

Church and Change: A History

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What is wrong with the WELS? By the grace of God the WELS has managed to hold on to the pure doctrine of justification. By the grace of God the WELS firmly confesses the three solas: sola scriptura, sola gratia, and sola fide. By the grace of God the WELS still subscribes to the Lutheran Confessions with a quia subscription. Despite the doctrinal soundness of the WELS, this synod is not growing by leaps and bounds. In fact, the synod is shrinking. What is wrong with the WELS? God's Word definitely is not the problem in the WELS. If there is a problem in the WELS, the problem is with the human beings involved in the WELS. The following is a history of an organization that seeks to do everything humanly possible to make sure that the human beings in the WELS avoid being the problem. The following is a history of an organization that seeks to do everything humanly possible to reach the changing culture of the world with the changeless power of God that is the gospel. This is a history of "Church and Change."

In 1995 several WELS pastors and leaders identified a need. People needed to talk. People needed to talk openly, frankly, and constructively about the current happenings in the WELS. The normal avenue for discussion among the leaders in the WELS had always been pastor's and teacher's conferences. In the eyes of some, however, the pastor's and teacher's conferences were not addressing what they believed to be the biggest concerns in the WELS. So in September of that year Dr. John Johnson—who at that time taught at Wisconsin Lutheran

College and also worked with Wisconsin Lutheran Child and Family Services, and Mike Pfeifer—who at that time was serving at St. Mark, Green Bay, decided it was time to address that need. They invited approximately thirty WELS pastors and leaders “who were known to have implemented creative approaches to ministry in the areas of outreach and discipleship”¹ to meet at Wisconsin Lutheran College. Also among those invited to the meeting were synodical officials Karl Gurgel, the synod president at that time (who was unable to attend) and Wayne Mueller, the vice president of the synod.² About twenty men in all were able to attend the meeting.³ This group of men talked about the concerns they had about the synod at that time. These concerns ranged from the doctrine of the roles of man and woman to people’s reaction to the amalgamation of the synodical schools.⁴

Underlying everything, however, was a concern for the loss of souls that the synod had been experiencing over the past several decades. Negatively speaking, the group noticed that for one reason or another people were slipping out of the back door of the synod. They discussed whether or not the WELS was keeping up with the rate of change in the culture around it. Positively speaking, they discussed innovative ways of penetrating society with God’s Word.⁵ They shared their ideas and what they had implemented in their own ministries. Dr. Johnson described the tone of the meeting in this way:

It really formed as more of a support group for those trying new things. I recall many expressing the hurt they had felt from those who would criticize them and call them ‘liberals’ and charge them with false doctrine when there was none. The group shared ideas about how we could reach the lost, reach our own youth who were leaving the WELS and still are, [and] how we could engage our laity in substantive ministry and to do this without compromising our doctrinal beliefs.⁶

¹ Kelm, personal interview.

² Pfeifer, phone interview.

³ Johnson, email to the author.

⁴ Pfeifer, email to the author.

⁵ Pfeifer, phone interview.

⁶ Johnson, email.

The meeting lasted for an entire afternoon and evening. The tone of the meeting remained positive, but at the same time ideas were shared and discussed openly and frankly. The following morning the group gathered together for worship and communion before they returned home. At that time Johnson and Pfeifer had no plans to hold another meeting.⁷

Over the next couple of years there were no more meetings directly connected to this first meeting. However, as the men continued to cross paths with each other, they decided that more meetings like the one in 1995 would be beneficial.⁸ Eventually, John Johnson and Mike Pfeifer organized another meeting under the name “Church and Change.” The first “Church and Change” meeting, or conference, was held in Green Bay in 1998. The goal of this meeting was similar to the goal of the first meeting in 1996. The idea was to provide an environment where people could come and openly discuss their ideas for ministry. While the goal was to have open and frank discussions, they wanted to avoid too much negativity against innovative ideas, so attendance at the first couple of conferences was by invitation. Anyone was welcome to come to the conference, but in order to promote a positive atmosphere for discussion and due to lack of money they did not advertise the conferences widely.⁹

The name “Church and Change” was developed by Mike Pfeifer. He had heard of an organization from the American Lutheran Church (ALC) named “The Changing Church.” He recognized the problems with that name in its current form and its association with the ALC, but also realized that the goal of this fledgling organization had to do with the church and how it

⁷ Pfeifer, phone interview

⁸ *ibid.*

⁹ Witte, personal interview.

dealt with the cultural changes around it. Eventually he settled on the name “Church and Change” and used it to advertise the conferences.¹⁰

The next three conferences—in 1998, 1999, and 2000—were relatively small, with thirty two people attending the 2000 conference.¹¹ At this time “Church and Change” was still an informal, grass roots organization. Not much information was saved or remembered from the 1998 and 1999 conferences.

However, the 2000 conference provides an example of what the early meetings of “Church and Change” were like. The 2000 conference was held in Green Bay on November 8 and 9. The participants had been asked in advance which four of about twenty possible topics they would like the group to discuss. The topics for discussion chosen by the participants in 2000 were: Adult Spiritual Growth/Bible Study; Worship; Ministering to and with 20’s and 30’s; and Family Ministry. The sessions that year were led by Pastor Scott Spaulding from Bloomington, Dr. John Bauer from WLC, Marty Wolf, and synod administrator (at that time) Jerry Kastens. These men led the discussions on the first day. Pastor Dan Koelpin, World Mission Administrator, started the second day off with a Bible and Breakfast time, and the conference was closed with a worship/communion service led by Pastor Ron Muetzel of Trinity Lutheran in Bay City, MI.¹²

Up to this point in 2000 “Church and Change” did not have an official connection to the WELS besides the fact that it was comprised of all WELS members. However, ever since 1998 Bruce Becker (Administrator for WELS Parish Services) had been attending the conferences. He saw the value of “Church and Change” and its desire to reach people with the gospel. He also was concerned that “Church and Change” was becoming a separatist organization. He felt that if

¹⁰ Pfeifer, phone interview.

¹¹ Pfeifer, email.

¹² *ibid.*

he could get Parish Services involved it would help keep “Church and Change” connected to the rest of the WELS.¹³

So in 2001 Becker applied for a Forward in Christ grant that would fund “Church and Change” Conferences for three years. The official purpose for this grant money totaling \$64,000 is explained on the grant application:

There is a need for and opportunity to network WELS congregations who are already pioneering new and unique methods (paradigms) for sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ. These congregations see nurture, not as an end itself, but the means for reaching out to others. These congregations are not satisfied with just feeding and re-feeding the same sheep. They want to feed the hungry and starving sheep in their congregations. These congregations want to see sheep producing sheep; i.e. sharing Jesus with those who don't know him. To coordinate paradigm pioneering and avoid duplication of efforts, we desire to network these paradigm pioneers.¹⁴

“Church and Change” was the vehicle to network these congregations and “pioneers.”

Right around the time the Forward in Christ grant was received, Mike Pfeifer stepped down from his leadership position in “Church and Change.” Bruce Becker then approached Steve Witte, a pastor in Green Bay who had been increasingly more involved in “Church and Change,” to take the lead in using the grant money to set up conferences for the next three years (2001-03). Witte agreed to take on this task and he and Pastor Scott Spaulding coordinated the conferences for the next three years.¹⁵ “Church and Change” was still not officially a part of the WELS, but Parish Services, through Bruce Becker, was closely involved with its efforts.

For Witte the objective was clear. Gather together a group of people who were looking for ways to reach more lost souls.¹⁶ The conferences were still by invitation only, but with the added funds Witte and Spaulding could invite more people. In 2001 fifty people attended. In 2002 one hundred fifty and in 2003 one hundred eighty people attended. The basic prerequisite

¹³ Becker, personal interview.

¹⁴ *Forward in Christ Mission Team—Proposal Review Form*

¹⁵ Witte, personal interview.

¹⁶ *ibid.*

for attending the conferences in those years was that the invited person had tried ^anew a method in their church recently, whether it failed or whether it was successful.¹⁷

Starting in 2001, Witte and Spaulding altered the conference agenda from what it had been in previous years. This is only natural considering the conference had access to more money, was met with more interest, and was more organized than it had been in the past. By 2002 the conference had a keynote speaker who would address the main topic. Then there were breakout groups to provide ideas and provide forums to discuss those ideas in different areas of ministry.¹⁸

Despite its growing popularity, “Church and Change” was still an informal organization. Witte and Spaulding had been doing most of the coordinating for the conferences. By the end of the 2003 conference all of the grant money had been used up. Decisions had to be made about the future of “Church and Change.” Many people wanted to see it continue, so Witte and Spaulding were asked to gather some names of people who would be interested in serving on a board for “Church and Change.”¹⁹ They decided it was time for them to take a step back from their leadership roles and focus on their own congregations, so they suggested several names and over the course of a few transitional meetings at WLC “Church and Change” once again changed hands.²⁰

The hands into which “Church and Change” fell were the organizing board of directors. This board included Rev. James Aderman, Rev. Ronald Ash, Dr. John Bauer, Rev. Bruce Becker, Sharon Buck, Rev. John Huebner, Sarah Owens, Daryl Raabe, and Barry Spencer.²¹ These men and women established THE CENTER FOR CHURCH AND CHANGE, INC. They

¹⁷ Becker, phone interview.

¹⁸ *Church and Change Agenda*. 2001-2003.

¹⁹ Ash, personal interview.

²⁰ Witte, personal interview.

²¹ *Prospectus*.

developed the Articles of Incorporation and the Bylaws of the Center for Church and Change, Inc.²²

The reorganized and current “Church and Change” has the following purpose and goals:

The Corporation’s purpose shall be, in cooperation with the Board for Parish Services of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, to provide opportunities for sharing relevant and innovative methods of carrying out Gospel ministry. These purposes of the Corporation are to be accomplished through the following goals:

- (1) By promoting the spiritual growth of Christians by helping them grow in their relationship with their Lord;
- (2) By understanding the diversity of our American culture and by applying practical methods for sharing the Gospel through relevant ministries to the member of those cultural groups;
- (3) By providing a forum for the exchange of ideas to empower Christians to explore and use relevant methods of Gospel ministry by promoting Christian love, freedom, the Universal Priesthood of all believers and a passion for evangelistic outreach in their communities;
- (4) By hosting conferences, symposia, and forums which bring together Christians from around the world to advance understanding and knowledge in areas of investigation relevant to the Corporation’s purposes;
- (5) By offering classes, workshops, or other educational services which benefit Christians who seek to know God better, gain a greater understanding of humans and human interactions, and find better ways of bringing the Gospel to an unregenerate world;
- (6) By providing electronic and printed resources to promote the access and exchange of creative and innovative ministry ideas, and to connect people for the purpose of sharing information, building synergy with other ministries, develop practical solutions to ministry problems, offer encouragement, build up the body of Christ, and inspire faith and action through the Gospel.²³

Initially, the board of directors considered officially connecting itself with the WELS as a para-synodical organization. The proposal was: “The steering committee recommends to the WELS Conference of Presidents that ‘Church & Change’ be received as an independent, para-synodical organization in partnership with WELS Parish Services.”²⁴ The Board for Parish Services (BPS) recommended that this partnership not take place. Bruce Becker summarized the BPS’s rationale in an email to the “Church and Change” Steering Committee Members:

²² *Proposal and Organizational Plan.*

²³ *Articles of Incorporation.*

²⁴ *Proposal and Organizational Plan.*

The BPS response to C&C flowed out of discussion on basically one key issue—C&C as a separate entity. I'll try to summarize the thoughts expressed:

- 1) The mission, vision, and objectives of Church & Change are essentially the same as those of WELS Parish Services. Although C&C has a narrower focus, that narrow focus is still a part of the overall mission, vision, and objectives of Parish Services.
- 2) As such, creating a separate WELS-related organization with essentially the same mission, vision, and objectives could be confusing and create misperceptions about C&C's intent in becoming an independent organization.
- 3) There were also questions about how the "partnership" between C&C and BPS would function practically. The questions centered on whether this would be a true partnership or one in name only?²⁵

Even though "Church and Change" is not officially under the umbrella of the WELS, the WELS sees the value of the organization. The Administrator for Parish Services Bruce Becker wrote:

Church and Change is a grassroots organization comprised entirely of WELS pastors, teachers, staff ministers, and member leaders. The biennial conferences are one of very few opportunities in WELS that bring together congregational leaders, both public ministers of the gospel and member leaders, from all over the synod to learn from one another and to discuss congregational ministry. The aspect of Church and Change that I've most appreciated is that it provides a forum for WELS leaders to have open and honest dialogue on differing perspectives of ministry methods and approaches. Church and Change offers a valuable service to WELS with its focus on bringing the changeless gospel to a changing world.²⁶

As was stated in the goals above, "Church and Change" currently carries out its purposes mainly through the conferences and the website. Since "Church and Change" has been formed into a non-profit organization it has held two conferences—one in 2005 and one in 2007. The basic concept for the conferences is the same as it has always been. The conferences are intended to bring likeminded people together for the opportunity to speak about ministry openly, honestly, and constructively. However, since 2005 "Church and Change" has formally invited every congregation in the WELS to participate in the conferences.²⁷ They encourage everyone to

²⁵ Becker, e-mail message to the Church & Change Steering Committee members.

²⁶ Becker, email, December 17.

²⁷ Ash, personal interview.

attend who wants to be exposed to, learn about, and discuss innovative forms of ministry. They also encourage those with questions about “Church and Change” to attend the conferences.²⁸

The 2005 conference was held in Middleton, WI, from November 9-11. The conference offered sixteen workshops “that provide practical information that will help you impact our culture with the gospel.”²⁹ The keynote address was given by Dr. Leonard Sweet. He shared “his research on the culture in which we live so that we might better understand how to design our own gospel ministries to reach the lost and nurture believers.”³⁰

The 2007 conference was held in Milwaukee, WI, from October 15-17. Thirty workshops were offered³¹ to the 280 attendees of the conference.³² WELS member and executive consultant and advisor John Di Frances was the keynote address speaker. He offered some breakthrough thinking on how the WELS can have a greater impact on the world around it.³³

The organizational structure of “Church and Change,” the support it has received from those who attend the conferences and the unending desire of the organization to reach new souls with the gospel gives the impression that “Church and Change” is going to continue to be a helpful organization working along side the WELS for years to come. However, it hasn’t happened without its struggles. There were the normal struggles that go along with a grass roots organization. “Church and Change” had to struggle to reach the point where it could be effective and reach people. Part of that process involved getting to know those who were doing innovative ministries and then bringing those people together.³⁴

²⁸ Kelm, personal interview.

²⁹ 2005 conference brochure.

³⁰ *ibid.* p. 7.

³¹ 2007 conference brochure.

³² Ash, personal interview.

³³ 2007 conference brochure.

³⁴ Ash, personal interview.

There have been other struggles as well. People unfamiliar with “Church and Change” have struggled over the name: “Church and Change.” Some have struggled with the innovation that “Church and Change” promotes. Some have shown concern over the idea that methods and cultural information can be gleaned from speakers who are outside of the fellowship of the WELS without violating fellowship.³⁵

To thoroughly analyze the controversies involved with “Church and Change” is not the concern of this paper. That discussion would be more appropriate in a face to face meeting of those who have concerns about “Church and Change” and the leadership of “Church and Change”—especially since these concerns remain for many. As for the struggles, “Church and Change” welcomes discussions concerning the validity and usefulness of methods and ideas. They place their trust in the gospel as the power of God. They are concerned not about a changing gospel because the gospel is changeless. They are concerned about the church in a changing culture and how God’s people can reach as many people as possible with that changeless gospel.³⁶ Steve Witte put it this way: “We need a voice to say, ‘Let’s not get crazy.’ We need the fellowship, the doctrine. We also need the voice that says, ‘Let’s get the message out there.’ Confessional Lutheranism has to be more aggressive at getting the message out there.”³⁷ “Church and Change” sees itself as an organization that brings innovative people together to share ideas of how to get that message out there.³⁸

The history of “Church and Change” is not a history of distrust in the Word of God. It is not a history of the abandonment of Lutheranism. The history of “Church and Change” is a

³⁵ *ibid.*

³⁶ *ibid.*

³⁷ Witte, personal interview.

³⁸ website.

history of an organization that seeks to do everything humanly possible to reach lost souls in this ever changing world with the changeless gospel.

For a balanced paper you should have contacted some of those who have expressed concern about some aspects of this organization.

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