

## ***“WHAT ARE THOSE FEEBLE ONES DOING?”***

The return of God’s Old Testament people to their homeland after the seventy year exile in Babylon is a portion of biblical history neglected by our three year lectionary. (No readings from Ezra, Nehemiah or Esther are included.) More subjectively, neither do these historical books seem to be studied in Bible classes as widely as others, though the *Christ-Light* Sunday School lessons do include them. So, unless you have recently read in this section of Scripture, you may not be familiar with the names of Sanballat and Tobiah. Sanballat, the Horonite, is thought to be a governor of Samaria during the time when the remnant of exiles were returning. Tobiah, the Ammonite, was likely a Persian appointee in Ammon. Ammon was the region east of the Jordan and a perennial rival of the Israelites. These two men lobbied against the rebuilding of Jerusalem’s walls under the direction of the priest and scribe, Ezra, and the layman, Nehemiah. In the presence of his associates and the army of Samaria, Sanballat asks:

*“What are those feeble Jews doing? Will they restore their wall? Will they offer sacrifices? Will they finish in a day? Can they bring the stones back to life from those heaps of rubble--burned as they are?” (Nehemiah 4:2)*

Tobiah, who was at his side, responded:

*“What they are building--if even a fox climbed up on it, he would break down their wall of stones!” (4:3)*

Prof. John Burg comments in The People’s Bible:

*In one respect Sanballat and Tobiah were right. the builders of Jerusalem were feeble if they depended on their own power. They didn’t have great numbers. They did not have great wealth. All they had was faith and the promise of God which supported that faith. But that was all they needed. With God-given courage they continued to work . . .<sup>1</sup>*

The assignment for this paper was to choose “a 20th century historical event that impacted the WELS.” We might ask ourselves, did a similar attitude exist during a portion of Wisconsin Synod history which began forty years ago as was present in this biblical account of Israel’s post exile days? At the 1961 synod convention in Milwaukee on Thursday afternoon, August 17 the convention delegates by a vote of 124 to 49 adopted a resolution to suspend fellowship with the Missouri Synod in the Synodical Conference.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Brug, John F. The People’s Bible, “Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther”. Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1985, pg. 88

<sup>2</sup> This act did not in itself dissolve the Synodical Conference, nor did it totally decide the question of the Wisconsin Synod’s future membership. A special Wisconsin Synod convention was held in November of 1962. There a resolution was passed requesting the Lutheran Synodical Conference to recognize and acknowledge that unity of confession no longer existed and that steps be taken to dissolve the federation. Though supported in the Synodical conference by the Norwegian synod, the resolution was soundly defeated. Then it was at its 1963 Synod Convention that the Wisconsin Synod officially withdrew from

With that decision prophets of doom evidently expressed their conviction that our small church body would not be able to stand on it's own. I will readily acknowledge that I did not find these convictions published. Neither did I spend much time looking for them since I didn't expect to find such personal views in print. I do recall, however, during my years at Northwestern College and Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary (during the late 60's and early 70's) professors mentioning such an opinion was voiced from time to time within and outside the WELS. The fact that a WELS history professor suggested the subject-matter for this paper would in itself be an indication some felt this action in 1961 would be the beginning of the end for our synod. With over 40 years separating us from the time that historic decision was made, can it now be said those doom's day prophets were mistaken?

I was only in my late teens during the early sixties. I well remember how this resolution by our synod divided my mother's side of our family with an unexpected and unpleasant division they had not authored. Discussions at our kitchen table questioned the wisdom of what took place. But in my youth I didn't have any inkling as to what this meant for our synod as a whole. Even now it was an eye-opener for me to compare the relatively thick 1960 Northwestern Lutheran Annual (i.e. "synod yearbook") at our seminary library with the slim ones which followed. The variance was something like holding a Quad Cities telephone directory in one hand, and a directory for the tiny town of Elizabeth in the other. I can only imagine what separation from such a large sister synod must have meant for our little Wisconsin Synod in every area of ministry. Talk about separation anxiety! In the 1960 Wisconsin Synod Annual was a listing entitled, "Stations of the Synodical Conference." Including in this listing was all the congregations of the Synodical Conference (i.e. the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, The Synod of Evangelical Lutheran Churches [Slovak], and the Evangelical Lutheran Synod [Norwegian] ) These numbers were then given for the Missouri Synod: 6,055 ordained pastors (with whom each of the 779 Wisconsin Synod pastors had been sharing pulpit fellowship); 5,532 congregations (which blanketed the United States and with whom WELS members had been sharing altar fellowship); 2,449,036 baptized members (many who were close relatives of the 352,563 WELS members.)<sup>3</sup> This decision in 1961 left more than a scratch on our synod. One pictures a body left feeble and helpless with both legs, or both arms, having been amputated.

After that heartbreaking, but necessary decision, the Wisconsin Synod in 1961, did look feeble compared to the larger Lutheran synods. We did not have great wealth. We did not have great numbers. All we had was "faith and the promise of God which supported that faith." With God-given courage we continued to work while some asked in one way or another, "What are those feeble one's doing?"

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the Evangelical Lutheran Synodical Conference. (Ironically that convention began with a worship service at the same church where in 1872 the Evangelical Lutheran Synodical Conference was born, St. John Lutheran in Milwaukee)

<sup>3</sup>Figures taken from "Statistical Report of the Wisconsin Ev. Lutheran Synod for 1962" Statistician - E.A. Wendland, page 82.

## THOUGHTS TO KEEP IN MIND

One cannot measure success in Christ's Church by the same standards used in our American society. Big numbers might be indicative of an active church body in which the Holy Spirit swiftly brings sinners to Christ. Think Pentecost. When similar blessings are poured out on us, we surely have reason to praise our Lord. On the other hand, we need to keep in mind large membership doesn't in itself equate with a spiritually healthy church. Remember our Lord Jesus once ministered to such a congregation. Membership fell from over 5000 to a mere dozen when our Lord began speaking about spiritual truths which really matter (John 6). Some might have labeled Jesus a "poor missionary". Our heavenly Father would not. So, we need to keep in mind even if our endurance and growth show the prophets of doom wrong, this could be a temptation for us to arrogantly be glad. Shall we not rather continue to rejoice, as the angels in heaven do, simply over each sinner brought to repentance, and, as the Apostle Paul did, because of our partnership in the gospel?

We might do well to also remember that while the Lord surely uses the gifts he gives to the members of the church, he often blesses his children whether or not they use these gifts wisely. Remember God's intentions for Jacob's son Joseph came about despite some terribly poor decisions made by various family members. As we try to picture all that has happened in the WELS during the last four decades, much was the result of bold, but difficult, decisions. In synod stewardship matters, mission work, and education endeavors daring ventures were proposed and pursued. But we will notice other ventures were proposed and not used. Wherever we, as individuals, might have stood on these various issues at the time, the fact of the matter is, our Lord continues to keep his promise and in all things works "for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose"

## A BIG JOB FOR A SMALL CHURCH

By the action our synod decided on in 1961 our circle of fellowship glaringly narrowed, but the scope of our work greatly enlarged. We no longer had "sister congregations" everywhere throughout the United States. We were a mid-western church. Areas of ministry which we did together with Missouri, or depended upon them to maintain, now needed to be provided for by ourselves, or left undone. What kind of manpower would this require? What size of budget were we talking about? Some apparently wondered aloud, others no doubt to themselves, "What are those feeble ones doing?" Sometimes it seemed if a fox climbed up on the walls of this little synod, it would break down.

But our gracious Lord did not abandon us feeble ones. Today we remain a part of Christ's Church to proclaim the good news of Jesus to a dying world. As we, the members of the Wisconsin Synod, reminded ourselves during our 150th Anniversary celebration, we do have reason to praise and thank our Lord for his blessings in the past and to continue to go "Forward in Christ.." We still are by no means a large church body. We see numerous opportunities to minister in new places and in new ways. But workers are few and funds lacking. Yet, forty years after finding it necessary to sever our fellowship relations with a sister synod much larger and with much greater resources, we, by God's

grace, nevertheless actively work in Christ's kingdom today to an extent that few would likely have imagined back in 1961.

### THE IMMEDIATE RESPONSE TO THE DECISION OF '61

The fact that we were not only small, but in many ways also weak was not overlooked by some of the leaders in our own synod. Executive Secretary for World Missions, Edgar Hoenecke remarked in the proceedings to the 1961 synod convention:

*Our traditional Lutheran "Nuechterheit" (deliberate complacency), our lack of fire and zeal for the Lord's work, must come to an end. A consuming passion for souls must accompany our ardent concern for the purity of doctrine . . . Our mission efforts have been few and feeble.*<sup>4</sup>

Nor was every Wisconsin Synod member, lay person or clergy, in total agreement with the decision that was made. Some did feel the action was long overdo. For that reason, the Church of the Lutheran Confession met to adopt their constitution at Watertown, South Dakota in 1960 and formally organized in Sleepy Eye, Minnesota in 1961. Others felt the decision made by our synod was premature, or even unnecessary. Twenty-eight per-cent of the delegates at our 1961 synod convention voted against the proposal to suspend fellowship with Missouri. Dr. Henry A. Koch in the *Gemeindeblatt* faulted both the Missouri and Wisconsin Synods for what took place. He felt, first of all, his Wisconsin Synod should have given more consideration to the advice from sister Lutheran synods overseas who questioned whether prayer fellowship could be placed in the same category as pulpit and altar fellowship which deal with the marks of the church (Word and Sacrament). Then also, he thought agreement between Missouri and Wisconsin should have first been sought in the doctrine of the church, since from this doctrine the doctrine of church fellowship flows.<sup>5</sup>

Did it not show wisdom and concern on the part of our synod's officials when they immediately addressed these inward concerns, even as they were concerned about taking care of the pressing matter of our synods survival? An open letter was written by President Nauman in the Northwestern Lutheran to answer a fellowship concern over a published decision at the 1961 convention to continue with the student ministry in Madison - a joint project of both synods.<sup>6</sup> Prof. Armin Schuetze in his popular question and answer column, "A Lantern to Our Footsteps", immediately addressed such questions as, "Is the Synod Resolution Binding on All Congregations?"<sup>7</sup> and, "Is the 'Avoid Them' of Romans 16:17 the Same as Excommunication."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Convention Proceedings - Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod 1951-1961. "World Missions." page 40.

<sup>5</sup> "Wisconsin Synod Publication 'Faults' Both Missouri and Wisconsin Synods." The Lutheran Witness. February 20, 1962. pages 88,89.

<sup>6</sup> "An Open Letter" Northwestern Lutheran. December 3, 1961 pg. 394.

<sup>7</sup> "A Lantern to Our Footsteps". Northwestern Lutheran. November 19, 1961. page 375.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., December 3, 1961, page 391.

As these internal concerns were addressed, necessary plans were made for the future of our synod. In the October 8, 1961 issue of the *Northwestern Lutheran* an editorial written by Northwestern President Carlton Toppe and entitled "Minding our Business," encouraged members of the Wisconsin Synod not to let the August decision obstruct the work of the church.

*Now, questions should be asked, problems should be aired, advice should be sought. The reasons for our Synod's action of last August ought to be understood, and the import of that grasped.*

*But this cannot be our chief concern in our church life. Even if we are deeply affected by the Synodical resolution to break ties with former associates, we need to remember the work of the Church goes on. As individual Christians, as congregations, and as a Synod, we have a job to do in the kingdom of God. We have a gospel to proclaim, souls to win, and souls to keep. Sermons must be preached, churches built, children taught, Sacraments administered, pastors and teachers trained, missions started. This is the Lord's business; it is our business.<sup>9</sup>*

### 1963 WISCONSIN SYNOD BIENNIAL CONVENTION

Delegates to the next synod convention took that advice to heart. The agenda for the delegates which met in 1963 at Wisconsin Lutheran High School in Milwaukee was filled with ambitious goals. The convention demonstrated our Synod had a history of its own. To celebrate the centennial of our Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary three brothers, all grandsons of Dr. Adolf Hoenecke, delivered individual essays.

World missions reported on their plans for a new type of mission activity called "the Christian missionary program". Two missionaries were to be sent into promising fields working in a way similar to that of the Apostle Paul, with the aim to establish self-sustaining congregations and then move on elsewhere.<sup>10</sup>

Home missions reported that already 22 states and one province in Canada brought requests to be served by our conservative Lutheran doctrine and practice.<sup>11</sup> In a 1971 *Northwestern Lutheran* article Executive Secretary of Home Missions, Rev. Norm Berg, looked back at the 1963 convention and wrote about the bold decisions made by the delegates.

*In 1963 the Synod divided the United States and Canada into areas of responsibility for our District Mission Boards. It thereby placed on the Home Mission Division the responsibility to extend its work wherever it seemed called for. In the same year a full-time Executive Secretary for Home Missions was authorized to coordinate the planning and execution of this newly expanded work . . .*

*No longer could our members and our Synod depend on pastoral*

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<sup>9</sup> "Minding Our Business". *The Northwestern Lutheran*. October 8, 1961, page 323.

<sup>10</sup> *Northwestern Lutheran*. September 8, 1963, page 281.

<sup>11</sup> "Publish with the Voice of Thanksgiving". *The Northwestern Lutheran*. September 8, 1963. page 278.

*service in most parts of the United States from other Synodical Conference churches. We had to assume responsibility throughout the 50 states. Secondly, calls began to come to us from Lutherans of our Wisconsin Synod and other synods, who were becoming acutely aware of the confessional confusion in many Lutheran churches. They called on us for help from all parts of the United States, from Alaska to Alabama, from Connecticut to California*<sup>12</sup>

To meet these needs, a program of tape-recorded worship services “to widely scattered brethren” was begun by the Northern Wisconsin District. Worship services were recorded onto a five-inch reel and sent to interested groups of Lutherans who did not have a pastor and were a long distance from a congregation in our fellowship. Eventually the General Board for Home Missions used “this marvelous invention” synod-wide.<sup>13</sup>

But Rev. Berg in the previously mentioned Northwestern Lutheran article went on to explain more difficult decisions that needed to be made.

*In 1964 the Conference of Presidents was asked to make another decision vital to home mission work. In view of the pastoral shortage, should the Home Mission Division continue opening a significant number of new missions requiring manpower? The presidents, fully conscious of the problem of vacancies, and yet also aware of the earnest prayers of our people for reapers in accord with the Lord's injunction, decided to give the green light to the opening of home missions.*

*The result? In the past four years new missions have been opened at a rate proportionately double that of other major Lutheran bodies in our country. The goal of a mission a month has been surpassed each year and almost doubled in one year.*<sup>14</sup>

Those involved with education announced a special pre-seminary training course designed and put into practice at Bethany College, Mankato to accommodate those who have worked at other occupations, but now desire the work of the ministry.<sup>15</sup> A list of needed construction at Synodical schools was set before the convention:

- a) a dormitory at Dr. Martin Luther College after the completion of the planned auditorium-gymnasium-student union-refectory building
- b) development of the Dr. Martin Luther High School campus
- c) replacement of the 1905 dormitory at Northwestern College soon after the replacement of the 1875 building.
- d) the development of a campus for the preparatory department of Northwestern College
- e) Renovation of existing dormitories at New Ulm and Saginaw
- f) development of a campus for Milwaukee Lutheran Teachers' College.

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<sup>12</sup> “1961-1971, A Decade of Decision for Home Missions”. Northwestern Lutheran. November 10, 1968, pg. 365

<sup>13</sup> “A Service to Widely Scattered Brethren”. Northwestern Lutheran. March 20, 1966. pg. 84,85

<sup>14</sup> “1961-1971, A Decade of Decision for Home Missions”. op.cit., page 365.

<sup>15</sup> “Publish with the Voice of Thanksgiving”. op.cit. page 282

- g) securing or building an academy for the Nebraska District
- h) securing or building an academy for the Arizona-California District and,
- i) should conditions warrant, also in the Northwest District.<sup>16</sup>

The need for evangelism was addressed with the synod's publication of a booklet *Study to Be Witnesses Unto Me*.<sup>17</sup> Pastors and congregations were urged to use these booklets for the purpose of teaching Christian laymen and women to become personal witnesses and missionaries in their own communities.

A newly adopted pension plan was introduced to become effective January, 1966.<sup>18</sup> In adopting a budget for the next biennium, the convention made use of the Synod's newly adopted pre-budget subscription plan for the first time. Formerly, the convention adopted a budget by calculating the average cost per communicant in the synod and then informing congregations of their fair minimum share.<sup>19</sup>

This convention quickly gave some concrete answers to the question "What are those feeble ones doing?"

### 1965 WISCONSIN SYNOD 38th BIENNIAL CONVENTION

The 1965 convention, dubbed the "Umbrella Convention" because of the relentless rain, was held on the Northwestern College campus in Watertown. The festive celebration of Northwestern's centennial was the convention's highlight. But business at the convention dealt with more sobering concerns which involved every division of the synod's work.

To provide for increased enrollments and those projected for the coming years, the Advisory Committee on Education requested the Convention approve:

- 10 new professors to be called during 1965-66
- 21 new professors to be called during 1966-67<sup>20</sup>

A special Advisory Committee also recommended:

1. That the senior teachers' college be established at Milwaukee, with facilities adequate for an enrollment of 1,000, to be constructed on the Synod owned Bluemound property.
2. That Dr. Martin Luther College be made a junior teachers' college, with facilities for a college enrollment of 500.<sup>21</sup>

At this watershed convention in Watertown an \$8 1/2 million capital expansion of educational institutions was passed. This was to include buildings on the campus of Milwaukee Lutheran Teachers College and a multi-purpose building for Dr. Martin Luther

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<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, page 284

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, page 294

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, page 295

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, page 296

<sup>20</sup> "Convention Preview" *Northwestern Lutheran*. July 11, 1965. pg. 214, 215

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, page 214, 215

College; the erection of a library at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, a residence hall and gymnasium for Northwestern College.<sup>22</sup> The convention gave no list of priority for these projects.

Rev. Edgar Hoenecke, the Executive Secretary for World Missions reported that the Wisconsin Synod had missions on four continents and was preparing to enter into Puerto Rico. Special attention was given to make the Christian Chinese Lutheran Mission, Hong Kong, a permanent part of the world mission program. The delegates also voted to add five additional workers to the seven who already served at its missions in Zambia and Malawi.<sup>23</sup>

The Committee on Specialized Ministries proposed the formation of an organization to address the needs of college students away from home and announced plans for a new Wisconsin Lutheran Chapel and Student Center in Madison. At the convention a Wisconsin Synod student organization was formed called the Lutheran Collegians, which was in the planning stage since 1963. Before this Wisconsin Synod students joined Gamma Delta, a student organization sponsored by The Lutheran Church- Missouri Synod. The Convention also authorized the appointment of a board to establish an institution for the full-time care of the mentally retarded.*(sic)*<sup>24</sup>

Delegates accepted a budget for the next biennium of \$8 1/2 million.<sup>25</sup> The bold ventures by this 1965 convention expressed the delegates confidence in God's promises to never leave or forsake his children. The monies budgeted were obviously not sufficient to meet the pressing needs for this little synod to do such big things. In the closing hours of the convention delegates voted a \$4 million special offering designated for building projects.<sup>26</sup> This developed into the special, synod-wide *Missio Dei* offering, directed by Pastor James P. Schaefer (Pastor Schaefer become our first Stewardship Counselor in 1968.) President Nauman wrote to the people of our synod in the Northwestern Lutheran:

*We need the spirit of Atonement Ev. Lutheran Church, Tokyo, Japan. In sending in the very first contribution to the Mission of God Offering, this tiny, faithful church wrote, "We are small and not very strong, but this little gift of \$25.00 is just the merest token of how we feel. We are happy to think that this gift will be used to build schools to train workers for the Lord's Kingdom. . . If each congregation of the Synod gave as proportionately and happily as these first fruits of our mission work in Japan gave, we can raise \$8 million!"<sup>27</sup>*

A 26-minute color film was produced in Hollywood to inform congregations of the needs to be met by the *Missio Dei* offering. In this film, "Tomorrow is Upon Us", Ed and Gretta Walters question the wisdom of the *Missio Dei* offering - "so much money just for

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<sup>22</sup> "Preliminary Convention Report." Northwestern Lutheran. August 22, 1965. pages 268, 269

<sup>23</sup> "Preliminary Convention Report." op.cit., pages 268

<sup>24</sup> "Preliminary Convention Report" op. cit., pages 268, 269.

<sup>25</sup> "Preliminary Convention Report." op.cit. pages 268, 269

<sup>26</sup> "Preliminary Convention Report". op. cit., page 269

<sup>27</sup> "A Message from the President". Northwestern Lutheran. December 12, 1965. page 386

buildings?" They combined a vacation with a tour of the synod's education institutions and became convinced of the need. Subscriptions surpassed the \$4 million goal, by a million and a half.<sup>28</sup>

### **MORE ACTIVITY BROUGHT MORE CONCERNS**

The Lord did bless our synod with some larger Seminary classes in the decade which followed.. Although my class of 63 graduates didn't begin our ministry until 1976, the decisions made in the 60's clearly had an effect on our ministries.

Those were exciting times in the WELS when the home mission slogan was "in all 48 states by '78." Call days at our Seminary were particularly exciting. There were many opportunities for calls in states graduates never went to before, where no WELS pastor ever served before. The Seminary graduate sent far from the Midwestern hub of Wisconsin Synod activity was told the circumstances of his call, but the reality of what this meant for him and his family couldn't be grasped until his ministry began. Many graduates came not to an established congregation with a church building and parsonage, but often to a handful of WELS Christians, worshipping in rented facilities. These fellow Lutherans would probably rent an apartment for their new pastor, until they could build or purchase a parsonage with a family room. The parsonage was then often also used as the congregation's worship facility.

The opening of such a large number of mission congregations in such a short period of time brought about a situation where conferences, such as the then Colonial Mission Conference of the Michigan District where I began my ministry, were often made up primarily with men who had no more than five years experience in the ministry. Training at the seminary for home missionaries consisted of a one day meeting at the home of the executive secretary of home missions. As young pastors we were keenly aware that our preaching and practice was setting precedents for the WELS in the entire eastern part of the United States. We craved the rare opportunity when an experienced man, such as a seminary professor or synod administrator, would visit. He was often cornered during breaks in the conference and bombarded with individual questions. After I was in the Massachusetts for about three years, a retired pastor took a temporary-call to one of our congregations in Canada. It was as though a prophet had come. This gray-haired gentleman had our undivided attention whenever he spoke. Perhaps, even after forty years, it is still too soon to tell if it was prudent to so quickly begin so many missions in such a large geographic area with so many young pastors.

The large amount of mission openings also set up a scenario which left the WELS in a difficult situation in the decade of the eighties. Many of these new missions, if not most, were unable to become self-supporting, with operating subsidy and interest-subsidy as quickly as was hoped. The inevitable consequence was eventually more difficult decisions had to be made. Some missions which for one reason or another did not growing rapidly could no longer be supported. Our former missions in Clinton and Dubuque, Iowa, in our own Wisconsin Conference are cases in point. The questions arose again in one form or another, "what are those feeble ones doing?"

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<sup>28</sup>*Our Missio Dei Thanksgiving*. *Northwestern Lutheran*. June 23, 1968. page 198.

## THEN AND NOW

It would be facetious to say the WELS program of ministry today compares externally to what existed in the Synodical conference in 1961. Obviously some methods of communication and publication were not even imagined by called workers in the Synodical Conference. With VCR's, cell phones, private and lap-top computers, e-mail, lazer printers, photo copiers individual pastors and teachers can produce quality materials and give timely presentations. Yet, in size the WELS, while initially experiencing a numerical growth spurt, is still Lilliputian.

Might some elder WELS members today say as Ezra tells us some did in Jerusalem? The people, "gave great shouts of praise to the Lord because the foundation of the house of the Lord was laid" (3:11), but many of the older folks, "who had seen the former temple, wept aloud" (3:12). Are there those who remember the Lutheran Church of the Synodical Conference and weep because the WELS as it exists today pales compared with the glory of the church back then? Would the Lord himself in making a comparison between the Synodical Conference then and our synod now speak as he did through the Prophet Haggai about the temple in Jerusalem?

*Who of you is left who saw this house in its former glory? How does it look to you now? Does it not seem to you like nothing? (Haggai 2:3)*

In some ways it is easy to compare our synod now with our synod forty years ago. We just have to weigh one number against the next. In many other ways we are not comparing apples with apples. In forty years times have changed, the economy is changed, synod structure has changed (e.g. the restructuring of our synod preparatory schools and colleges.) and new opportunities have come about. (e.g. Internet Web sites were not even in one's vocabulary in 1961.) Nevertheless, consider this:

- The nine Wisconsin Synod districts which existed when our participation in the Synodical Conference ended has grown to twelve. But the different arrangement of Districts makes it difficult to compare areas of growth. Each of those nine 1961 districts has grown in number of congregations. The greatest area of growth, however, was where the new districts were formed (North Atlantic, South Atlantic, and South Central).
- Our thirty-six full-time administrators today far surpasses the president of the synod whose position was made full-time just in 1959. (Some might question whether many administrators is beneficial progress for the synod, or "a comfortable disease", as poet e.e. cummings defined progress.)<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup>Immanuel G. Frey in a Northwestern Lutheran editorial (May 29, 1966, page 167) commented:

*In recent years there has been a rather sharp increase in the number of men called to serve our Synod as full-time executives. The functions of their offices were formerly carried out on a part-time basis by men serving as parish pastors or teachers. The demands of the offices in question became so complex and so time-consuming that they could not be met by men whose time and energy were largely consumed by other duties. The obvious solution was to free men with special talents to perform the specialized du-*

- Our 403,824 membership is a moderate increase from our 352,563 members in 1960.
- The increase in the number of congregations is more noticeable - from 829 to 1,214.
- Then we had 1374 students in all our worker training schools, today 1891.
- According to the 2001 Statistical Report for the WELS, we have 370 Lutheran Elementary schools with an enrollment of 31,610 students. Four decades ago there were 228 schools with a total enrollment of 23,931.
- In 1961 we had 8 area Lutheran High Schools, today we have 24. This not only shows great expansion, but would also seem to be indicative of how highly WELS members value Christian education. It is no small feat, for a group of congregations to maintain a high school.
- In 1961 there were 25 candidates for the ministry from Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, forty years later the 2001 graduate assignments totaled 31.<sup>30</sup>

The biggest change in the Wisconsin Synod today from the day then we left the Synodical Conference can no doubt be seen in what is listed as "Areas of Ministry" in our present yearbook. Consider these areas of ministry which did not exist back then:

Administrative Services

Committee on Relief  
 VEBA Commission,  
 WELS Church Extension Fund  
 WELS Investment Funds, Inc.  
 WELS Foundation, Inc.

Parish Services

Commission on Worship  
 Commission on Youth Discipleship  
 Commission on Adult Discipleship  
 Commission on Special Ministries<sup>31</sup>  
 Staff Ministry

Other Synod Organizations & Projects

Jesus Cares Ministry	Civilian Chaplain (begun 1965, Vietnam)
Life Resources International	Lutheran Association for Church Extension.

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*ties of these offices.*

*. . . the matter has been approached with a great deal of caution, some doubts and certain fears. . . . There is truth as well as humor in what is known as "Parkinson's Law," which states, in effect, that "work expands in direct proportion to the time available in which to do it."*

*. . . Actually, the calling of full-time men for specialized work is not new in the Church. According to Acts 13 it was done in apostolic times upon the demand of the Lord Himself: "Separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them"*

*. . . The men who fill these offices have in some ways a rather lonely existence, and by the very nature of their offices they live in glass houses. They deserve our support, and they need our prayers. And we owe gratitude to God for endowing the Church with the talents it needs to carry on its work.*

<sup>30</sup> Figures were found in various places in the Statistical Report of the Wisconsin Ev. Lutheran Synod for 1961 - statistician E.A. Wendland and in the Statistical Report of the Wisconsin Ev. Lutheran Synod for 2001 CCFS Statistical Office.

<sup>31</sup> Several areas of Special Ministries were addressed at the time we left the Synodical Conference, such as care of the aging, college students and military personnel, but not to the extent as it is today.

Lutheran Counseling Services      Kingdom Workers  
Organization of WELS Lutheran Seniors      Gift Planning Counselors  
WELS Web sites      Wisconsin Lutheran College

In addition to these there are today numerous projects of local interest which address important needs in specific areas. (e.g. Camp Philip in the Northern Wisconsin District, Camp BASIC in our Western Wisconsin District, Wisconsin Lutheran Institutional Ministries, Lutheran Institutional Ministry Association in the Minnesota District, Project Share in the Michigan District etc.)

World Missions and Home Missions were obviously a part of the synods ministry both then and now. Each has greatly grown.

- Back then we worked alone primarily in four world mission areas - the Apache Mission, Rhodesia Mission, Japanese Mission and the Mission in Germany.

Today in our World Mission Fields we have 70,529 baptized members in 510 established congregations and 160 preaching stations. These are served by 71 missionaries, 22 teachers and 29 lay workers. Most revealing in these world missions there are 95 national pastors, 6 student pastors, 246 national evangelists, 13 national vicars, 227 Bible Institute students and 76 seminary students.<sup>32</sup>

- In home missions we were in 1961 primarily a mid-western church with some identity in the western part of the United States.

Today we have congregations in every state, except for Rhode Island. (Good Shepherd Lutheran Church which began in Rhode Island has since relocated in South Attleboro, Massachusetts.

- The synod budget  
for 1961-62 was \$4,0093,264  
for 2001-2002 \$54.4 million

The wide difference in areas of ministry and the difference in cost of living make these two figures difficult to compare.

Surely we as a church body have reason to thank and praise our Lord for the blessings he has showered upon us feeble ones since that difficult decision was made in 1961.

### **CONCLUSION - BY GOD'S GRACE OUTWARDLY SELF-SUPPORTING, INWARDLY STEADFAST**

The Lord blessed the work of his people during the days of Ezra and Nehemiah. But as strong as those walls of Jerusalem were and as beautiful as the rebuilt temple appeared, the people and leaders again strayed from the truth and promises of God's Word. When the Messiah came, Jerusalem was clueless. When our Savior carried out his ministry and did the necessary work for our redemption, the people crucified the Lord of Glory. Yet the Lord used even this dastardly deed to establish his eternal kingdom. *Unless the LORD builds the house, its builders labor in vain. (Ps. 127:1)*

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<sup>32</sup>Statistical Report of the Wisconsin Ev. Lutheran Synod for 2001. CCFS Statistical Office, page 123.

Do not we, the members of the WELS today, need to constantly remind ourselves what the important work of the church is? Are we not to shout from the rooftops the good news of Jesus to an unbelieving world, and quietly administer Word and Sacrament among the body of believers? The Gospel is God's power. He alone gives any increase.

By God's grace it would seem that the dooms day prophets of 1961 were mistaken. The Wisconsin Synod is not as large membership-wise as perhaps we wish we were. Our imperfections are as evident as the group of men meeting for this conference. Yet our perfect Savior gives us the strength to continue "to work while it is day." We sometimes disagree about things that were done in the past, or how things should be done now. Flaws and weaknesses can be pointed out in what has been built in the last forty years, yet neither would our walls fall apart if a fox climbed up on them. By God's grace we still build upon the on Corner Stone, our Lord Jesus Christ.

During the last week of my last year at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, the professor who suggested the topic for this paper was asked a question by one of my classmates. "What can we as young pastors do to be sure the same thing doesn't happen to our synod during our ministry as happened to Missouri?" Just as the question was asked the bell rang to end the class period. The professor replied, "That's an important question. I'll try to answer it the first thing tomorrow."

At the beginning of class the next day, he kept his word and said, "Men, the one thing you can do to keep our synod from falling to all the temptations that will assail us, is to live daily lives of repentance." That was it. I didn't fully comprehend the wisdom of that answer at the time, but I did remember it. And surely our strength as a church body always has been, is today, and must always be, not in our wisdom, our programs, our size, or our intensity of work, but in the daily return to the cross of Christ. We meet Jesus there. We are weak, but he is strong.

What are those feeble ones doing? Forty years after making a monumental and necessary decision, we are still doing what we were doing before 1961. Through the strength Jesus provides and for the honor of Jesus' name we continue to serve with his Gospel to build in his kingdom.

*Kenneth R. Arndt  
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