

THE SLOVAK SYNOD'S POSITION AND ROLE  
IN THE SYNODICAL CONFERENCE FROM 1950-1963

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During the doctrinal discussions within the Synodical Conference in the forties and fifties concerning scouting, prayer fellowship, the military chaplaincy, the Common Confession and other unionistic practices involving the Missouri Synod, the Slovak Synod assumed the role of mediator and was viewed as a middle-man, standing somewhere between the Missouri Synod on the left and the Wisconsin and Norwegian Synods on the right. The crucial years from 1956 to 1963 saw two Slovak leaders, Rev. John S. Bradac and Rev. John Daniel, elected to the presidency of the Synodical Conference, while other prominent Slovaks often served as moderators at the many inter-synodical meetings during those years. The question naturally arises, were they actually in the middle doctrinally, or did they just assume this role into which they were thrust? Were they primarily concerned with resolving the differences on the basis of Holy Scripture, or were they more concerned with preserving the Synodical Conference at all costs? This paper shall endeavor to shed some light on these and related questions by critically examining what the Slovaks themselves have said and written in their monthly periodical, The Lutheran Beacon, and in the proceedings from the Synodical Conference conventions during this period of time.

From the beginning, one might have expected the Slovak Synod to align itself doctrinally with the Missouri Synod's position, if for no other reason than its close inter-relationship with Missouri and its dependency upon Missouri schools for providing the necessary theological training for Slovak ministerial candidates. When the Slovaks celebrated their fiftieth year as a synod in 1952, The Lutheran Beacon ran an article

in their February issue tracing the historical development of the Slovak Synod, then known as the Slovak Evangelical Lutheran Church (SELC). The author of this article makes this interesting observation: "All of our Synod's present pastors received their theological training either wholly or in part in the seminaries of the Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod."<sup>1</sup> Thus all of their pastors would have been exposed to, if not indoctrinated in, the Missouri viewpoint concerning the doctrine of church and ministry, especially Missouri's definition of what constitutes the church.

This close working relationship with the Missouri Synod can also be seen in the desire of many pastors within the Slovak Synod for a complete merger with Missouri. At a meeting of the Central District of the Slovak Synod in October, 1951, Rev. J. G. Majoros, then Vice-President of the synod, read an essay dealing with ". . . the eventual possibility of our Slovak Synod merging with the Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod."<sup>2</sup> As a result of this interest, at the 1953 convention of the Slovak Evangelical Lutheran Church it was resolved that "a special committee is to be appointed to study the advisability of our Synod affiliating with the Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod as a Slovak District."<sup>3</sup> Apparently very little actual progress occurred in this direction until the late fifties, when the matter finally came to a vote in the 1959 convention of the SELC.<sup>4</sup> Two years prior to this convention, a Beacon editorial had underscored

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<sup>1</sup>Andrew Daniel, "Fifty Years of Grace," The Lutheran Beacon, IX (February, 1952), p. 28.

<sup>2</sup>"Pastors of Synod Meet for District Conferences," The Lutheran Beacon, VIII (November, 1951), p. 171.

<sup>3</sup>"Synodical Convention Report," The Lutheran Beacon, X (November, 1953), p. 169.

<sup>4</sup>The Slovak Synod was officially called the Slovak Evangelical Lutheran Church until August, 1959, when the name was officially changed to Synod of Evangelical Lutheran Churches. The abbreviation, SELC, remains the same in either case.

the reasons for merging with Missouri. "Doctrinally we are one; in practice we are one; we make full use of Missouri's publication house, materials, schools and seminaries. We exchange calls and pulpits and members."<sup>5</sup>

Missouri also seems to have been in favor of such a merger. At the 1957 convention of the SELC, the president of the Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod, Dr. John W. Behnken, made a surprise visit to the Tuesday afternoon session, during which he addressed the assembly and ". . . hailed the harmony and brotherhood enjoyed by the Missouri and Slovak Synods."<sup>6</sup> If nothing else, Missouri was certainly interested in maintaining the close rapport which existed between the two synods.

When the final vote was in though, the proposed merger was defeated. The reason for its rejection was not due to disharmony or doctrinal disagreement between the Slovaks and Missouri. Instead it was rejected ". . . as not coming at the opportune time and as being disruptive of the Synodical Conference."<sup>7</sup> A merger at this critical period in the Synodical Conference would have seriously jeopardized any further efforts at mediation by the Slovaks since it would have placed them squarely in Missouri's camp for all to recognize. Thus they would have been unable to continue their masquerade as the concerned middleman in the doctrinal disputes.

If one closely examines their doctrinal statements which are often vague and somewhat indefinite, one can readily see that even in the early days of the dispute the Slovak Synod maintained essentially the same

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<sup>5</sup>"Time to Study Merger," The Lutheran Beacon, XIV (September, 1957), p. 130.

<sup>6</sup>"37th Convention of S.E.L.C. Held in Streator Illinois," The Lutheran Beacon, XIV (October, 1957), p. 152.

<sup>7</sup>"Chicago Synod Convention Report," The Lutheran Beacon, XVI (September, 1959), p. 138.

doctrinal position as the Missouri Synod. As already noted above, the Slovaks clearly identified themselves with Missouri's position in the September, 1957 issue of The Lutheran Beacon. Even prior to this though, the Slovaks had consistently followed Missouri's precedent. When the Common Confession was endorsed jointly by Missouri and the American Lutheran Church, the Slovak Synod was the only other member of the Synodical Conference to follow Missouri's example. Although the Slovaks pointed out a number of the same defects which had been mentioned by the Norwegian Synod and the Wisconsin Synod, namely in the articles dealing with election, justification and the last things, they unanimously adopted the Common Confession.<sup>8</sup> In commenting upon this action by the Slovaks in the Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly, Professor E. Reim pointed out, "This obvious divergence is due to a single factor--the failure of the Detroit Convention to take into consideration an admitted fact, namely that the 'Common Confession' has been accepted by both signators, Missouri and the American Lutheran Church, as a document which removes the differences that have separated these bodies in the past."<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, the Slovak Synod did not retract their endorsement even when this fact was pointed out to them--a fact which should have been obvious from the American Lutheran Church's rejection of the Brief Statement drawn up by Missouri.

While Wisconsin failed to fully grasp the significance of this step, Rev. O. G. Malmin, editor of the Lutheran Herald<sup>10</sup> at this time,

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<sup>8</sup> "Official Minutes of the Thirty-Fourth Regular Convention of the Slovak Evangelical Lutheran Church, August 15-21, 1951," The Lutheran Beacon, IX (March, 1952), p. 56.

<sup>9</sup> E. Reim, "The Slovak Resolutions on the 'Common Confession,'" Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly, XLVIII (October, 1951), p. 286.

<sup>10</sup> Official organ of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, one member of the proposed A.L.C.-Norwegian-Danish merger.

did perceive what was already underway. In an editorial he writes:

What is of significance to the rest of us is that the inevitable realignment of the bodies within the Synodical Conference is doubtless brought a step closer by the action of these three bodies, two unfavorable and one favorable to the Common Confession. The only possible solution of an untenable situation is the dissolution of the Synodical Conference, Missouri and the Slovak Synod going one way and the Wisconsin and Norwegian Synods the other.<sup>11</sup>

While we might dispute the fact that such a realignment was "inevitable" or that the situation at this time was already "untenable," the trend for Missouri and the Slovaks to stand together doctrinally was already underway.

This trend can also be detected in the Slovak's reaction to the scouting issue. Missouri had passed a resolution at Saginaw in 1944 granting individual congregations the right to sponsor a Boy Scout troop. Wisconsin objected to this practice over a period of years so that the 1952 convention of the Synodical Conference devoted a great deal of time to this particular problem. The result was what one might have expected. The Wisconsin and Norwegian Synods went on record in opposition to scouting either within the church or outside of the church while the Missouri and Slovak Synods viewed scouting as a secular organization not directly involved in the teaching of religion and thus no real problem. The decision of whether or not to sponsor a Boy Scout troop was left up to the judgment of the individual congregation.<sup>12</sup>

Although the Slovak Synod basically adopted the same doctrinal position as the Missouri Synod, they were by no means blind to the problems

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<sup>11</sup>Rev. O. G. Malmin, "The Common Confession," Lutheran Herald, XXXV (September 18, 1951), p. 871.

<sup>12</sup>Proceedings of the Forty-Second Convention of the Evangelical Lutheran Synodical Conference of North America (St. Paul, Minn., 1952), pp. 145-147.

developing within the Synodical Conference nor did they overlook the instances of unionism within the Missouri Synod itself. In addressing the thirty-fifth convention of the Slovak Synod in 1953, President Paul Rafaj noted:

In the Synodical Conference, we regret to say, there is not the understanding and harmony in doctrine and practice that there might be if there were more love and less mistrust. This was plainly visible and discernible at last year's convention in St. Paul, Minnesota. There are four main points on which we disagree.<sup>13</sup>

The four points in controversy were the Common Confession, scouting, prayer-fellowship and the military chaplaincy.

The controversy on these points and related issues was clearly outlined in a series of articles by Rev. Stephan G. Mazak, Sr., which appeared in the 1961 March through October issues of The Lutheran Beacon. In these articles, Rev. Mazak presents a relatively unbiased treatment of the various problems within the Synodical Conference, striking at the very heart of the matter by carefully defining the two divergent views on the doctrine of the church held by Missouri and Wisconsin respectively. After presenting the Missouri viewpoint, Mazak makes some rather interesting observations.

Is not the position taken by the Missouri Synod a deviation from the practice which has been in effect in the Synodical Conference throughout the history of this body? Is not this position of the Missouri Synod the camel's nose of unionism thrusting itself into the tent of the church, slowly to be followed by the rest of the body, eventually forcing out of the church its orthodox character? If we can join in prayer with errorist Lutherans, under the conditions described above, could we not then also under the same conditions hold a joint worship service, and perhaps even hold a joint communion service? Could we not also, under the same conditions, join in prayer with Methodists, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, Roman Catholics, etc.?<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>Rev. Paul Rafaj, "Synodical Convention Address," The Lutheran Beacon, X (October, 1953), p. 148.

<sup>14</sup>Rev. Stephan G. Mazak, Sr., "Missouri's Position on Fellowship," The Lutheran Beacon, XVIII (September, 1961), p. 134.

These rather pointed questions seem to indicate that at least some individuals among the Slovaks were not willing to just blindly follow the Missouri Synod's lead in doctrinal issues, even though the Slovak Synod as a whole eventually arrived at the same position.

Already in 1955, after the Norwegian Synod had suspended fellowship with the Missouri Synod, this same Mazak wrote an editorial urging individuals within the Slovak Synod to carefully examine the issues and arrive at their convictions on the basis of Scripture alone.

The question is, what will our Church do? Are we going to sit idly by and watch the Synodical Conference be destroyed? Or are we going to determine our action on the basis of what Missouri Synod will do, or the Wisconsin Synod, or what the Norwegian Synod has done? Of course, we should read and study whatever reasons are adduced for the actions taken by these Synods. But, brethren, we have a conscience, and that conscience must be bound only by the Word of God. We must diligently "search the Scripture" for in it alone will we find the answer to this problem. And, when we have searched that Scripture, then let us speak with a clear and emphatic voice, the truth as we find it in God's Word.

Every pastor, teacher, and lay delegate should acquaint himself with the causes that led up to this situation. Study them carefully, analyze them on the basis of God's Word.<sup>15</sup>

Because of this and other similar statements, it would be unjust to accuse the Slovak Synod of indifference in doctrinal matters or of condoning whatever Missouri taught or practiced without examining the issues involved.

This latter point is clearly evidenced by what took place at the Missouri Synod's Cleveland Convention in June, 1962. The Beacon write-up of the convention reports, "We . . . conveyed our deep concerns over past actions of our sister church--private and public statements and actions of individuals and groups, the apparent 'drift' toward a liberal approach. We were gratified by the receptive response to our appeal

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<sup>15</sup>Rev. Stephan G. Mazak, Sr., "The Convention of Our Church," The Lutheran Beacon, XII (July, 1955), p. 99.

and suggestions."<sup>16</sup> A few months later, at the Synodical Conference Convention in Chicago, a resolution of the Board of Directors and the Doctrinal Unity Committee of the Slovak Synod was presented which called Missouri to account for "those of its members who violate its confessional stand" by stating:

With concern we noted statements and articles by Missouri Synod representatives and individuals, and we watched the actions taken by Missouri Synod representatives and individuals, their participation in joint activities with other bodies with whom the Missouri Synod was not in fellowship--activities which, though not all can be classified as unionistic, nevertheless were breaching the Missouri Synod's traditional and Scriptural positions.<sup>17</sup>

In view of these statements, one might wonder why the Slovaks did not protest more vigorously and side with the Wisconsin and Norwegian Synods or why this protest comes at such a late date in the controversy. The answer lies partly in the Slovak's intimate relationship with the Missouri Synod as previously noted and partly in the concluding sentence to the paragraph cited above. "We have been assured time and again that the officials of the Missouri Synod are dealing with the men and issues involved."<sup>18</sup> Apparently these reassurances from Missouri were enough to pacify the Slovaks as they tried to carry out their role of peacemaker or middleman in the Synodical Conference.

This middleman role would account in part for the paucity of clear confessional statements on behalf of the Slovak Synod. It was far more advantageous for them to remain somewhat ambiguous rather than to publish

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<sup>16</sup>Rev. Daniel M. Estok, "Some Notes on the Convention of the Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod by an S.E.L.C. Observer," The Lutheran Beacon, XIX (August, 1962), p. 119.

<sup>17</sup>Proceedings of the Forty-Seventh Convention of the Lutheran Synodical Conference (Chicago, Ill., 1962), p. 67.

<sup>18</sup>Loc. cit.

a clear cut statement either for or against certain practices. Aside from the scouting issue and the Common Confession, they never really commit themselves openly one way or the other until after the break up of the Synodical Conference has occurred. Instead one continually finds statements similar to the following, "Synod regrets the present situation, declares its continued loyalty to the Word of God, and prays for a God-pleasing solution to the problems now disrupting the Conference."<sup>19</sup>

The role of peacemaker or mediator within the Synodical Conference found eager acceptance among the Slovaks. Already in 1953, Dr. John S. Bradac was appointed to serve as a moderator at top level meetings in January, 1954 between Missouri and Wisconsin leaders ". . . for exploration of ways and means to achieve an amiable agreement in points of difference between the two bodies of the Synodical Conference."<sup>20</sup> This role subsequently becomes synod-wide as the 1955 convention of the Slovak Evangelical Lutheran Church proclaimed its desire to assume "the role of peacemaker and reconciler of differences in the Synodical Conference."<sup>21</sup> That they continued to maintain this position can be seen from an editorial by Rev. J. J. Vajda in the fall of 1960 where he writes:

Tension between right and left wing attitudes in theology has become strained, in some areas, to the breaking point. . . .  
The Synod of Evangelical Lutheran Churches seems to stand in the middle of the disputes, lending what weight it has to the conservative view. More than anything else, the S.E.L.C. seems to have found its place in the role of peacemaker.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>19</sup>"Highlights of Synod's 36th Regular Convention," The Lutheran Beacon, XII (September 1955), p. 139.

<sup>20</sup>Rev. Theodore A. Daniel, "Seen on the Lutheran Scene . . .," The Lutheran Beacon, X (December 1953), p. 178.

<sup>21</sup>"Highlights of Synod's 36th Regular Convention," The Lutheran Beacon, XII (September 1955), p. 137.

<sup>22</sup>Rev. J.J. Vajda, "Contending for the Truth," The Lutheran Beacon, XVII (November, 1960), p. 162.

Notice how this editorial too is very guarded in defining exactly where the Slovak Synod actually stands, which raises the question, were they really in the middle of the disputes?

Doctrinally there was a strong tendency to follow Missouri's precedent, a tendency which was obvious in the early days of the controversy. Thus they viewed the position of Wisconsin and the Norwegians as a separatistic legalism based upon human ~~extrapolations~~<sup>extrapolations</sup> above and beyond the Word of God. While they did not excuse Missouri's unionistic excesses, they were equally, if not more so, deprecatory in regards to the Wisconsin position on church fellowship as their later statements reveal. It is only after the Wisconsin Synod's Commission on Doctrinal Matters declares an "impasse" in their efforts to resolve the differences with Missouri with respect to Scriptural principles, that the true position of the Slovak Synod is revealed. Because of the "impasse" reached in dealing with Missouri, Wisconsin suspended fellowship with Missouri in August, 1961. Almost at once, the action is branded as separatistic by the Slovaks.

We cannot quite see that this decision was the best one. Observing the trend in both synods over the years, we can see many actions that had to result in such a rupture unless they had been halted along the way. There are sins to be repented of in both camps. If nothing else, fruitless as they seem to have been, the discussions and meetings prior to the Wisconsin convention served to alert both parties in the dispute to the dangers of unionistic and separatistic practices. One and the other party have been guilty of such departures from the Synodical Conference stated principles.<sup>23</sup>

Their position is further clarified the following year at the Chicago convention of the Synodical Conference. The President's Address by Rev. John Daniels, a Slovak, emphasizes the need for unity among fellow "conservative" Lutherans, especially when there is basic agreement in the Gospel. " . . . The measure of agreement in the Gospel among us is so

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<sup>23</sup>Rev. J.J. Vajda, "A Sad Day for the Synodical Conference," The Lutheran Beacon, XVIII (September, 1961), p. 130.

so much greater than the number of points on which we have not yet come  
to agreement in our latest discussions that we should continue by the  
Holy Spirit's guidance to work out our differences."<sup>24</sup> In this same  
address, he faults the Wisconsin and Norwegian Synods for failing to  
accept in good faith Missouri's pledge that they still stand on the Word  
of God and the Confessions. "But how can we who are 'baptized into one  
body' (I Cor. 12:13) stand before God if we use the measure of our own  
judgments in the balances of our own minds and wayward hearts to condemn  
others who say they still stand on the Scriptures and the Lutheran Con-  
fessions?"<sup>25</sup> Here he lays bare the heart of the Slovak position, namely  
that the Wisconsin stand on church fellowship and the related issues is  
an individual or personal judgment rather than a Scriptural principle.  
This becomes even more obvious later in his address, when he says:

. . . a legalistic, traditionalistic adherence to doctrinal  
statements and forms and a stereotyped, second-hand, predigested  
presentation of truth can become deadly, sterile, and undis-  
ciplined in application. . . .  
We have either not used the whole counsel of the Word of God  
or have added to it what was not contained in the Word of God.  
To that extent some of our statements and positions have been  
extremist both in content and spirit and not helpful to Lutheran  
unity.<sup>26</sup>

This view was already hinted at in the concluding article by Rev.  
Stephan G. Mazak, Sr., in his series dealing with the problems in the  
Synodical Conference. "In many instances it is not always possible to  
apply a flat universal rule as to the propriety or impropriety of a  
specific activity. Scripture does not always define precisely and speci-  
fically the judgment that must be taken in each case."<sup>27</sup> He then cites

<sup>24</sup> Proceedings of the Forty-Seventh Convention of the Lutheran  
Synodical Conference (Chicago, Ill., 1962), p. 13.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., pp. 15-16.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>27</sup> Rev. Stephan G. Mazak, Sr., "The Problem is Complex," The  
Lutheran Beacon, XVIII (October, 1961), p. 150.

examples such as smoking or card playing which are not sinful in themselves but can lead to sin if they are abused. He continues, "Another factor which indicates the complexity of the present situation is the historical fact that the Church can and does change its judgment concerning specific activities when a restudy and reappraisal of the activity demonstrates that a change is necessary."<sup>28</sup> Here Mazak seems to infer that Wisconsin needs to shed its old-fashioned, stereotyped views and re-evaluate its position, that the time for a change has arrived.

This attitude is not just the opinion of two men, but is stated even more precisely in a resolution presented by the Slovak Synod at the 1962 Synodical Conference convention.

We hold that the Wisconsin Synod's attempt to classify the term "church" in "primary" and "secondary" groupings is Scripturally untenable. The doctrine of the church is the crux of the entire matter. Only from a clear understanding of the doctrine will it be possible to formulate a Scripturally correct doctrine of fellowship. Furthermore, we hold that the Wisconsin Lutheran Synod's "unit concept" of fellowship violates the notae purae (pure marks of the church--the Word and sacraments).<sup>29</sup>

The Slovak stand is now no longer veiled behind their so-called middleman position. In essence they are rejecting the Wisconsin position as un-Scriptural and abiding by the Missouri Synod's distinction between joint prayer and prayer-fellowship while upholding the Missouri concept of the church which limits the church as such to the local congregation.

When the Wisconsin and Norwegian Synods finally withdrew from the Synodical Conference in 1963, this position was maintained by the Slovaks. A Beacon editorial at this time notes, ". . . We do question the validity of all the arguments put forth in favor of dissolution and application

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 151.

<sup>29</sup> Proceedings of the Forty-Seventh Convention of the Lutheran Synodical Conference (Chicago, Ill., 1962), p. 68.

of certain Scriptural passages to the Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod."<sup>30</sup>  
The Slovaks failed to understand or appreciate the Scriptural basis for Wisconsin's action and were willing to overlook the few flaws which they detected in Missouri in the interest of preserving unity among fellow conservative Lutherans.

That there are valid objections to be raised, we agree. But we do not feel, as we have stated officially, that the objections raised are sufficient for severance of fellowship within the Synodical Conference. We cannot believe that the Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod as a body is as wayward as pictured by the ELS and the Wisconsin Synod.<sup>31</sup>

In evaluating the role of the Slovak Synod, it is the opinion of this writer that they were basically sincere in their intent to serve as a mediating body within the Synodical Conference. This does not imply, however, that they occupied a middle position doctrinally, since they consistently upheld the Missouri position on all of the contested issues, even though they did object to the more extreme forms of unionism within the Missouri Synod. Thus they may have misled some individuals within the Wisconsin and Norwegian Synods who assumed that their mediating role meant that they were seriously questioning Missouri's doctrinal position. The only charge which they really raised against Missouri was one of unionistic practices by various individuals but never against the Missouri Synod as a whole. Because the Slovaks themselves were apparently free from such unionistic practices within their own midst, they felt qualified to serve as a reconciler or peacemaker in the Synodical Conference.

These mediating efforts by the Slovaks were primarily aimed at

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<sup>30</sup>"Another Rupture, Another Sorrow," The Lutheran Beacon, XX (August, 1963), p. 114.

<sup>31</sup>"When Brothers Part," The Lutheran Beacon, XX (July, 1963), p. 99.

maintaining the Synodical Conference in order to "preserve and extend conservative Lutheranism."<sup>32</sup> For them, the outward expression of unity was the essential factor, even if there were some minor differences of opinion in regards to the application of certain Scriptural principles. These could eventually be resolved over the years through continued dialogue and discussion. After Wisconsin had suspended fellowship with Missouri, they protested, ". . . This is not the time to separate from each other, for this would destroy the agency and means by which we could demonstrate and witness to the world how true unity can be achieved."<sup>33</sup> They overlooked the fact that one of the basic reasons for establishing the Synodical Conference was "to give outward expression to the unity of spirit existing among the constituent synods" (emphasis mine).<sup>34</sup> The Synodical Conference itself did not bring about this "unity of spirit" but rather provided an outward form through which this unity could be expressed and promoted among the member synods. When the unity in doctrine and practice could no longer be asserted, then the outward form was emptied of its contents and no longer served a meaningful purpose.

In spite of the repeated pleas of the Slovaks for patience and understanding, the Wisconsin and Norwegian Synods withdrew from the Synodical Conference in 1963. After almost two decades, it had become obvious that Missouri possessed a different spirit than the "Old Missouri" in the early days of the Synodical Conference. Unfortunately, this same spirit exerted its influence also among the members of the Slovak Synod and led them to espouse essentially the same position as the Missouri Synod. Mediators they may have been, but middlemen they weren't.

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<sup>32</sup>Rev. J.J. Vajda, "Contending for the Truth," The Lutheran Beacon, XVII (November, 1960), p. 162.

<sup>33</sup>Proceedings of the Forty-Seventh Convention of the Lutheran Synodical Conference (Chicago, Ill., 1962), p. 68.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., p. 17.

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