

How Controversy Strengthened Confessionalism During  
the Early History of the Wisconsin Synod in Green Bay

By David Voss

For Professor E. C. Fredrich

Senior Church History

April 15, 1983

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

## How Controversy Strengthened Confessionalism During the Early History of the Wisconsin Synod in Green Bay

As a young boy brought up in the Wisconsin Synod, it seemed to me impossible that controversy ever existed, or ever would exist, within our synodical family. For a while I had the mistaken notion that because we uphold God's Word as the rule and judge for our doctrine and practice, and because God's Word is inerrant, there should never be any dissension among the members of the Wisconsin Synod.

In time I realized that our synod doesn't enjoy such a utopian existence, that the struggles of the Church Militant take place within our circles, too. While we hate to see serious differences arise at any level--congregational, conference, district, or synodical--the problems in our synod have, in varying degrees, served to reinforce our strong confessional stance. The early days of our synod in Green Bay, Wisconsin bear that out. This paper will treat some of the controversies which arose at that time in Green Bay's Wisconsin Synod churches and the strengthened confessional position which developed in the congregations as a result of dealing with those controversies.

### The Wisconsin Synod Comes to Green Bay

Green Bay is the oldest city in the state, founded as a French trading post in July, 1634. The "citizens" at that time were Indians and Frenchmen. Two Jesuit priests are credited with

bringing Christianity into the area. Claude Allouez conducted the first Catholic mass on Dec. 3, 1669 to a group of Indians. He was joined later by fellow-missionary Jacques Marquette. Thus Catholicism was present in Green Bay almost from the beginning of its official existence and has continued to be the dominant denomination in the city to the present time.

Understandably, Lutheranism didn't arrive in Green Bay until some Germans did. It appears that the first German families moved into the city around 1850. A teen-ager in that group would go on to play a leading role in preserving pure confessional Lutheranism in Green Bay. He is Theodore Kemnitz. Interestingly, he married a Green Bay girl who had come over from Germany on a different ship, but at about the same time. This Theodore Kemnitz-Catherine Simmons wedding, held on July 19, 1857, was the first Lutheran wedding in Green Bay. Although there is no record of who performed the ceremony, it is noted that they were married in the East Side Moravian Church.<sup>1</sup>

The first German settlers in Green Bay formed a local "Lutheran Society" in 1853. Whenever a traveling Lutheran missionary came to the city, services were held in the aforementioned Moravian church. By 1862 the Germans felt they were ready for a more structured religious organization. They met with Pastor Mohldenke, a traveling missionary of the Wisconsin Synod, to request a resident pastor who would serve the Lutherans of Green Bay. The synod responded by sending theological candidate, C. G. Reim,, who arrived in early December 1862.

---

<sup>1</sup> Green Bay Press-Gazette, July 19, 1957.

The congregation organized as the First Evangelical Lutheran Church. Their first service with Pastor Reim was held on the second Sunday in Advent in the East Side Moravian Church. Canvass work began at once. Reim and Mr. Christian Woelz found some forty people interested in a Lutheran church in Green Bay. In January 1863 the members of First Lutheran discussed the possibility of building their own house of worship. A lot was purchased in February, and in an article reporting that purchase, the Green Bay Advocate noted, "The Rev. Mr. Reim, a talented German sent out by the Mission House in Bassel, has accepted the charge, and there are already 75 families who have joined the society." <sup>2</sup> On October 30, 1863 the congregation dedicated its first church.

For the most part, the first two decades of First Lutheran were years of positive strides for Lutheranism in Green Bay. The congregation joined the Wisconsin Synod and accepted the synod's constitution in 1865. The following year a Christian day school was built, and within eight years it had an enrollment of 104. In 1867 a parsonage was added to the property. The only recorded setback for the congregation was the loss of several members in 1873. These people disagreed with the church's opposition to lodge membership. From 1870 until 1876 Pastor C. F. Goldammer served the congregation. "The congregation flourished under Pastors Goldammer and Reim, as did the school. (The congregation) numbered some 200 members...There was promise that soon it could be listed among (the Wisconsin Synod's) largest congregations." <sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Green Bay Advocate, Feb. 18, 1863.

<sup>3</sup> Pastor G. A. Ernst, "25th Anniversary Booklet of St. Paul Evangelical Lutheran Church," quoted in the "Centennial Anniversary Booklet" of St. Paul Lutheran Church and School (1983), p. 4.

## The Controversial Pastor Oppen

The third pastor of First Lutheran was Rev. Carl Oppen. Oppen's years in Green Bay were interesting, to say the least. The information doesn't come from the minutes of congregational meetings. The minutes from 1873-1882 were lost in a fire which destroyed the Christian day school. But brief histories of both First Lutheran and St. Paul congregations, the "Berichte der Wisconsin Synode," and Green Bay newspaper accounts all give clear evidence that Rev. Oppen was not a model minister.

Pastor Oppen arrived at First Lutheran in 1876. Apparently he made a favorable first impression. Records indicate that during the first years of his ministry, First Lutheran continued to grow. Pastor Ernst wrote that Oppen was "a man of fine appearance and great eloquence."<sup>4</sup>

But after a while, Pastor Oppen's ethics became a sore spot with neighboring pastors, with a certain segment of First Lutheran members, and, in time, at the synodical level. The charges made against Oppen between his installation in 1876 and his exclusion from the synod in 1882 cover a number of incidents and developments. One hardly knows where to begin in unraveling the many complaints concerning his conduct. To be sure, the lack of accurate notes from this period of First Lutheran's history makes that unraveling difficult. But the fact that Oppen was constantly getting into trouble also accounts for the difficulty of lining up in chronological order the events which led to his dismissal.

Perhaps a good place to begin is with a Green Bay orphan-

---

<sup>4</sup> Ernst, ibid.

age. It went by the name of Northwestern Orphanage in the mid-1880's, at which time 58 children were cared for there. Pastor Oppen established this orphanage. The date of incorporation is uncertain, but it appears to have opened in the late 1870's.

This orphanage was discussed at the Wisconsin Synod meeting of 1881. That the pastor from Green Bay was running an orphanage was no secret. The report of that 1881 convention states, "Herr Pastor C. Oppen hat, wie schon hinlänglich bekannt, ein solches (this is the first sentence under the heading: "14. Waisenhaus") in Greenbay gegründet." <sup>5</sup> Oppen gave a report to the assembly there in Fond du Lac, noting both the need for such an institution in the Green Bay area and the need for support of it from congregations within the synod. To entice Wisconsin Synod members to help his orphanage financially, Oppen asked for permission to list contributions to it in the Gemeindeblatt. He even requested the synod to appoint a committee which would visit the orphanage regularly and give an annual report. But at this Fond du Lac convention, the synod clearly refused to have anything to do with the management of Oppen's orphanage and was told <sup>Oppen</sup> that all funding <sub>for the orphanage</sub> must come from private sources. But, <sup>Oppen</sup> curiously, the synod did grant the pastor permission <sup>to list any contributions to the institution in the Gemeindeblatt.</sup>

The debate about the orphanage carried over to the next synodical meeting. This was the one held in La Crosse. Pastor Oppen's various indiscretions were brought up at the meeting, but the orphanage discussions will be considered first here. Pastor

---

<sup>5</sup> Berichte der Wisconsin Synode, 1881, p. 60.

Adelberg filed an official complaint against Oppen for synod deliberation. The fifth (and final) point of his complaint reads, "Dazu kommt noch: Die Verwaltung seines Waisenhauses." <sup>6</sup> The 1882 report on Oppen's orphanage was made by an unidentified member of the synod. He alluded to the fact that Oppen himself had purchased "ein schönes Stück Land mit einem grossen, prächtig eingerichteten Gebäude." <sup>7</sup> The orphanage was obviously Oppen's personal possession. When people throughout the Wisconsin Synod raised questions about a pastor being sole owner of an institution, Oppen orally agreed to transfer ownership of his orphanage to a corporate body. But he changed his mind, and it was reported to the synod that "(P. Oppen) werde das Eigenthum nicht aus der Hand geben." <sup>8</sup> Since this was by no means an arrangement which members of the synod could trust, the synod went on record disapproving of Oppen's orphanage ownership.

As was hinted earlier, Pastor Oppen was in hot water for more than just his orphanage. Rev. Adelberg's complaint contained four other points. The complaint stated,

Ich klage hiermit Herrn Pastor Oppen im Namen einer Anzahl Synodalglieder an:

- 1, der offenbaren Lüge, durch falsche Darstellung einer Untersuchung in einer Zeitung von Greenbay;
- 2, des Versuchs, einem wegen Unmoralitäten aus der Missouri-Synode ausgeschlossenen Pastor seiner Gemeinde als Hülfspastor aufzuladen;
- 3, sündlicher Praktiken mit seinem Amt und Beruf, und
- 4, anderer eines Pastors unwürdiger Handlungen.
- 5, Dazu kommt noch: Die Verwaltung seines Waisenhauses. <sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> Berichte der Wisconsin Synode, 1882, p. 76.

<sup>7</sup> Berichte der Wisconsin Synode, 1882, p. 78.

<sup>8</sup> Berichte der Wisconsin Synode, 1882, p. 78.

<sup>9</sup> Berichte der Wisconsin Synode, 1882, p. 76.

These accusations weren't prompted by a personality clash between Adelberg and Oppen. To avoid giving this impression, namely, that Adelberg had a personal vendetta against Oppen;

Zur Begründung seiner Beschwerde hob P. Adelberg hervor, dass sie nicht persönlicher Art sei, sondern dass sei im Namen vieler Synodalglieder geschehe, welche seit Jahren durch P. Oppen's unlauteres Wesen geärgert worden sind.<sup>10</sup>

Brother pastors in the same conference with Oppen had repeated discussions about his conduct with him. But since all efforts to handle his offensive behavior as a private matter proved fruitless, Oppen was now publicly called on the carpet before the synod.

The reference to a public lie in the first point of the complaint concerns a newspaper report of a special congregational meeting at First Lutheran and a letter written to and published by the newspaper. The first article (see Appendix B) was printed in the February 15, 1882 edition of the Green Bay Daily Data. It states that charges were made against their pastor by two members of First Lutheran on Sunday, Feb. 5. Those charges were discussed the following Sunday, at which meeting Wisconsin Synod President J. Bading, Synod Vice-President R. Adelberg, and Prof. A. Hoenecke were present by request of the congregation. The charges listed in this Feb. 15 article explain some of what Pastor Adelberg wrote in his formal complaint to the synod in June. The fourth point of the newspaper report corresponded to Adelberg's second point: Pastor Hoffman had been put out of the Missouri Synod on immorality charges.

---

<sup>10</sup> Berichte der Wisconsin Synode, 1882, p. 76.



Some of the points discussed at First Lutheran Church on Feb. 12, 1882 may seem trivial, perhaps even humorous. (Cf. Appendix B) But taken together, they show that Pastor Oppen was not conducting himself as one who had a divine call to serve as a minister of the gospel. As if those charges weren't enough to quiet him, Pastor Oppen went on--in print, no less!--to claim that they charges weren't substantiated at the meeting. Obviously, someone was lying. Was it the members who raised the charges, <sup>who were lying</sup> or was it Oppen?

The Wisconsin Synod refused to let that question go unanswered. The synod had appointed a committee to investigate Oppen's behavior. The committee members (those present at the Feb. 12 meeting in Green Bay) wrote to the Green Bay Daily Data to refute Oppen's claim that the charges were dropped. This letter, and a note from the two members of First Lutheran who had brought the charges against Pastor Oppen were printed in the March 7, 1882 edition of the Green Bay Daily Data. (See Appendix C) That some additional grievances against Oppen were listed in the letter from the Wisconsin Synod committee (Bading, Adelberg, and Hoenecke--"Haenecky" in the newspaper) is not surprising. No doubt one or more of the synodical representatives took extensive notes at the Feb. 12 meeting and included <sup>much of</sup> the information from those notes in the letter. It should also be noted that part of what these men wrote to the Daily Data was the official decision of the committee.

All of this was discussed at some length in La Crosse that June. A German translation of the March 7, 1882 Daily Data article was read to the assembly. The official committee decision

was read. Also brought up was a series of letters by Oppen and his Green Bay supporters--letters which tried to confuse the congregation and pin the blame on Bading's hasty handling of the affair ("der Vorwurf zurückgewiesen werden soll, als sei der Präses zu schnell vorangegangen.") <sup>11</sup>

Pastor Oppen was given a chance to tell his side of the story to the synod assembly. The synod wanted to know why he had lied to the public through the newspaper in Green Bay. His excuse was that he only gave the information to the reporter from the Daily Data "zur persönlichen Information des Redakteurs, nicht zur Publikation"! <sup>12</sup> Why had he several times earlier denounced the investigating committee's decision as biased and sinful? Oppen had no defense. The report of these discussions about Pastor Oppen offered the following summary of the impression the accused pastor had made on synod members:

Nun trete aber durch sein jetziges Verhalten und Hin and Herwendem aufs Neue die schlüpfrige Art zu Tage, mit welcher er sich immer aus früher stattgefundenen Untersuchungen herauszuwinden gesucht hat; dadurch sie das Vertrauen in P. Oppen vollständig erschüttert worden; selbst das Urtheil derer, die draussen sind, laute ungunstig gegen ihn. Schon das heutige Auftreten allein, wo er vergeblich aus einem Schlupfloch in das andere zu flüchten suche, lasse erkennen, wie unlautes er sei. <sup>13</sup>

With all of this evidence against Pastor Oppen, there was little doubt among the synod's members about what course of action to take. But Oppen had staunch supporters back in Green Bay and one of them now appealed to the synod. The appeal was made

---

<sup>11</sup> Berichte der Wisconsin Synode, 1882, p. 77.

<sup>12</sup> Berichte der Wisconsin Synode, 1882, p. 77.

<sup>13</sup> Berichte der Wisconsin Synode, 1882, p. 78.

in a letter written prior to the convening of the synod in La Crosse, and apparently the letter was withheld from discussion until it was obvious that Oppen was about to be ousted. The appeal claimed, "dass man P. Oppen auf der Synode nicht fair play geben würde." <sup>14</sup> The synod denied the appeal. The denial cited the third point in Rev. Adelberg's grievance: "sündlicher Praktiken mit seinem Amt and Beruf." <sup>15</sup> Pastor Oppen had turned in his resignation on June 4, 1882, just before the synod was to meet. Oppen contended that the resignation was forced out of him and that if the congregation accepted it, First Lutheran members would be guilty of a grievous sin. The synod declared, "Er hat also offenbar ein freches and schändliches Spiel mit seinem Amt and Beruf getrieben." <sup>16</sup> Oppen now realized that he could never extricate himself from his numerous lies and instances of offensive behavior. The synod report states, "P. Oppen wusste hierauf selbst nichts zu erwidern." <sup>17</sup>

At the completion of the discussion, the Wisconsin Synod unanimously decided:

dass P. Oppen wegen dieser erörterten Punkte, erwiesene Lügenhaftigkeit und sündliche Praktiken mit seinem Amt und Beruf, von der Synodal-Gemeinschaft ausgeschlossen werde. <sup>18</sup>

The synod also heeded the request of First Lutheran (apparently the congregation was sure that Oppen would be dismissed) to send a committee to Green Bay to discuss the synodical action taken

---

<sup>14</sup> Berichte der Wisconsin Synode, 1882, p. 78.

<sup>15</sup> Berichte der Wisconsin Synode, 1882, p. 76.

<sup>16</sup> Berichte der Wisconsin Synode, 1882, p. 78.

<sup>17</sup> Berichte der Wisconsin Synode, 1882, p. 78.

<sup>18</sup> Berichte der Wisconsin Synode, 1882, p. 78.

against Oppen. The synod meeting concluded June 15, and the following Sunday, June 18, the committee (Pastor von Rohr, Pastor R. Pieper, and Prof. Ernst) explained the synod's stand.

Looking back on this sad affair some 100 years later, it seems incongruous that anyone could still back Pastor Oppen after many of his shameful activities had <sup>been</sup> brought out in the open before the synod. The charges made by some members of the congregation, Oppen's public lie, his shady orphanage dealings, his false testimony at La Crosse--all of this is conduct unbecoming a Christian, much less a confessional Lutheran pastor. In 1880, apparently fearing<sup>a</sup> synodical inquest into his orphanage, Pastor Oppen arranged to have his brother Alexander (who was the chief fund collector for the Oppen orphanage) serve as the lay delegate from First Lutheran. Then at the 1882 meeting, Oppen had tried to get his congregation's lay delegate, Theodore Kemnitz, disqualified as a delegate. Oppen had no legitimate reason, but he obviously feared that Kemnitz would tell the synod the truth about the pastor's irresponsibility and other indiscretions. But in spite of all his questionable practices, Oppen had his backers. He must have had a most persuasive manner about him and have enjoyed a certain amount of charisma. The Green Bay Globe reported on June 14, 1882:

On account of the alleged indiscretions of Rev. Oppen of this city, that gentleman was excluded from participation in the Lutheran Synod last week at La Crosse. This had the affect to strengthen the ardor of his friends here, who have taken up the cudgel in his behalf more vigorously than ever, and the probabilities are that he will be retained as pastor, though prominent and influential members are quite as strongly opposed to him. 19

---

<sup>19</sup> Green Bay Globe, June 14, 1882.

## Formation of the "German Evangelical Lutheran St. Paul's Congregation"

The future of a congregation is often in doubt when its pastor is dismissed from the synod. So many questions face the members of the congregations. Who is our pastor? Will the synod give us a new man? Should we leave the synod so that we can retain our pastor? No doubt these questions were asked by the members of First Lutheran in Green Bay. Their pastor had been excluded from the Wisconsin Synod. Pastor Oppen had run out of answers to the questions fired at him in La Crosse about his unethical behavior. But, true to form, the controversial pastor had refused to acknowledge any wrongdoing and had also refused to repent. What would the pastor tell his congregation? Perhaps a better question: What could he tell them as a pastor since he had resigned on June 4 and also been dismissed by the synod with which the congregation was affiliated?

It may not be too surprising to learn that the subversive Oppen found a way to retain a flock at First Lutheran of Green Bay. Immediately after returning from La Crosse, Pastor Oppen joined the Ohio Synod. He then urged the members of the congregation (from which he had resigned!) to follow him in switching membership to the Ohio Synod. He was successful. The congregation voted in favor of leaving the Wisconsin Synod. Some members weren't sure about this move. They requested, and received, an eight-week period to think the matter over. By the end of the summer of 1882 most of First Lutheran's parishoners had followed their controversial pastor to the Ohio Synod.

Did Oppen seek affiliation with the Ohio Synod because he supported that church body's stand on the doctrine of election?

This occurred in 1882, the time when the Election Controversy was raging in Lutheranism. The Wisconsin and Ohio Synods were on opposite sides of the controversy. It wouldn't be accurate to say that First Lutheran of Green Bay joined the Ohio Synod strictly because of doctrinal reasons. It would be inaccurate to claim that Oppen joined the Ohio Synod strictly because of doctrinal reasons; one doubts that he really cared at all about confessionalism of any sort. Perhaps the best that can be said is that the combination of the Election Controversy and the persuasion of Pastor Oppen led the congregation to switch synods, with the latter being the dominant factor. In President Bading's annual report to the 1883 Wisconsin Synod convention, he included the Green Bay congregation in a list of three congregations lost to the synod during the year as a result of the Election Controversy. But Bading's failure to mention Oppen's hand in the defection of First Lutheran doesn't necessarily mean that it was a move motivated only by the doctrinal issue. He may simply not have wanted to give Oppen any more publicity.

Oppen wasn't able to sway everybody at First Lutheran. There were several who didn't want to associate with a congregation led by a pastor who caused such great offense. They also wished to remain faithful to God's Word in the doctrine of election. This dissenting group numbered about twenty. A split in the congregation was inevitable.

"Follow me, brethren," one of (the dissenters) cried out during a congregation meeting which supported the sinful behavior of its pastor. Having said that, he and others left the meeting. 20

---

20 Ernst, op. cit.

With this action, they severed their membership with First Lutheran.

The step they had taken was a drastic one. These people had left the church where they had heard God's Word and received Christ's body and blood in the Sacrament of the Altar. They now had no building to worship in nor a resident pastor to serve them. The men who led this "walkout" were Theodore Kemnitz and Louis Neese, the two who had charged Pastor Oppen with a scandalous public life and an improper ministry. These were the charges discussed in the Feb. 12, 1882 meeting at First Lutheran. They had spoken out for the truth, and now they were without a congregation. Kemnitz left behind the congregation of which he was a charter member, the church group he had helped to organize, the church building he helped construct.

But this group was bolstered by the knowledge that they placed more importance on Scripture's pure teachings than on outward organization. These few, relatively poor, Germans remained faithful to God and His Word, and their perseverance was rewarded. They rented a vacant (former Episcopalian) church building in Green Bay and held regular services. The Wisconsin Synod supplied the temporary preachers.

This group of strictly confessional Lutherans who had remained loyal to God's Word, and thus to the Wisconsin Synod, asked the synod for a confessional Lutheran pastor who could serve them full time, and on Dec. 3, 1882 Seminary graduate Ernst Dornfeld was installed. Two weeks later the first official meeting of the German Evangelical Lutheran St. Paul's Congregation was held. In less than three months a Christian day school was begun. (It

had an enrollment of 60 pupils by 1885.)

St. Paul's had its own pastor and teacher, but <sup>had to</sup> ~~only~~ rented church and school facilities. In May 1883 the congregation appointed a building committee. Once again Theodore Kemnitz was in the thick of things. His business partner in a joint planing mill venture was a fellow Lutheran who had come to America on the same boat, Christian Schwartz. These two experienced carpenters headed the construction of St. Paul's church. The Wisconsin Synod provided some financial support for the building. The church was dedicated Dec. 2, 1883.

A little more than a year earlier they had been without a pastor and a church building--now they had both! Most importantly, of course, they were a congregation committed to strict confessional Lutheranism, to the Bible in all its truth and purity. The stormy years of Pastor Oppen's ministry and the Election Controversy squabble had forced them to stand on their own. They survived and the Wisconsin Synod remained alive in Green Bay, scarcely missing a beat. What happened in Green Bay also occurred elsewhere in the synod at that time. In the previously mentioned report to the synod in 1883 on the results within the synod of the Election Controversy, Präses Bading said,

Die dem geoffenbarten Worte der Wahrheit und dem Bekenntniss unserer Kirche treu geliebten beträchtlichen Theile jener Gemeinden haben sich sofort zu neuen Gemeinden organisirt und sind mit gesegnetem Erfolg zu einem neuen Kirchenwesen gekommen. <sup>21</sup>

---

<sup>21</sup> Berichte der Wisconsin Synode, 1883, p. 15.



## First Lutheran Rejoins the Wisconsin Synod

Pastor Oppen didn't remain pastor at First Lutheran too long after taking the congregation with him over to the Ohio Synod. The reason for his leaving the ministry is not recorded. On October 4, 1883 Pastor J. Siegrist was installed by Oppen as First Lutheran's new minister. A translation of the congregation's minutes do note that at this time "Pastor Oppen was accepted as a member of the congregation." <sup>22</sup> It's difficult to determine what this note means. Perhaps it implies that Oppen now became a lay member of First Lutheran, in distinction <sup>formerly</sup> to being her pastor.

It's ironic that no congregational minutes exist for the next period of controversy at First Lutheran. Remember that the minutes of the Oppen years were destroyed in a fire. The minutes from 1894-1911 were lost. A few sketchy notes were gleaned from the Ladies' Aid minutes of those years, and Pastor Siegrist's brief church history provide a few details.

First Lutheran suffered another split in 1908. Since the congregation was founded in 1862-3 only the German language had been used in the church services, Christian day school classrooms, and Sunday School sessions. But English had long since been the prominent language in Green Bay. Now it was the twentieth century and some parents were upset because their children were forced to learn German as the number one language in <sup>the church's</sup> school. The parents of children who didn't attend First Lutheran's day school were upset because their children couldn't understand a thing in

---

<sup>22</sup> "100th Anniversary Booklet" of First Evangelical Lutheran Church, Green Bay, Wis. (1963), p. 14.

the church services.

A group of families wished to have divine services conducted in English instead of German. They left First Lutheran when their wish wasn't granted. This group joined the new Lutheran church in town--Grace Lutheran (presently an ALC member). This separation was the last straw for First Lutheran's Christian day school. The enrollment decreased dramatically when the congregation split in 1882. The biggest reason for the drop in the number of pupils<sup>then</sup> was that the teacher resigned in the confusion over switching from Wisconsin to the Ohio Synod. Now that even more families left the congregation, there were barely enough pupils to warrant holding classes. The school closed in 1910 and wouldn't reopen for almost seventy years.

But 1910 is not a gloomy date in the history of First Lutheran. Why not? It was in this year that the congregation rejoined the Wisconsin Synod. The events which led up to this decision were nowhere near as involved and widely noted as the events which prompted the move to the Ohio Synod in 1882. Apparently the members became fed up with the liberal attitude in the Ohio Synod. Pastor Siegrist simply stated that First Lutheran broke "with the Ohio Synod on account of the unbiblical and un-lutheran practices of some of its officers, and also because no attention was paid to the protests of the congregation against such sectarian practices." <sup>23</sup> First Lutheran chose to seek affiliation with "the honorable Synod of Wisconsin" <sup>24</sup> because the confessional position of the congregation in 1910 agreed in every

---

<sup>23</sup> Pastor J. Siegrist, "The History of the First Ev. Lutheran Congregation of Green Bay, Wis., (1913) (trans. by Mr. Emmel, 1956)

<sup>24</sup> Siegrist, ibid.

point with the Wisconsin Synod.

No doubt the older members of First Lutheran in 1910 saw the hand of the Lord in what had just happened to their church. Liberalism had led her away from confessionalism, away from the Wisconsin Synod, twenty-eight years earlier. Now a reaction against liberalism led her back to a strong confessional position, back to the Wisconsin Synod. The congregation must have realized that in His marvelous grace, God had seen to it that His saving Word was once again proclaimed within her walls. God had used the controversy of the past thirty-plus years to strengthen an appreciation for and commitment to confessionalism in her midst. And by the grace of God alone she has not deviated from that confessional stance since.

From 1910 until the early 1950's the two Wisconsin Synod churches in Green Bay existed--yes, even flourished--in proximity to each other. First Lutheran stood at the corner of Cherry and Van Buren Streets. St. Paul's was located four blocks west and three blocks south at the corner lot of Madison and Stuart Streets. St. Paul's relocated in 1953 and First Lutheran moved in 1957. The churches are once again close to each other on Green Bay's East Side. St. Paul's (Chicago and Clay Streets) is now five blocks east and three blocks north of First Lutheran (corner of Monroe and Lawe).

Those are more than interesting facts. For more than seventy years these congregations--once split by scandalous controversies and doctrinal divisions--have gone about the Lord's business

in harmony, working (for the most part) in the same Green Bay neighborhoods. From 1910 until 1973, when First opened their Christian day school again, St. Paul gladly <sup>accepted</sup> ~~took~~ First Lutheran children at her day school. For more than seventy years the two congregations have upheld the teachings of the Wisconsin, and enjoyed the spiritual benefits of a conservative church body membership.

In 1882 a handful of Green Bay's Lutherans refused to give up the confessional position of the Wisconsin Synod. They weathered serious controversy and the months of existing without any real outward church organization. As a result, the spirit of confessional Lutheranism remained alive in Green Bay. A split thirty years later led many old members and some new ones back to the Wisconsin Synod. The troubles which these congregations experienced in their early years have served to instill a deeper commitment to the pure doctrine which our synod teaches. That commitment has remained in both St. Paul's and First Lutheran to the present. May the zeal for holding on to confessional Lutheranism, no matter what the cost, never leave these--or any--Wisconsin Synod congregations.

## Appendix A.

Rev. Adelberg's Grievance against Pastor Oppen at the 1882 Convention

6. Klage gegen Pastor C. Oppen.

Von Pastor N. Adelberg wurde folgende Beschwerdeschrift der Synode zur Verhandlung vorgelegt :

Ich klage hiermit Herrn Pastor Oppen im Namen einer Anzahl Synodalglieder an :

- 1, der offenkundigen Lüge, durch falsche Darstellung einer Untersuchung in einer Zeitung von Greenbay ;
- 2, des Versuches, einen wegen Unmoralitäten aus der Missouri-Synode ausgeschlossenen Pastor seiner Gemeinde als Hülfspastor aufzuladen ;
- 3, sündlicher Praktiken mit seinem Amt und Beruf, und
- 4, anderer eines Pastors unwürdiger Handlungen.
- 5, Dazu kommt noch : Die Verwaltung seines Waisenhauses.

## Appendix B.

The February  
15, 1882 ar-  
ticle in the  
Green Bay  
Daily Data

**Charges Preferred Against Rev. Carl Oppen by Members of His Congregation.**

On Sunday at the Lutheran church a special meeting was held to consider charges preferred against the pastor, Rev. Mr. Oppen. The charges made by two members of the congregation, Mr. Nesse and Mr. Kemnitz were as follows, as given to a DATA reporter this morning by the accused pastor:

First. That he had told a wilful black lie to Mr. Nesse and the rest of the trustees, some years ago.

Second. That he had shamefully undressed in the presence of two young unmarried men and had acted so scandalously that modesty forbade a mention of the details.

Third. That he had written an article published in the Advocate some time ago in which he said he had been sent for by the emperor of Germany, who gave him a pleasant audience on a recent visit, which story was without foundation.

Fourth. That he had done wrong in offering his pulpit to the Rev. Mr. Hoffman, a minister who had been dismissed from the ministry, and

Fifth. That he had acted improperly in a meeting called after the New Year's service was over.

These charges were first made on Sunday, Feb. 5, at which time it was resolved to investigate them on the 12th, and therefore, according to request, the president and vice president of the synod, and the first theological professor came on and attended the investigation Sunday. Mr. Oppen states that a further charge was made against him Sunday; that of cruelty to animals, in shooting a singing bird.

The investigation lasted a number of hours, and Mr. Oppen states, decided that the charges were not sustained, but that they held he had given offense in offering his pulpit to Mr. Hoffman, he says Hoffman did not preach in the church, and that as to the other charges, he claimed that they were so silly that in giving his explanation they were immediately dismissed. He claims also that the whole matter given out of his former troubles with the Rev. Mr. Goldamer, and that nothing more will be done concerning the charges.

**MR. GREEN'S STATEMENT.**

It appears from a statement made to THE DATA by Mr. Adolph Green that Rev. Carl Oppen, pastor of the church, invited a Rev. Mr. Hoffman to occupy his pulpit

on Sunday, 29th of January last, to which Mr. Green objected, upon the grounds that Mr. Hoffman was no longer a minister, he having been deposed from the ministry of the church by the Synod, for violations of rules five and six. To this protest, Mr. Oppen replied that there was no justification in fact for it, and implying that Mr. Green had spoken untruthfully in regard to the matter. This assertion Mr. Green made the basis of a charge of slander against Mr. Oppen, which was made a subject of investigation as above stated, and resulting in a finding sustaining the charge, and requiring Mr. Oppen to recall all matter giving offense as stated in the charge against him.

## A MINISTERIAL MUDDLE.

*To the Editor of The Data.*

In the issue of your paper of Feb. 15, an article appeared containing "the charges made by two members of the Lutheran congregation, Mr. Neese and Mr. Kemnitz, as given to a DATA reporter by the accused pastor." In the same article you say, "Mr. Oppen states that he investigation decided that the charges were not sustained, and that nothing more will be done concerning the charges." We regretted at the time, and we do still regret that this matter has, by Mr. Oppen himself, been dragged before the public; but as he, in his statement, names us as those who preferred the charges which he designates, as silly or untrue, we are compelled in justification of our character, to reply to the statements made in your paper on Feb. 15. We do this reluctantly; but as Mr. Oppen has chosen this way, through the press, to ventilate the subject, the responsibility rests with him, if we, through the same channel, defend ourselves against his attack on our veracity. Our answer will simply and solely consist in the decision arrived at by the commission appointed to investigate the charges, consisting of the president and two other ministers of the Lutheran Synod of Wisconsin, dated Feb. 25, 1882.

The following is a true translation of the document: "The committee appointed to investigate the charges preferred against Rev. C. Oppen, of Green Bay, by a number of members of his congregation has thoroughly investigated those charges which, in accordance with the word of God could, at the time, be brought for investigation before the assembled congregation, by hearing the complainants and their witnesses on the one side, and the accused Rev. Oppen and his

witnesses on the other side; and they have in justice as before God decided, as follows, to-wit:

1, That the charge of intentional and wilful lying could not be sustained, although Rev. Oppen has not, in the matter in question, expressed himself in a manner which fully corresponds with the facts.

2, As to the charge relative to the Town of Eaton nothing could be decided from want of actual testimony on the part of the complainants as well as on the part of the accused; but the subject was referred to a future investigation by proper visitation.

3, The charges relating to offense given in a certain cow and dog trade could not be investigated, as they had not previously been laid before the congregation.

4, As to the charges concerning cruelty against animals and offensive conduct at bathing it was decided that the conduct of Rev. Oppen must be designated as at least not befitting a clergyman.

5, As to the charge, that Rev. Oppen, without preceding pastoral admonition, has, publicly from the pulpit, reprimanded members of the congregation for neglect of duty, it was decided that the action of Rev. Oppen must be severely censured and that he is to be charged with gross neglect of private pastoral care towards negligent members.

6, As to the charge that Rev. Oppen intended to allow Mr. J. J. Hoffman, a former minister at Sheboygan Falls, the use of his pulpit, and attempted to engage the same as assistant pastor of his congregation, it was decided that Rev. Oppen has grievously sinned by his frivolous conduct and has given great offence to the congregation.

7, As to the charge that Rev. Oppen did publicly from the pulpit accuse Mr. Green, who had protested against the

preaching of J. J. Hoffman, of calumny, and expressed the hope that Mr. Hoffman would prosecute Mr. Green, was decided that this action of Rev. Oppen must be severely censured and that he is bound to give Mr. Green public satisfaction from the pulpit.

8, As it has become evident from the proceedings (on record) that, at the investigation of Rev. Oppen, that paragraph of the church rules in which the connection of the pastor with the synod of Wisconsin is made obligatory and which hitherto been one of the unalterable paragraphs, had been changed and placed among the alterable paragraphs, this was deemed to be strange in the high degree and it was declared to be the duty of the pastor to have said paragraph again replaced among the unalterable ones.

9, As finally, the motion had been made and repeatedly seconded that Rev. Oppen should resign his pastoral office, the committee declared such motion, and the evident want of confidence in Rev. Oppen could be readily understood, as a consequence of the serious offences given him, but that the committee did not deem it absolutely necessary to demand of the pastor the resignation of his office provided that Rev. Oppen heeding the most earnest admonitions would try to regain the confidence of the members of the congregation by a faithful and conscientious performance of his official duties. [Signed.]

JOHANNES BADING,  
A. HAENEKY,  
R. ADELBERG.

Milwaukee, Wis., Feb. 25, 1882.

We have nothing to add to this official declaration of the investigating commission, but leave it to the public to judge for themselves.

LOUIS NEESE,  
THEODORE KEMNITZ  
Green Bay, March 7, 1882.

## B I B L I O G R A P H Y

### I. Newspaper articles

Green Bay Advocate, 1860's and 1880's.

Green Bay Daily Data, 1882.

Green Bay Globe, 1882.

Green Bay Press-Gazette, 1850's, 1934 Tercentennial Edition, 1957 (July 19).

### II. Congregational material

Siegrist, Rev. J. "The History of the First Ev. Lutheran Congregation of Green Bay, Wisconsin," 1913 (translated by Mr. C. C. Emmel, 1956).

English translation of minutes from the records of First Evangelical Lutheran Church, Green Bay, 1863-1910.

"100th Anniversary Booklet" of First Evangelical Lutheran Church, Green Bay, Wis., 1963.

"Centennial Anniversary Book" of St. Paul Ev. Lutheran Church and School, Green Bay, Wis., 1983.

### III. Synodical Proceedings

Berichte der Wisconsin Synode, 1881, p. 60.

Berichte der Wisconsin Synode, 1881.

Berichte der Wisconsin Synode, 1882.

Berichte der Wisconsin Synode, 1883.

Berichte der Wisconsin Synode, 1884, p. 57.