does or will he find he is not in agreement with. (underlining is hers)

This letter is one example of the congregation's reaction. The members at Faith in general worked hard to make godly, biblical decisions concerning Pastor Gruen. Based on the aftermath of Pastor Gruen's dismissal, obviously some members at Faith came down on both sides.

On November 12<sup>th</sup>, a special voters' meeting was held. On December 15<sup>th</sup>, Pastor Rutschow again wrote Pastor Gruen. In it he warns of "words and phrases in your letter that tend to raise red flags in our fellowship." He promised to check in with Pastor Gruen after the first of the year. There were certain specific issues that the praesidium wanted Pastor Gruen to address. One item in particular from Pastor Gruen's second letter that Pastor Rutschow wanted withdrawn

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was this comment about heterodox preachers: “They are not false prophets. They are true prophets. Their fruit is from God.” This letter was also sent to the rest of the praesidium and to Pastor Hermanson.

Pastor Hermanson also wrote Pastor Gruen on December 12<sup>th</sup>. He was reacting to Pastor Gruen’s two letters and their various conversations. Pastor Hermanson expressed those areas he could agree with. Throughout Pastor Gruen’s arguments his accusations against the WELS often overstated the case. Really Pastor Gruen was seeking to tear down the doctrine of church fellowship. In the process he said or implied some points about the WELS that are not true. Pastor Hermanson agreed that “some individuals have been less than loving in their words and actions” and thereby sinned. He rightly agreed with Pastor Gruen and the praesidium that we do experience a certain fellowship with all believers regardless of denomination, but this is “distinct and different from the close fellowship we practice with our orthodox brothers and sisters.” He agreed that the WELS could find better ways to relate to people outside the synod. He agreed that there is some benefit to know non-WELS pastors. He agreed that WELS pastors and teachers could teach the doctrine of church fellowship in a better manner.

In this letter, Pastor Hermanson also reiterated the concerns of the praesidium to Pastor Gruen. Apparently, the congregation along with Pastor Hermanson was concerned that for Pastor Gruen “if there is a subscribing to a doctrinal position, that it be not just a subscription in volition, but a subscription of faith.” Pastor Gruen seems to have offered here and later as well to teach WELS doctrine as a WELS pastor even if he did not agree with it. This of course is absurd. Finally, Pastor Hermanson also noted concerns about Pastor Gruen’s hermeneutical approach to Scripture. His exegesis of passages continually came up lacking.

Pastor Gruen never really desired to mine the truth from God’s Word. He wanted always to leave the Bible open to various interpretations in all doctrines. This was noted before in his first letter. One wonders what he wanted to glean from the Bible studies with the praesidium except to have them share his view of God’s Word, that it is open to subjective judgments, that no supposed truth of Scripture can be pushed too strongly because we are limited human beings.

This letter which follows shows this very disappointing spirit in Pastor Gruen. On February 16, 1996 Pastor Gruen wrote a short letter to the Board of Lay Ministry. He attached two papers to it. He requested that they read these two papers on fellowship by WELS Pastors Naumann and Malchow so that they might see the wide diversity of teaching even among WELS

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pastors. Apparently, he hoped that by showing diversity in teachings the Board would agree with him that there is no objective truth, just faith in Jesus.

Pastor Gruen was not finished. Two letters could not express his opinions adequately, so he wrote a third to his fellow pastors in the Southern Conference on February 22, 1996. It would be his last such letter. This letter begins with some side points. First, he apologized to “my brothers of the Southern Conference, for any unkind and unfair comments which I made... for any overstatements or false caricatures which I have made.”<sup>65</sup> The praesidium had at least convinced Pastor Gruen that many of his statements were exaggerations at best.

Second, he wished to “thank publicly my spiritual forefathers in the WELS for their faithfulness to the Scripture and their spiritual warfare which they waged on my behalf.”<sup>66</sup> Ironically, Pastor Gruen never seems to grasp that much of their spiritual warfare involved this same issue. Throughout history, orthodox Lutherans have needed to protect themselves and their people from compromising God’s Word through unscriptural unions with other denominations. Pastor Gruen thanks the same men he is now fighting against. He claims to be thankful that he was taught the truth and not false doctrine, but now he wants to engage with other heterodox Christians in ways that make such distinctions appear unimportant.

Third, he wished to “state publicly that my first two letters contain many thoughts not always the best expressed.”<sup>67</sup> Here he seems to speak out of both sides of his mouth. He expresses a desire to hold to the truth as the rest of the WELS, but he only agrees “with the district praesidium that we must keep a *certain distance* from those who teach false doctrines” (Italics added).<sup>68</sup> This phrase “certain distance” betrays that he still desires some church fellowship with heterodox believers. This certainly was not the belief of the praesidium.

Fourth, he thanked the district praesidium for their “fine, evangelical manner in which they have treated me.”<sup>69</sup>

Then, Pastor Gruen leveled his concerns again. A somewhat new development in his theology was a supposed disagreement with the WELS use of the term “brother.” He saw no scriptural basis for the WELS use of the term. The praesidium had explained to him that we use

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<sup>65</sup> 3<sup>rd</sup> letter, p. 1, 22 February 1996.

<sup>66</sup> 3<sup>rd</sup> letter, p. 1, 22 February 1996.

<sup>67</sup> 3<sup>rd</sup> letter, p. 2, 22 February 1996.

<sup>68</sup> 3<sup>rd</sup> letter, p. 2, 22 February 1996.

<sup>69</sup> 3<sup>rd</sup> letter, p. 2, 22 February 1996.

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it in a wide and narrow sense. In the wide sense, all Christians are “brothers.” In the narrow sense, “brothers” refers only to those with whom we are in fellowship. Pastor Gruen insisted that only the wide sense is biblical. He requested that the WELS rethink their use of this term.<sup>70</sup>

The rest of the paper once again addresses the WELS exegesis of various passages related to the doctrine of church fellowship. All the passages deal with the matter of avoiding false doctrines and their teachers. He also continues his attack on the unit concept of fellowship in this paper. Along those lines Pastor Gruen expressed his concerns about WELS policy on organists and soloists in worship. He was reacting to Professor Brug’s article in the *Northwestern Lutheran* that he attached to his letter.<sup>71</sup> He also expressed concerns about the close communion practice of the WELS that he considered too “close.” For both of these last two points he used examples where he saw these policies break down, some real to his ministry, others hypothetical. Whereas the application of the doctrine of church fellowship can be difficult at times and often must be taken on a case-by-case basis, Pastor Gruen seemed to want to use difficult applications to determine or shape the biblical principal.

This third paper really advanced nothing new. It simply restated some of his former objections and toned down others. The only item of note is Pastor Gruen’s new tendency to use problems in applying a doctrine to help dictate a principle. In the same attitude, he points to alleged objections to this doctrine by lay members in various WELS congregations as proof that we need to adjust this doctrine of church fellowship.<sup>72</sup>

Pastor Rutschow and the district praesidium now decided it was time to force Pastor Gruen to show where he stood. They wanted to know if Pastor Gruen agreed or disagreed with his fellow believers in the WELS. If not, the time had long come for Pastor Gruen to move on. Pastor Rutschow sent six statements to Pastor Gruen to answer with a simple “yes” or “no.” He even provided him a small blank on which to write his answer. On May 9<sup>th</sup>, Pastor Gruen responded. The statements are as follows:

1. We may speak of “fellowship” in both a wider and narrower sense. All Christians enjoy a spiritual fellowship with Jesus Christ and with each other; at the same time Christians enjoy a

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<sup>70</sup> 3<sup>rd</sup> letter, p. 3-4, 22 February 1996.

<sup>71</sup> “Church teachings and church fellowship,” by Professor Brug. *Northwestern Lutheran*, p.32, October 1995.

<sup>72</sup> 3<sup>rd</sup> letter, p. 9-11, 22 February 1996.

## The Breaking of Church Fellowship

close fellowship with those who hold to the same doctrinal confession, and with whom they can join in a partnership of worship and ministry. The word “brother” can also be used in a range of meanings, in a wider and narrower sense.

2. A Christian must accept responsibility for teachings and practices of an organization to which he or she belongs. Those teachings and practices are an important factor (though not the only factor) in determining a person’s spiritual identity as he or she relates to other Christians.
3. Altar fellowship properly belongs among those who enjoy a unity of public confession of faith. Close communion is not a rule taught by men but a Scriptural and spiritually healthy practice.
4. Joint public prayer with heterodox Christians is not wrong in and of itself, but it can easily become unionism or be perceived as unionism. What is communicated by these actions is of paramount importance in deciding how any such prayer should be done.
5. Heterodox preachers and teachers do God’s work insofar as they proclaim the truth of God’s Word and are false teachers insofar as they teach contrary to God’s Word.
6. The WELS is not guilty of false teaching in its public statements, rightly understood, on church fellowship, close communion, and joint prayer. That the WELS has a partnership in worship and ministry only within its fellowship does not deny the Christianity of members of other church bodies nor deny the presence of the Gospel there.

In Pastor Gruen’s response on May 9<sup>th</sup>, he did not simply answer “yes” or “no.” Rather, he gave lengthy answers. His answer to the first three questions was basically “no.” The fourth question he agreed with but added this statement, “Would most WELS professors and pastors agree with your statement?” It is uncertain what his proof for this question is or what his point is. His answer to the fifth question was basically “no.” True to form, his answer to the last question was an “I honestly don’t know.” He claims, concerning the WELS doctrinal statements in 1970, that although they were “written by fine evangelical men, these statements came out of a time of battle.” Therefore they are missing an “evangelical balance” and need to be redone.

Pastor Rutschow responded on June 3<sup>rd</sup>. He expressed regret that Pastor Gruen could not simply answer his statements with a simple “yes” or “no.” Pastor Gruen had still not given any good

## The Breaking of Church Fellowship

“sedes” to the praesidium passages on altar and pulpit fellowship to support his position. Pastor Rutschow reminded Pastor Gruen that he had requested these on three prior occasions. He had attacked the WELS doctrine first from emotion then later from the standpoint of difficult applications. He never made his own doctrinal statement based on Scripture, though. To his response to the six statements, Pastor Gruen had added, five questions to Pastor Rutschow regarding what he must teach if he were to remain a WELS pastor. Pastor Rutschow reminded him that he must teach in line with WELS doctrine. Pastor Gruen was given four more questions from Pastor Rutschow to answer. Pastor Rutschow requested that Pastor Gruen prepare answers to these four questions and have them ready for a meeting with the district praesidium following their district convention at the Seminary on June 12<sup>th</sup>. He also urged Pastor Gruen to have his “sedes” passages ready by that time.

An interesting side note should be entered here. At this same time Pastor Rhyne from Immanuel Lutheran in Waukegan, Illinois was expressing similar concerns. Pastor Glen Schaumberg answered his questions in a letter dated June 3, 1996. Pastor Rhyne had an influence on Pastor Gruen throughout the controversy. He resigned from his congregation around this time, but he encouraged Pastor Gruen to be more vocal. Pastor Rhyne, however, was even too radical for Pastor Gruen. Pastor Rhyne later turned to Pentecostalism and faith healing, but his influence on Pastor Gruen is evident.<sup>73</sup>

Pastor Gruen wrote a letter to Pastor Joel Gerlach on June 27, 1996 in response to a letter from the same. In this letter a late development in Pastor Gruen’s thinking can be seen that is noteworthy. It concerns the exegesis of 1 Corinthians 11:17-32. Verse 29 says, “For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing *the body of the Lord* eats and drinks judgment on himself.” The WELS has held that this refers to the real presence of Christ’s body in the bread. Pastor Gruen proposed a new interpretation for this passage to fit his doctrine of church fellowship, especially in communion practice. In this letter he asks Pastor Gerlach to consider “is there any possibility that, when the Apostle Paul wrote ‘the body of the Lord’ in verse 29, he was referring not to the real (sic) Presence but to the body of the Lord known as the *Una Sancta*?” Pastor Gruen still holds to this interpretation, according to Pastor Christie at Faith. His interpretation then is a condemnation of all who hold to a close communion practice because, according to Pastor Gruen, close communion denies the *Una Sancta*. The WELS falls under this condemnation. In

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<sup>73</sup> Hermanson interview, 30 March 2001.

## The Breaking of Church Fellowship

his final letter to the members at Faith following his resignation, Pastor Gruen hinted at this interpretation of 1 Corinthians 11:29 as well.<sup>74</sup> The author of this paper has heard a taped sermon by Pastor Gruen at his new congregation that still promotes this interpretation.<sup>75</sup>

On July 11<sup>th</sup>, the members of the district praesidium had a final meeting with Pastor Gruen concerning this whole issue. In their opinion they had concluded their study and discussion with Pastor Gruen and determined that they had reached an impasse. His doctrinal position was not in agreement with Scripture or the WELS. He was counseled to either change his position or to peacefully resign. Previously, Pastor Gruen had indicated to the praesidium and to the congregation that he would do so if an impasse was reached. They requested that he give them a decision by the end of the weekend.

In this meeting the members of the praesidium presented Pastor Gruen's position, as they understood it. They also expressed concerns about his position. Pastor Gruen was willing to go along with WELS doctrine on church fellowship and teach it to his congregation even when did not agree. They reemphasized their position. WELS pastors and teachers must teach WELS doctrine. Pastor Gruen could no longer hold to his contention that WELS documents deny that faith exists in believers outside of the WELS if he wanted to remain a WELS pastor. He had to renounce his previously written letters for the most part.<sup>76</sup>

On July 14, 1996 Pastor Gruen wrote a letter addressed to President Rutschow. He notified the district praesidium that he would not change his position or resign. He requested a congregational "meeting for the afternoon of August 18 or 25" so that the "praesidium could publicly bring their charges against me for all the members of Faith to hear." Pastor Gruen seems to have never intended to resign. He was slowly forcing the praesidium to remove him from the WELS ministerium. Again, this seems to have been an attempt to make himself appear to be a victim.

On July 17, the district praesidium responded to Pastor Gruen. They again encouraged him to resign immediately because of his differences with the WELS in doctrine. If he chose not to resign, they informed him that they would remove him from the pastor roster of the WELS effective Thursday morning, July 18<sup>th</sup> at 9:00 a.m. This would mean that he would be no longer

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<sup>74</sup> Pastor Gruen's letter to members of Faith Evangelical Lutheran Church, p.6, 19 July 1996.

<sup>75</sup> A paper on this interpretation written by Pastor Gruen is attached at the end, dated 23 March 1998.

<sup>76</sup> A copy of this meeting's outline is attached to the end of this paper due to its importance.

## The Breaking of Church Fellowship

eligible to serve as a pastor at Faith congregation or in any congregation within WELS fellowship.

That same day Pastor Gruen explained to the executive committee that he would not contact the district praesidium to resign or otherwise. He told them that he would be removed from the WELS ministry. If he was removed, he promised that he would then submit his resignation at a Voter's Meeting on July 28<sup>th</sup>. He was encouraged by the executive committee that for the sake of peace and unity among the congregation he should submit his resignation to the Board of Lay Ministry or the Church Planning Council on Thursday, July 18<sup>th</sup>. He took their suggestion under advisement.

On July 18, 1996 at 9:00 a.m., Pastor Gruen was removed from the pastoral ministry of the WELS when he refused to resign. Pastor Rutschow wrote a letter to Dennis Dretzke, the Executive Director at Faith. It explained that the praesidium had twice counseled Pastor Gruen to resign from his office as pastor. The second attempt also gave him a deadline. Pastor Rutschow informed Faith Evangelical Lutheran Church that Pastor Gruen had indeed been removed from the pastor roster of the synod as promised. This was done only after long hours had been taken to resolve the situation. "By Pastor Gruen's own admission it was taken after many hours of study and discussion with him. It was also taken only after both he and we clearly understood one another's position and after he indicated he could not and would not abandon his position." At 6:00 p.m. that same day, Pastor Gruen submitted his letter of resignation to the Board of Lay Ministry.

Dear Members of Faith Ev. Lutheran Church,                      July 18<sup>th</sup>, 1996

As you know I have been meeting with members of our district praesidium concerning the WELS understanding of church fellowship. Despite the efforts of both sides, our discussions have reached an impasse on numerous points. As a result of the impasse, the district praesidium has removed me from the WELS ministerium this morning. Since Faith is a WELS congregation, it is best for me to resign from my ministry effective this evening, July 18, 1996.

I have deeply loved my ministry here at Faith and I am deeply sorry it has come to this point. But each man must follow his conscience and the Holy Scripture to the best of his God-given



## The Breaking of Church Fellowship

ability to understand it. I pray that God will richly bless you all in the coming years.

In Jesus our Savior  
Darald Gruen<sup>77</sup>

The Board accepted his resignation.

The next day, July 19<sup>th</sup>, Pastor Gruen wrote a letter explaining his views to members at Faith in detail. He had written the three previous letters only to fellow pastors. This letter was intended for the people he had shepherded for many years. The letter is similar to his papers to his fellow pastors. He attempted to outline the three areas where he differs from the WELS. He could not use the passages that the WELS uses “as the foundation for our separation from all non-WELS/ELS Christians... Matthew 7:15; Romans 16:17-18; Titus 3:10; 2 John 10 & 11.”<sup>78</sup> He recognized an “impasse on the issue of organists and soloists at weddings and funerals.”<sup>79</sup> He promoted what he called an “evangelical close communion” in place of the WELS practice of close communion.<sup>80</sup> He closed the letter urging each member at Faith to carefully study God’s Word and discuss these issues to come to their own conclusions. He also noted that his wife is totally united with him in this. For their further perusal, Pastor Gruen attached a copy of the WELS doctrinal stance on church fellowship from 1970 and another copy of Professor Brug’s article in the *Northwestern Lutheran*.

On July 21, 1996, the Board of Lay Ministry issued a report on these new developments. In this report they stated, “These last seven days have been perhaps the saddest week in the history of this congregation.” They scheduled an open forum for the next Sunday, July 28<sup>th</sup> “for all adult members of Faith to meet with the District Praesidium for more information about this matter.”

The Board of Lay Ministry knew that such an open forum in this difficult time would be tense. People stood on both sides of the issue. The forum was held at 7:00 p.m. on that Sunday. They issued guidelines for the open forum. The people must address the chair. The chairman must repeat each question from the floor. Each person is allowed one minute to ask his or her

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<sup>77</sup> This letter to the congregation was taken from a report from the Board of Lay Ministry to the congregation dated 21 July 1996.

<sup>78</sup> Pastor Gruen’s letter to members of Faith Evangelical Lutheran Church, p.1, 19 July 1996.

<sup>79</sup> Pastor Gruen’s letter to members of Faith Evangelical Lutheran Church, p.2, 19 July 1996.

<sup>80</sup> Pastor Gruen’s letter to members of Faith Evangelical Lutheran Church, p.3, 19 July 1996.

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question. Everyone will have a chance to ask a question before anyone is given an opportunity to ask a second question. Questions, once asked, are not to be repeated. The open forum will last two hours, 7:00 – 9:00 p.m. The chairman will open and close with prayer and conclude with a message of how painful this is, but how the congregation must move on. The meeting was tape recorded solely for the members who were unable to attend. (No copy of this tape is still available to the knowledge of this author.)

The Board of Lay Ministry opened the forum with these two comments:

The reason the Board of Lay Ministry called this meeting is to have more information provided by our District Praesidium so that we can better understand this matter. Therefore, we will listen to their presentation and then the chairman will entertain only questions, not comments or statements, from those of us here. This is a painful situation and we do not want it to become an open debate and to use up valuable time. Please remember that the matter before us tonight is a doctrinal issue, it is not about personalities.

The Board of Lay Ministry has been entrusted with the duty of overseeing the spiritual well being of the congregation. Therefore, we have been studying this doctrine for several months with our pastors. We would like to report that we are in full agreement with all the doctrines of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, including the doctrine of church fellowship.

The meeting was moderated by the circuit pastor. The people only asked questions as allowed. Pastor Rutschow noted that 30 questions were asked in 90 minutes.

Most of the questions seemed to indicate the people asking them were more on Darald's side of things than on the synod side. However, on my way out of the meeting, a number of people indicated they have been and are on the synod side. The(y) also said they wanted to indicate that during the meeting, but didn't know how to put it in the form of a question. I have since heard from others saying the same thing.<sup>81</sup>

Pastor Hermanson also was present at this meeting. He described the atmosphere as tense. The members of the district praesidium, Pastors Rutschow, Huebner and Jeske, served as a three-man panel. There were two sides: a silent majority that took its cue from Pastor Hermanson and a vocal majority that asked many of the questions as Pastor Rutschow also

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<sup>81</sup> Quote taken from a letter written from Pastor Rutschow to the Southeastern Wisconsin District pastors, dated 07 August 1996.

## The Breaking of Church Fellowship

noted. All the questions were fielded by the district praesidium. Pastor Rutschow explicitly outlined WELS doctrine. Pastor Jeske often showed his empathy for the congregation.<sup>82</sup>

Some people asked where the congregation stood. Could the congregation leave the synod? Faith Lutheran's constitution stated that it could not do so. Others tried to pin Pastor Rutschow down with the question, "Are you calling Pastor Gruen a false prophet?" Pastor Rutschow answered, "To the degree he proclaims false doctrine, he is a false prophet." The congregation members present at the forum responded with a gasp. Another question was asked. "Do our pastors not have the right to study Scriptures and come to their own conclusions?" Pastor Jeske answered that they do indeed have the right to do so. They cannot, however, preach or teach their own conclusions if they differ from WELS doctrine.<sup>83</sup>

The time following the dismissal and resignation of Pastor Gruen was naturally a time for healing. Pastor Hermanson noted that Pastor Gruen had lost a lot of his support by sticking to the bitter end.<sup>84</sup> The congregation, however, still had to move on. In an attempt to facilitate this, the Board of Lay Ministry wrote a brief letter to the congregation on August 6<sup>th</sup>. The letter stated, "We hurt because all of you are hurting. There is not a man, woman, or child here who does not have a knot in their stomach and a tear in their eye." They encouraged each member to study God's Word. "We ask everyone not to make hasty decisions while there is so much pain. We will study these things as a church family, but nothing God-pleasing will be accomplished if we rip this congregation apart. As with all things, Scripture will guide us." The Board of Lay Ministry, the congregation's executive committee and the Church Planning Council all should be commended for the way in which they cared for Pastor Gruen, Pastor Hermanson and especially their congregation throughout these eighteen months. They certainly carried out their calling from God to love his people and guide them through his Word.

Pastor Hermanson also should be commended for his actions throughout this time. He grew in love for his people. He too stood on the firm foundation of Scripture in the face of controversy. He trusted in his God for strength. He was now ready to move on to a new point in the congregation's history. Pastor Rutschow wrote this to the pastors of the district about Pastor Hermanson at this time:

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<sup>82</sup> Hermanson interview, 30 March 2001.

<sup>83</sup> Hermanson interview, 30 March 2001.

<sup>84</sup> Hermanson interview, 30 March 2001.

## The Breaking of Church Fellowship

As most of you know, this has not been easy for Greg and Carol, but they seem to be doing all right. Although Greg did not come under any attack at the open forum meeting on Sunday night, the meeting certainly drained and numbed them. However, I met with both of them for nearly three hours on Tuesday, and they were recovering. They were also looking ahead to calling another pastor..., meeting with leaders and school staff, doing some instructions in the congregation on fellowship, etc.<sup>85</sup>

What happened to Pastor Gruen following his dismissal and resignation from Faith? In 1996 and the years following, 39 family units received peaceful releases to go to Beautiful Savior Lutheran Church in Antioch (71 confirmed members and 28 children). This was a new church that Pastor Gruen started in Antioch. The fact that he started a new congregation so soon afterwards and so close to Faith shocked the congregation.<sup>86</sup> According to Pastor Christie, Pastor Gruen continued to contact some members at Faith, encouraging them to follow him to his new church.

Pastor Gruen submitted his application to the Pastoral Colloquy Program of the LC-MS. An article in the *Antioch News*, a local newspaper, indicated that by July of 1997 he had been accepted into the LC-MS ministerium. It also stated that his new church had a membership of 90 people. They were renting an empty Baptist church at 554 Parkway in Antioch. Pastor Gruen described his membership in this way: "They are independent thinkers who search the scripture for themselves and will not swallow something just because a church body says it." The article also described their worship style. "There is not a formal liturgy. Men do the scripture readings, and during Gruen's absence, people may conduct the service. Men occasionally write sermons and deliver them."<sup>87</sup>

Pastor Gruen moved from his stated doctrinal position during the controversy further from the WELS position in the time that followed. In 1997, as pastor of Beautiful Savior Evangelical Lutheran Church, he wrote an article in a local paper entitled, "Christ banner portrays unity." The article is full of ecumenical overtones. Pastor Gruen explains how the congregation repaired a special, large banner using traces of their own handprints for display outside their church. "The congregation then invited members of Lighthouse, a Baptist congregation using the

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<sup>85</sup> Quote taken from a letter written from Pastor Rutschow to the Southeastern Wisconsin District pastors, dated 07 August 1996.

<sup>86</sup> Hermanson interview, 30 March 2001.

<sup>87</sup> Article in *Antioch News*, "Independent church arises", by Kenneth Patchen, dated 31 July 1997.

## The Breaking of Church Fellowship

same building, to add its handprints as well. The members of Lighthouse accepted the offer and their handprints were added to the banner. . . It is amazing how the Holy Spirit is using this picture of the face of Jesus as an object lesson to portray the unity of the Body of Christ, the holy Christian Church.”<sup>88</sup>

A November 5, 1999 article in the *Antioch News*, entitled “Lighthouse beams hope,” by Michael H. Babicz, is more telling. The article shows how three congregations share one church building, two Baptist congregations along with Beautiful Savior. “If you sat in on the services (of each), you could probably come for 10 weeks before you would notice much of a difference,” Gruen said. “I’d rather focus on all of us being brothers and sisters through the blood of Jesus.” Perhaps, this is more of a sad commentary on Pastor Gruen’s preaching than anything else. The article also spoke of “a joint service of all three congregations.”<sup>89</sup>

On Mother’s Day of 2000, Beautiful Savior Lutheran Church was officially accepted into the Missouri Synod. It has purchased land in the Antioch area and plans on building its own church building in the near future.

What happened to the congregation at Faith Lutheran following the dismissal and resignation of Pastor Gruen? Naturally, there was a period of mourning. Many members had to take time to work out their own personal feelings on the issues. Pastor Hermanson urged the congregation to be patient. He noticed that the congregation seemed to turn the corner when Pastor Gruen started his new congregation. They now were ready to move on, since this action provided closure for the events of the last year and a half. In the fall of 1996, he conducted another Bible study on church fellowship in light of the recent events. Over the next year they issued five calls for a new pastor. Finally, the congregation turned to the Call Committee. Pastor Hermanson asked Pastor Rutschow to seek a graduate with doctrinal soundness. The Lord blessed Faith Lutheran Church with a new pastor, Aaron Christie, a graduate from the Seminary in 1997. Pastor Hermanson credits Pastor Christie for his help. Faith Lutheran had a “renewed identity of what it means to be confessional Lutheran.” Pastor Hermanson also noted

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<sup>88</sup> This article is in the author’s files. He only has a copy and is unaware of the original newspaper.

<sup>89</sup> Article in *Antioch News*, “Lighthouse beams hope”, by Michael H. Babicz, dated 5-11 November 1999.

## The Breaking of Church Fellowship

that the members of Faith learned again to trust in God when their church home was under attack.<sup>90</sup>

God certainly does bless his children. He guided his children at Faith Lutheran through Satan's attacks of false doctrine. He defended them with his sure Word. In a statistical report for the year 2000, the baptized membership was listed at 970, up slightly from the 1993 report. This is true, even in spite of the numerous losses of members throughout the controversy. The congregation's building project, although perhaps stalled slightly during the controversy, is now in full swing. Currently, the building plans are being finalized. The congregation has also decided to add a new staff ministry to help with the youth and evangelism. The author of this paper during his own visits to the congregation in recent years has also observed a deeper commitment to God's Word and a richer understanding of doctrine. More people now attend Bible study than before.

In these events at Faith Lutheran during the years of 1995-1996 the devastating effects can be seen of false doctrine. No false doctrine ever exists alone. It grows and creates other false doctrine. "A little yeast works through the whole batch of dough" (Galatians 5:9). Pastor Gruen moved from a problem with church fellowship to other doctrinal problems including the clarity and authority of Scripture. May our prayer be that God protects his new congregation from further error that clouds the truth of the Gospel!

Yet, these events also show God's grace. He promises to work for the best of his children and here we see that he did. The congregation did not crumble under the stress and now it stands stronger than before firmly on the truth of God's Word. Pastor and members alike have grown in faith in their Savior Jesus and their understanding of God's Word. May God continue to bless his children at Faith Evangelical Lutheran Church! May they always hold firmly to his Word!

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<sup>90</sup> Hermanson interview, 30 March 2001.

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The other letters, documents and papers cited and consulted in this paper are not published or available to the public. Many are personal. Some were correspondences between the praesidium, the pastors and the like. Copies of these can be found in the author's personal files. Please contact him if you would like more information.

I. Q. WHAT IS THE CHURCH?

A. The word "church" is used in 2 basic ways in Scripture.

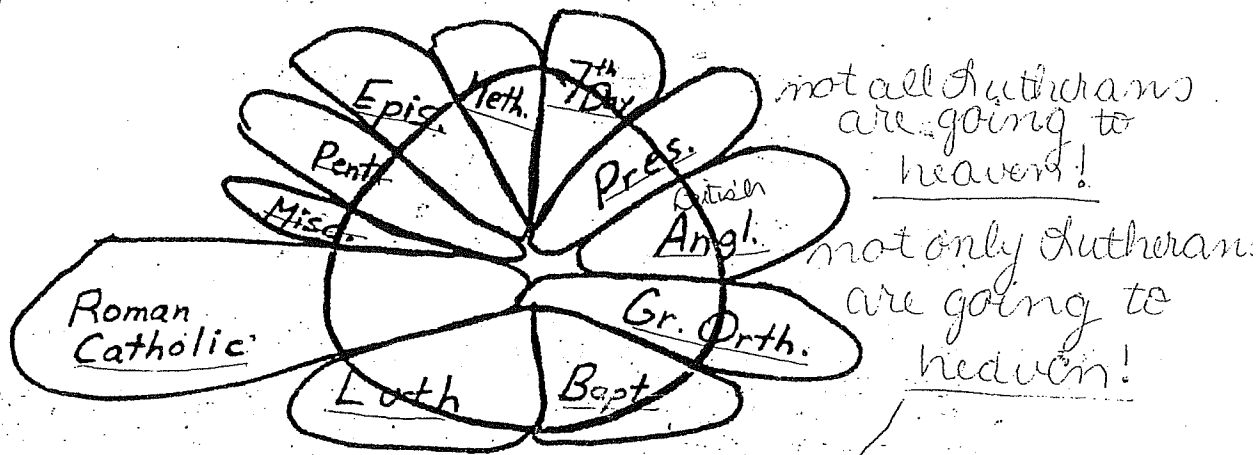
1. The "invisible" church which consists of all truly repentant believers in Jesus Christ. It is invisible because ultimately only God can see faith.

EPHESIANS 5:23&24 For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.

2. The "visible" church which would be a local gathering or congregation of believers. In this sense we can talk about Faith Ev. Lutheran Church. Thus also a "church" can be the building such a group of believers erect for worship.

REVELATION 2:1 To the angel of the church in Ephesus write.

The relationship between the invisible church and visible churches is shown in this illustration.

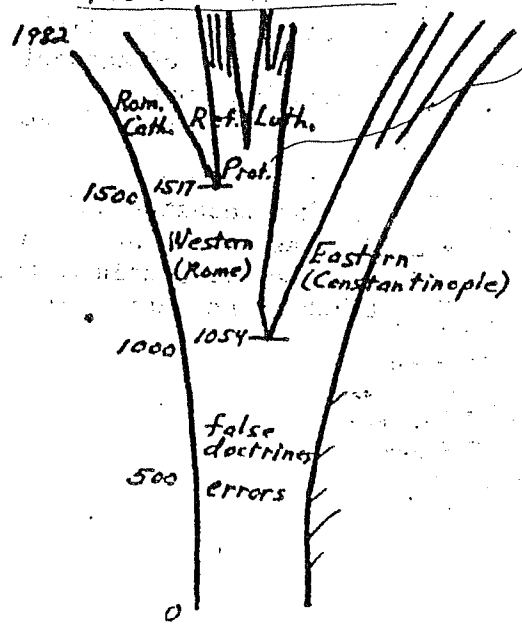


- Note: 1. Not all Lutherans are going to heaven.  
2. Not only Lutherans are going to heaven.

II. Q. HOW DID THE CHURCH BECOME SPLIT INTO SO MANY DIFFERENT DENOMINATIONS?

A. The devil, his demons, and unbelievers worked in the church and split it up by a series of doctrinal and personal conflicts.

The Visible Church



Approximate dates in which these errors were accepted by the church at Rome:

- AD 593 - Purgatory (cf. 1 John 1:7, Lk. 23:42-43)
- " 600 - Mass for the dead
- " 650 - Prayer to the saints (cf. Is. 63:15+16)
- " 650 - Pope head of the church
- " 750 - Saints merits for us
- " 1075 - Priests dare not marry (cf. 1 Tim 4:1-6)
- " 1100 - Money for masses
- " 1190 - Sale of indulgences
- " 1215 - Transubstantiation
- " 1226 - Adoration of host
- " 1303 - Unam Sanctum - one holy
- " 1415 - Cup withheld
- " 1517 - Luther and other reformers
- " 1854 - Immaculate conception of Mary
- " 1870 - Infallibility (papal)
- " 1950 - Assumption of Mary into heaven

transubstantiation  
change substance.

never makes mistakes



PRAESIDIUM MEETING- Darald Gruen  
July 11, 1996

#### Your Position as We Understand It

- You cannot/will not teach WELS "sedes" passages on church fellowship.
- You contend that WELS documents deny the Christianity of believers in non-WELS/ELS churches.
- You do not accept the unit concept of church fellowship as explained to you by the district praesidium.
- You are willing to go along with WELS fellowship practices, but you do not really agree with them
- You cannot envision yourself always serving happily in the WELS because of WELS fellowship principles and practices.
- You have more/new questions on the Sacraments.

#### Our Concerns About Your Position

- "Going along" is going against your conscience.
- If you are not convinced or certain about certain doctrines, you really cannot answer those who might raise questions about them.
- If you are not sure of the way in certain areas, you really cannot show the way for God's people.
- You appear to have left our seminary with unnecessarily harsh views of other Christians that are not and have not been the position of the WELS.
- Your ambivalence has gone beyond asking questions, is widely perceived as attack, and is undermining trust between you and your members and between you and your pastoral brothers.
- You do not appear to know how to maintain a balance between respecting a heterodox Christian's Christianity and yet respecting confessional fences.

#### Our Position

- Pastors and teachers in the WELS will teach "sedes" passages on fellowship and all doctrines.
- Pastors and teachers in the WELS cannot hold to the contention that WELS documents deny the faith of believers in non-WELS/ELS bodies.
- Exceptions prove the rule. They do not destroy the rule.
- Your widely-circulated letters (January and September of 1995) must, for the most part, be renounced.

Received  
3-23-98

### Thoughts on 1 Corinthians 11:29

For the first 21 years of my ministry I believed and taught that Paul's words "without recognizing the body of the Lord" referred to the real presence. But now I firmly believe that Paul was referring to the Una Sancta when he spoke of the "body." I believe that for at least three reasons.

- 1) Look at the critical apparatus in your Greek Bible. There are two variant readings which are fairly well attested to (the other is found in only one manuscript). Of the two variants it seems to me that "to soma" is much more likely to be correct because it has the better and earlier manuscripts on its side and because it would be much easier for a copier to automatically add "tou kuriou" from verse 27 rather than to eliminate it. Now, if indeed the reading is "to soma", then there is little doubt that Paul is referring to the Una Sancta in verse 29.
- 2) When Paul is talking about the Real Presence in the sacrament, he (always?) says "the body and the blood of the Lord" as he does in verse 27. Why does Paul leave out "and the blood" in verse 29? I believe that Paul does not do this to save paper or as a literary device (the part for the whole). I believe that Paul leaves out "and the blood" because he is not referring to the Real Presence in this verse but rather the Una Sancta, the body of Christ. If indeed he were speaking of the Una Sancta, how could he have said it any clearer?
- 3) The entire context of this chapter (and, yes, even the entire book) is a plea for the Corinthians to recognize the unity which God has given to them in the Una Sancta. He is pleading with them not to be divided up into all their various factions.

Thus I believe that Paul is really saying, "You Corinthians are desecrating the sacrament. When you come together, you aren't really celebrating the Lord's Supper, at least not in the way the Lord intends. Each of your groups refuses to eat the Lord's Supper with the others. Each of your groups wants to prove that they are the superior, the more correct, Christians. Watch out! Whoever eats and drinks the sacrament in an unworthy manner is sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. Examine yourselves! Check your motives! If you are eating and drinking in order to show that you are the superior Christians, if you are using the sacrament as a factional (denominational) weapon, then you are eating and drinking judgment on yourselves, not recognizing the Una Sancta. And as long as you do not honestly recognize the Una Sancta, you shall experience spiritual weakness (the least affliction), spiritual sickness (the medium affliction), or even spiritual death (the greatest affliction)." And I believe that that is what is happening in the WELS today. I also believe that the WELS misunderstands and thus misuses 1 Corinthians 1:10-12 and 1 Corinthians 10:17 and has them say exactly the opposite of what Paul intends. He is pleading for them to recognize that God has already made them one in Jesus even if they don't always think alike. They are one, now they should act as one. Instead the WELS turns these verses around to say that unless you think as one, you are not one. Though the WELS gives lip service to the Una Sancta, by its conduct it effectively denies the Una Sancta's existence except as an abstract concept.

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