

HISTORY OF THE LMS-USA

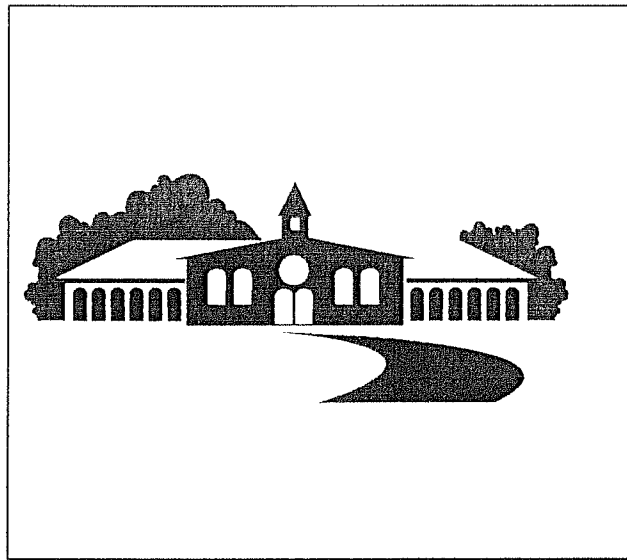
by

David Fleischmann

Prof. Korthals

Senior History

April 29, 2001



This paper will be covering the brief history of the Lutheran Ministerium and Synod - USA (LMS-USA). The LMS-USA is a small synod of Lutheran churches and ministerium of Lutheran pastors that was formed in 1994 (or 1995 depending on which event you want to use to mark the official birth day for the Synod). This paper is being written from a conservative point of view and will reflect the opinions and doctrines of the author, a student at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, a seminary that trains pastors for the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod. Therefore many of the doctrinal comparisons will come from that point of view. Before I begin writing this paper, I would like to thank the LMS-USA for providing an excellent and thorough web site that was used extensively in researching this paper. On the web site is contained their official publication, "Table Talk." I am also indebted to the information provided by Pastor Ralph Spears, the current President of the LMS-USA. My thanks also go to Prof. Forrest Bivens of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary for providing insight of somebody who has attended some of their conventions as an observer.

### **WHAT IS THE LMS-USA?**

The LMS-USA is a ministerium and synod of congregations who arose originally out of concern over the direction that was being taken by the AALC (American Association of Lutheran Churches). The concerns will be discussed later. They describe themselves as "moderate conservative"<sup>1</sup> (this term will also be explained later). The way that they describe themselves is "a 'coming together' of those who will covenant to 'walk together'

---

<sup>1</sup>"Announcing the LMS-USA!", Table Talk, Vol. 2, No. 2, - May, 1995, taken from the web site, <http://www.lmsusa.org/tt-5-95>.

through the 'signing under' of a series of doctrinal statements."<sup>2</sup> They also have an ongoing forum for theological discussion. They do this by meeting annually both in a theological forum and separately as a synod. In these meetings, they discuss theological issues.

When the LMS-USA describes itself, they emphasize that they are Biblical, Confessional, Evangelical, Liturgical and Congregational.<sup>3</sup> The first congregations of the Synod were in Wisconsin, Indiana, and Pennsylvania. The 1998 Yearbook for the LMS-USA listed congregations in Indiana, Minnesota, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin.<sup>4</sup> The backgrounds for the pastors seems to be varied among a number of Lutheran Synods and independent Lutheran churches. To further get an idea of the size of the Synod, the 1998 Yearbook lists the membership in the LMS-USA as 446 Baptized and 339 Confirmed members. When asked if there were any updates on those numbers, the President of the Synod informed me that the numbers were not tallied exactly.<sup>5</sup> The rest of this paper will look at the historical development of the LMS-USA. Then it will proceed to the doctrinal development. Finally, this paper will give this author's assessment and summary of the LMS-USA.

The LMS-USA can trace its official beginning back about six years. However, if you trace their roots back farther than their official beginning, I don't feel that they would

---

<sup>2</sup>"Introduction to LMS-USA" from the LMS-USA web site, [www.lmsusa.org](http://www.lmsusa.org).

<sup>3</sup>"Who We Are" from the LMS-USA web site, [www.lmsusa.org](http://www.lmsusa.org).

<sup>4</sup>"Lutheran Ministerium and Synod 1998 Yearbook." This was the latest yearbook that I was able to locate.

<sup>5</sup>Rev. Ralph Spears, e-mail correspondence, 4/18/01.

hesitate to have their Synod associated with many of the former Lutheran synods. In fact, when asked if there was any synod that you "would feel strongly that you have close ties to and any that you would say that we in no way resemble this particular synod," Pastor Spears answered that he felt that they were similar to all true confessing Lutheran bodies - yet different from the Old Ohio Synod and the old Illinois Synod."<sup>6</sup>

The beginning of the LMS-USA can be traced back to a couple meetings of the Indianapolis Conference of the AALC.<sup>7</sup> It all began in the spring of 1993 when the pastor of St. Matthew Lutheran, Indianapolis, Indiana and the pastor of Christ Lutheran, Chetek, Wisconsin were put into contact with each other. Both were concerned with the direction that the AALC had taken. Soon thereafter, they were contacted by the pastor of Community Lutheran Church, McAllister, Wisconsin. All of these pastors had concern over the direction that the new AALC theological seminary had taken.

These three pastors plus a few others with similar concerns met together in Janesville, Wisconsin on October 7, 1993. At this meeting, the papers presented reflected a concern over the direction that the AALC was going - namely that they were trying to bring together the Orthodox, Evangelical, and Charismatic Lutherans under one roof. These pastors and some others joined together in a joint effort to steer the AALC back to a confessional Lutheran direction. Their efforts failed. They had tried to get the pastors of the AALC together to discuss concerns. They worked to keep a professor that held neo-Orthodox views from being nominated to the new AALC seminary.

---

<sup>6</sup>E-mail correspondence with Pastor Ralph Spears, 4/18/01.

<sup>7</sup>Much of the information to follow is taken from the web site [www.lmsusa.org](http://www.lmsusa.org). It is taken from the page "A Brief History of the LMS-USA."

After the June, 1994 Convention of the AALC, which showed that the AALC was not going to be reformed in any way, five pastors joined in a conference which became known as the First Indianapolis Conference on Biblical Inerrancy. This meeting took place in Indianapolis, Indiana in August, 1994. One of the LMS-USA subscription documents came out of that conference, "The Annotated Indianapolis Statement on Holy Scripture." In January of 1995, the first of the future LMS-USA congregations began to withdraw membership from the AALC followed soon by some others. At the April, 1995 meeting of the Second Indianapolis Conference, the decision was made to begin a new church body which eventually became known as the LMS-USA.

The founding fathers of this synod are men by the name of Rev. Ralph Spears of St. Matthew Church in Indianapolis, Indiana, Rev. John Erickson, Christ Lutheran, Chetek, Wisconsin, and Rev. Roy Seward of Faith Lutheran and Barley Lutheran, Altoona, Pennsylvania. These men may well be remembered just as we remember and praise God for the founding fathers of our Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (Muehlhauser, Goldammer, Bading, Reim, Fachtman, etc.). In fact, the parallels in beginning size are quite remarkable when you compare the beginnings of the Wisconsin Synod and the LMS-USA.

The original name adopted at the Second Indianapolis Conference (which met and organized on April 24-25, 1995) was the Lutheran Synod and Ministerium. Their publication puts it this way: "The steering committee moved to form a new Lutheran church body, the Lutheran Synod and Ministerium - USA."<sup>8</sup> By August of 1995, the

---

<sup>8</sup>Taken from the LMS-USA web site, [www.lmsusa.org](http://www.lmsusa.org), "Table Talk - Vol. 2, No. 2 - May, 1995.

decision had been made to make a slight name change from the Lutheran Synod and Ministerium to the Lutheran Ministerium and Synod - USA.<sup>9</sup> This name change was made because there was a student group who was using the letters LSM-USA (the Lutheran Student Movement - USA). Although the student movement did not incorporate these letters, the LMS-USA decided that, in a spirit of good will, they would use the slightly altered name.

The original group initially subscribed to:<sup>10</sup>

1. The Three Ecumenical Creeds
2. Luther's Small Catechism
3. The Unaltered Augsburg Confession
4. The Indianapolis Statement on Holy Scripture

Since that time the pastors and congregations have signed on to more confessions of faith. These were used as a starting point for those who wished to walk together both as pastors and a synod.

This list has expanded over the few years that the LMS-USA has been in existence.

The subscriptional documents are now:

1. The Indianapolis Statement on Holy Scripture
2. The Deerfield Statement on the Lutheran Confessions (adopted in 1998)<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup>www.lmsusa.org "Table Talk - Vol. 2, No. 3 - August 1995.

<sup>10</sup>www.lmsusa.org, "Table Talk - Vol. 2, No. 2 - May, 1995.

<sup>11</sup>"The Deerfield Statement on the Confessions" states that the LMS-USA congregations believe, teach, and confess all of the Lutheran Confessions that are contained in the Book of Concord of 1580 "because they are (quia) the presentation and explanation of the pure doctrine of the Word of God and a valid summary of the faith of the Lutheran Church, and recognizes them as normative for theology." This can be found on their web site,

3. The Constitution of the LMS-USA

4. The Statement on the Holy Spirit and His Proper Work<sup>12</sup>

The Lutheran Ministerium and Synod experienced some moderate growth in its earliest years and appears to have suffered some minor setbacks in the late 1990's (as many synods who have been searching to be confessional have over the years - e.g. our Wisconsin Synod over the Protestant Controversy and the results of that). Currently, Pastor Spears reports<sup>13</sup> that there are 20 pastors (eight of them are subscriptional pastors - this term will be explained later). Five of the pastors are chaplains, two in graduate school and three others in special service. There is also one lay minister who is informally taking courses working towards ordination. There are currently about eight congregations. These ministers are from quite a variety of backgrounds in other church bodies ranging from the American Synod, the Missouri Synod, and ULCA (later LCA). None of the current ministerium ever served a congregation in the largest Lutheran church body in America, the ELCA.

There are many doctrinal items that will continue to be under discussion in the LMS-USA. There have been items which have been discussed in the theological forum which do not seem to have ever reached the floor of the conventions of the synodical meeting. One such item was a discussion on pro-life. I did ask Pastor Spears about this one item and he responded, "We are not in favor of spending time making statements or

---

[www.lmsusa.com/deerfield.htm](http://www.lmsusa.com/deerfield.htm)

<sup>12</sup>This longer statement again is indicated on the LMS-USA web site at the address previously indicated. The contents of this document will be discussed in greater detail later in the paper.

<sup>13</sup>These statistics are from an email interview with Rev. Ralph Spears, 4/18/2001.

theological pronouncements which are not absolutely necessary... We would let Scripture speak for itself. As we believe that Scripture is pro-life - that is good enough for us."<sup>14</sup>

Another question which comes up when a new synod arises is what will be done for theological training. The LMS-USA tried to get a seminary off the ground, but the initial attempt did not seem to bear any fruit. The idea was to use mentors and to suggest certain texts and methods of study. It originally had three students, but only one continued in the program. Pastor Spears reports that they have searched for accredited and decent seminaries by correspondence. Unfortunately, all of these seminaries are of questionable roots or very expensive. The parallel with our Wisconsin Synod's early attempts to find a good worker training program is quite amazing (even using the mentoring program). This writer sees that as a potential future problem in the Lutheran Ministerium and Synod.

The LMS-USA has established a procedure for congregations and pastors to enter into their fellowship.<sup>15</sup> The procedure is designed to both safeguard the doctrinal positions of the LMS-USA and to expedite the process so that pastors and congregations who have made the bold move to leave another synod will not have to go through a prolonged process to join their fellowship. The pastor that desires to join the LMS-USA must first read, study and reflect on the positions of the LMS-USA. Then he makes application for membership and submits a paper concerning his understanding of the faith. The pastor desiring membership is then interviewed by either the President/ Pastor

---

<sup>14</sup>Pastor Ralph Spears in an email conversation, 4/19/2001.

<sup>15</sup>The process is found on the LMS-USA web site in the November 1996 "Table Talk - Volume 3, Number 4.



of the LMS-USA or one of the other subscribing ministerium members. The pastor then, after recommendation by the visiting pastor and receiving unanimous affirmation and recommendation by the Ministerium Subscribing Pastors, may be granted general membership in the LMS-USA. He must remain in general membership for at least year, and can remain in general membership indefinitely. The pastor in general membership is a non voting member in the LMS-USA, but being in the general membership does afford the pastor "voice, fellowship, and coverage in any LMS-USA plans."<sup>16</sup> During this time of general membership, the pastor is not supervised in any way by any of the LMS-USA officials. After this period of general membership, a pastor may apply for membership in the LMS-USA. The pastor then undergoes a review process. If he clearly agrees with the doctrinal positions of the LMS-USA, he is then recommended to the Steering Committee/ Convention. The pastor then may sign under the doctrinal statements of the LMS-USA showing that he fully agrees with the doctrine of the LMS-USA. Upon signing the subscription document, the pastor immediately becomes a full voting member of the LMS-USA.

The procedure is basically the same for the congregation. Of course, a congregation can't submit individual papers like a pastor can. In place of the paper of understanding the faith the congregation submits information relative to the congregation. In place of the interview, the congregation is visited either by the President/ Pastor of the LMS-USA or another ministerium member.

Each subscribing pastor and each subscribing congregation has one vote in the

---

<sup>16</sup>op.cit.

LMS-USA. It is not necessary that both the pastor and his congregation belong to the LMS-USA. There could be a situation where one or the other belongs while the other one doesn't. All new subscriptional items must be approved by all of the subscribing pastors and congregations. The subscribing pastors and congregations are free to leave the ministerium at any time should they want to do that. All property is held entirely by the congregation, not the synod. The LMS-USA makes a big point that congregations are autonomous and free from the harsh, hierarchical control of the synod.

The LMS-USA uses five words in describing itself: Biblical, confessional, evangelical, liturgical and congregational.<sup>17</sup> By biblical, they mean that they stand solely on the Bible as the inerrant and infallible Word of God. Their wording, even taken from the Indianapolis Statement, shows much the same regard for the Word of God as our own Wisconsin Synod does. For confessional, it was described earlier that they subscribe to the entire Book of Concord because (quia) it is the true exposition of Scripture.

When they get to the definition of evangelical, they vary from our Wisconsin Synod. This is their description of evangelical: "We are in the world, but not of it. We cooperate with other Bible-believing Christians, and share the Sacraments with all who have a right understanding of them. We are mission-oriented." The main emphasis in the LMS-USA is that evangelism lies at the heart of evangelical. In fact, one issue of "Table Talk"<sup>18</sup> is dedicated to evangelism which they seem to consider to be the heart and soul of evangelical. While we in our synod would agree that being evangelical

---

<sup>17</sup>Taken from a separate sheet put out by the LMS-USA.

<sup>18</sup>The issue referred to is February 2000. Vol. 7 No. 1.

includes evangelism, we would disagree that they are so close to being synonymous. Rather, we would say that evangelical is centering everything on the gospel which reflects the love of Christ and the good news (εὐαγγέλιον) that Christ died for the sins of the whole world.

Their phrase (mentioned earlier in the paper), that they "cooperate with other Bible-believing Christians and share the Sacraments with all who have a right understanding of them" also shows a great difference between the Lutheran Ministerium and Synod and our Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod. As part of one of their documents,<sup>19</sup> they say that they practice open communion with any who truly believe that Christ's body and blood are present in, with, and under the bread and wine. The members of LMS-USA are also welcome to commune in other churches. They also say that joint marriages, baptisms, or other joint special events are no problem to participate in. In addition, they do not hesitate in welcoming others from other denominations to preach or speak to their congregations. However, they say that they are "not unionistic nor bent on ecumenicity for the sake of worldly institutional unity."

The same document also asserts that there is no problem with its members belonging to groups such as 4-H, scouts, lodges, etc. as "long as the teachings and practices of any such group do not come into conflict with the teachings of Scripture." This writer feels that this may be one of the biggest problems that will face the LMS-USA in the future. I admire the fact that they want to train their members to recognize error and thus help them out in facing the world. However, there is grave danger in participating in

---

<sup>19</sup>Taken from "Defining Statement #2 - We are A Moderate or Middle Conservative Lutheran Body."

organizations that do not share in the true gospel. Many of the organizations mentioned (especially many of the lodges which are even anti-Trinitarian) teach salvation by works. There is no doctrine that could be more anti-Christian than this one. Any who proclaim a salvation by works deny salvation by grace alone, by Christ alone, through faith alone. That is the crux of the Christian religion. Denying that is denying Christianity.

The next descriptive word that they give to themselves is liturgical. When they say this, they are saying that the historic liturgy, lectionary, and vestments are important to them in their worship. These are tools which to help preserve gospel preaching. In this, we greatly applaud the LMS-USA. The final defining word that they use for their synod is congregational. They say that they support then autonomy of the local congregation against any form of hierarchical control... Yet, their "subscription" holds them accountable to each other under the Word. They say that they congregation is the "right form of the kingdom of God on earth."<sup>20</sup> In order to say this, they must not hold to the same definition of kingdom of God that our Wisconsin Synod holds to. In the Wisconsin Synod, we say that the church (which is where the kingdom of God is found on this earth) is found wherever the gospel is rightly proclaimed and the sacraments are correctly administered. In the LMS-USA synod conventions, they proclaim the Word and administer the sacraments, yet according to their definition earlier, that is not the "right form of the kingdom of God on earth." Their practice seems to be in line with the Wisconsin Synod definition of church even if their official proclamation isn't.

The Lutheran Ministerium and Synod - USA is an interesting little church body.

---

<sup>20</sup>"LMS-USA Constitution" taken from the web site, [www.lmsusa.org](http://www.lmsusa.org).

When we look at this fledgling synod, we can see many parallels to our own Wisconsin Synod. They arose from a group (the AALC) that seems to have departed pretty far from the roots of Lutheranism. They are working hard at coming to the truth in a gospel-oriented way. They search the Scripture to come to their consensus. Do I think that there are dangers in what some of their doctrines and practices are? Obviously, by looking at this paper, you can see that I feel that there are some problems. Can they be overcome? Absolutely, I think they can (especially as this group continues to dig into Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions). They have many strengths going for them. They have a deep love for people. It is very apparent in all of their writings. They have a desire to be true and faithful to God's Word. They have expressed a great desire for mission work (which I did not get into in this paper). From their writings, they appear to be hard workers - working for the truth of God's Word.

What is the future of the LMS-USA? Obviously, I don't know the future. Some things tell me that they will be around for a long time. There is an attractiveness in a synod that is so concerned about people. There is a lack of churches who are in the middle of the liberal and the conservative. Yet, are people looking for that kind of church? That is a question that only time will tell, but I don't see much of that right now. Another major question is training pastors for the future. Most church bodies that go without some formal training seminary end up merging with another for lack of any trained ministers. If another seminary is found, often the people will stay with the synod who operates that seminary.

What can we learn from the LMS-USA? Number one is their great love and concern for people. I expressed in the paragraph above how that is apparent with them. Another

thing to learn from them is their zeal in searching the Scriptures to find their doctrinal statements. So often, we may be tempted to take a short-cut and just look at the Confessions or what somebody else wrote about a subject when we should be thoroughly searching the Scriptures. Another thing that we should learn from the LMS-USA is to be very loving in our insistence on the truth. Truth and love are two things that go hand in hand. It is so easy in this day when so many church bodies are wandering so far from the truth to speak the truth, but not in love. I hope that I have the spirit of the LMS-USA in speaking the truth during the ministry that, God willing, I will soon be called to.

In conclusion, it is my prayer that the LMS-USA find exactly what it is looking for - the truth based on God's holy Word. That is the basis for true unity. That would be the basis that someday we in the Wisconsin Evangelical Synod could someday walk hand in hand with them. However, I don't see that happening soon for the reasons mentioned throughout the paper. May God grant that I am wrong.

## **Bibliography**

Table Talk. Published monthly from May, 1995 to February, 2001 by the Lutheran Ministerium and Synod - USA, Chetek, Wisconsin

LMS-USA web site located at <http://www.lmsusa.org>

Rev. Ralph Spears in two email interviews, April 18 and April 19, 2001.