

THE DISTINCTIONS IN  
THE SYNODS OF ILLINOIS

--a brief study of the  
origins and outcomes  
of the various Lutheran  
synods in the state of Illinois

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## The Distinctions in the Synods of Illinois

The state of Illinois is the fifth most populated state of the union. It joined the United States in 1818, only 42 years after the union declared its <sup>in</sup>dependence from Great Britain. And yet it is poorly represented in our synod today, with only thirty-three congregations listed in our 1986 Yearbook.

Despite the lack of WELS representation in the Land of Lincoln, Lutheranism has played a <sup>important role</sup> heavy hand in the church history of the state. It is the purpose of this paper to search out the origins and outcomes of the various Lutheran synods of Illinois. The synods that are covered will include: the Illinois Synod, the Northern Synod of Illinois, the Central Synod of Illinois, and the Southern Synod of Illinois.

The early history of Illinois is not without its accounts of Indian battles and treacherous traveling conditions. Nor is it without an account of the early Lutheran settlers who braved the frontier to make a home for themselves.

This was the period (after 1820) in which the great westward movement in our country began to take on large proportions. New states were being founded, steam navigation was developed, roads were built into the West, and canals dug. The opening of these new territories invited settlers from the East. There were many Lutherans among them. Lutherans of Pennsylvania and New York moved into Ohio, Indiana and Illinois.

Wherever the Lutheran pioneer came, he brought with him his Bible, his Catechism, and his hymnal. In many of their log cabins in the backwoods daily devotions were conducted, and their children learned their catechism at the knees of their faithful mothers. Where a sufficient number of such Lutheran pioneers settled in one place, congregations were formed and churches built. This was done with the help and guidance of missionaries sent out by the various synods of the East.<sup>1</sup>

These loyal Lutherans, bound by distance from the east, soon formed synods of their own. On the frontier they had

troubles unique to their own situation which the eastern synods could not cure. And so in Illinois it was only a matter of time until a number of synods arose. Each of these bodies held its own purpose and outcome.

### The Illinois Synod

The Synod of Illinois held its first session at Hillsboro; Oct. 15, 1846. It is composed of seven ministers, having under their care eighteen congregations. They report Baptisms forty-two, confirmations thirty-one, communicants six hundred-eighty-five. These Brethren seem to be engaged in the work of the Master. This synod in connection with the Synod of the West, have recently established a Literary and Theological Institute at Hillsboro, Illinois. We trust that this attempt to advance the Redeemer's kingdom may be abundantly successful.<sup>2</sup>

This report shows the concern that the Illinois Synod had for keeping its members educated in the areas of their redemption. On the other hand, often the extreme interest in a liberal, literary education shows an affinity in liberal theology.

In 1848, the Synod joined the General Synod. At one time the General Synod had stood for something confessional and orthodox, as can be seen by its early leader, Samuel Schmucker:

I solemnly declare in the presense of God and the Directors of this Seminary, that I do believe the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament to be the inspired Word of God, and the only perfect rule of faith and practice. I believe the Augsburg Confession and the Catechisms of Luther to be a summary and just exhibition of the fundamental doctrines of the Word of God....<sup>3</sup>

Despite this <sup>seemingly</sup> solid stance, the Synod of Illinois gave no mention to the Definite Synodical Platform in the official minutes of its meeting held in 1856. This platform was less than orthodox when introduced in 1855. In fact, the fact that it in part came from the hand of Schmucker, shows that he was only treading water in his theological position. The Platform made it clear that it did not hold the Augsburg Confession

to be an accurate Biblical document, but it itself declared that the Augsburg Confession was in error on five accounts. Whether this silence reflected an indifferent attitude toward the confessions, or toward the teachings of the Bible can be debated. However, in time the Synod of Illinois more firmly established its feet in orthodox and confessional soil.

Confessionalism in the General Synod continued to deteriorate. Despite the confessional statements that were made, practise just was not following. The Melanchthon Synod was accepted; the Frankean Synod was accepted. Neither of which would proclaim their stance on the Augsburg Confession. Finally it was time for the Synod of Illinois to get out, and in 1867, joined the General Council.

The required number of synods having adopted the 'fundamental principles,' the first regular convention of the 'General Council of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of North America' was held at Fort Wayne in November, 1867. Eleven synods participated in the organization: the Ministerium of Pennsylvania, the New York Ministerium, the English Synod of Ohio, the Pittsburgh Synod, the Wisconsin Synod, the English District Synod of Ohio, the Michigan Synod, the Augustana Synod, the Minnesota Synod, the Canada Synod, and the Illinois Synod.<sup>4</sup>

The General Council never changed "the fundamental principles of faith" that it had adopted when it was organized. The doctrinal position assumed in those principles was the distinguishing mark of the General Council throughout the fifty years of its life. It asserted that the Unaltered Augsburg Confession is by "pre-eminence" the Confession of the Lutheran faith, being "throughout in conformity with the pure truth of which God's Word is the only rule; that the other confessions in the Book of Concord are in perfect harmony with th Augsburg Confession, and that the confessions in order to be a bond of union must be understood in the same sense by those who subscribe to them."<sup>5</sup>

Despite this apparent unity, the singleness of doctrine would not last. In time its position too, grew a bit indifferent and there were great differences in what the synods believed.

It was soon found that even among Lutherans of the strictest orthodoxy there were wide differences of opinion concerning the doctrinal teachings of the confessions. The variety of interpretations cropped out particularly in several matters of practise. The result was that the Missouri Synod refused to join the Council, and most of the other western synods withdrew after the organization was formed.<sup>6</sup>

Just as the indifference of the General Synod caused division among the Synods, so the indecision on the Four Points caused division among the General Council. Chiliasm, altar fellowship, pulpit fellowship, and secret societies had been brought up for discussion. But no reply had been produced. As a result, the Wisconsin Synod left in 1868. Two years later, Illinois Synod left along with the Minnesota Synod.

Attempts at unity were not given up and the Synodical Conference appeared. "At the time of its organization, the Ohio Synod, the Norwegian Synod, the Illinois Synod, the Minnesota Synod, the Wisconsin Synod, and the Missouri Synod became charter members."<sup>7</sup> "The first permanent officers elected were C.F.W. Walther, president; William Lehmann, vice-president; Friedrich A. Schmidt, secretary; and John Schmidt, treasurer."<sup>8</sup> Delegates from the Illinois Synod were President F. Erdmann, and the Reverend F. Wolbrecht.

In 1880, the Illinois Synod officially *Merged with* ~~absorbed~~ into the Missouri Synod and became its Illinois District.

#### The Synod of Northern Illinois

The beginning of the Northern Illinois Synod is found in Lars P. Esborn. He was a leader for a Swedish settlement in the state of Illinois. He had attended a meeting of the Frankean Synod but was not impressed; so he conducted a fund-raising tour attending the joint sessions of the Joint Synod of Ohio,

the Pittsburgh Synod, and the Ministerium to open the eyes of the Eastern Lutherans to the mission prospects. Esborn later wrote to the East: "I have the hope that a Lutheran Synod may be opened in Illinois and I would be pleased to unite with the same, unless it 'throws away the Augsburg Confession.'<sup>9</sup>

On May 21, 1853, the Northern <sup>Illinois</sup> Synod was accepted into the General Synod. We have this account of the popularity of the General Synod at this time:

By 1860, the General Synod held 26 synods, 864 ministers, and 164,000 communicants and its territory covered the South and Texas, the entire Atlantic seaside and extended westward to Illinois and northward to Minnesota.<sup>10</sup>

That same year, however, in 1860, the Scandinavians who "had been associated with the General Synod through membership in Northern Illinois Synod, withdrew because of the lax doctrinal practice of the general body and organized the Scandinavian Augustana Synod."<sup>11</sup>

The confessional stance of the remainder of the Northern Synod <sup>was</sup> is less than orthodox. When the crisis came up over the Definite Synodical Platform, the Synod told its delegates to "vote against the platform if the question came to the floor."<sup>12</sup> Yet it persisted in its rejection of some of the writings of the Unaltered Augsburg Confession and other symbolical books of the Lutheran Church.<sup>13</sup>

Despite the confessional conflicts, the Northern Synod of Illinois persisted until it joined the United Lutheran Church of America in 1918. In 1920, it joined the Central Illinois Synod, the Southern Illinois Synod, and the Chicago Synod to form Illinois Synod of the ULCA.

## The Synods of Central and Southern Illinois

The Southern Illinois Synod has a silent past. Its name is found in the indices of very few books. It was formed in 1856, and became a member of the General Synod in May, 1857. It merged with the Central Synod of Illinois in 1897, only to split again in 1901. In 1918, it joined with the ULCA, and two years later merged with the other Illinois Synods to form the Illinois Synod of the ULCA.

The formation of the Central Synod of Illinois is more colorful.

During the great doctrinal conflict between the "New Measures and the American Platform" and the "Old Measures and the old doctrinal position", which came to a head in 1866, some of the pastors and congregations of the Central Illinois Synod to the new General Body, which had split off from the General Synod and called itself the "General Council", then from the General Council to the Missouri Synod. However, soon these pastors and congregations rebelled against the "Predestination Doctrine of the Missouri Synod" and particularly against the strict practise of casting all lodge members out of the church. Much litigation about church properties resulted. The Pastors Thoele, Tjaden and Bond lost their churches in such litigation, hence their strong antagonism to Missouri.<sup>14</sup>

The Central Synod returned to the General Synod in 1868 after its organization in 1867. In 1876, the German Conference split to form the Wartburg Synod. As noted above, in 1897, it joined the Southern <sup>Illinois</sup> Synod only to split again in 1901. In 1918, it joined the ULCA when the General Council joined the General Synod and the United Synod of the South to form the new church body. In 1920, it merged with the Southern Synod, the Northern Synod and the Chicago Synod to form the Illinois Synod of the ULCA.

### Conclusion

So it has come to be that we, the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod have only thirty-three congregations in Illinois.

Despite the early beginnings of Lutheranism in Illinois, the pull was much too strong from the unionists who, for the sake of numbers, have relinquished their heritage in God's Word and Luther's explanations. And yet all is not lost. Those who are not against us are for us. Where God's Word is being at least read, there are hearts that are turning to Him in hope and comfort that their sins have been forgiven in the blood of Christ.

And yet we cannot give up the fight. Whether in Illinois or elsewhere, we must take up our Sword of Truth and the shield of our Lutheran heritage and uphold the doctrines for which we stand. May God give us the confidence and the strength in this never ending battle.

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ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup>W.G. Polack, The Building of a Great Church, (St. Louis, Missouri, Concordia Pub. House, 1941), p. 22.
- <sup>2</sup>Carl S. Meyer, Moving Frontiers, (St. Louis, Missouri, Concordia Pub. House, 1964), p. 36.
- <sup>3</sup>E. Clifford Nelson, The Lutherans in North America, (Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1980), p. 217.
- <sup>4</sup>Abdel Ross Wentz, A Basic History of Lutheranism in America, (Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1964), p.147.
- <sup>5</sup>Ibid., p.232.
- <sup>6</sup>Ibid., p.233.
- <sup>7</sup>Meyer, p.260.
- <sup>8</sup>Nelson, p.251.
- <sup>9</sup>Ibid., p.170.
- <sup>10</sup>Polack, p.107.
- <sup>11</sup>Ibid., p.107.
- <sup>12</sup>Vergilius Ferm, The Crisis in American Lutheran Theology, (New York, The Century Co., 1927), p.333.
- <sup>13</sup>Meyer, p.46.
- <sup>14</sup>ULCA Committee, Story of the Midwest Synod--ULCA, p.19.

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