

Johannes Heinrich Sieker

The Living Link Between Conservative Lutheranism

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"For 28 years he was the pastor of St. Matthews Lutheran Church and a leading minister of the Missouri Synod. In synodical matters he was an uncompromising defender of the faith as he understood it. He left the record of a singularly devoted and successful ministry. At least 30 young men were led into the ministry under his influence. Roesener's "Ehrendenkmal," a sketch of his life and character ought to be read by every Lutheran minister in this city."¹ The memorial to him in our synod's Gemeindeblatt of 1905 reads, "Der Kreis derer in unserer Synode, mit denen er als Synodalbruder noch zusammenlebte, ist nicht mehr gross, aber wie er ihnen als Synodalbruder werth war, ist auch bin ihnen herzliche Traue-ueber sein Scheiden."² The Wisconsin Synod was saying it owed a great deal to this man as a synod brother for all the work he had done, and that we would really miss him.

Who is this man? And why is he so important? Johannes Heinrich Sieker is my great-great uncle. He and my great-great grandfather William Conrad Sieker and the rest of the Christian Sieker (my great-great-great grandfather) family emigrated to America from Schweinfurt, Bavaria in 1850. A recounting of his life story takes one from his early life in Newton, WI (near Manitowoc), to his theological training at Gettysburg Theological Seminary in Pennsylvania, to his first parish at Salem Ev. Lutheran Church in Granville, WI. From there he went to Trinity Lutheran Church in St. Paul, MN and became president of the Minnesota Synod. In 1876 he took a call to St. Matthews

Ev. Lutheran Church in Manhattan, NY and thus ^{became} the pastor of the oldest continuously Lutheran congregation in the US (since 1649). He remained there until his death in 1904.

Through all these 65 years of life, Sieker became the living link between the Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Missouri Synods. Each of these synods owe him a great deal. To the Wisconsin Synod, he was their first home-grown pastor. To the Minnesota Synod, he was the one who set them on the right paths of conservative Lutheranism and established bonds with the Wisconsin Synod. His life ended with Missouri after leading many people into the Missouri Synod fold. He also had links with the Pennsylvania Ministerium, the General Council, and the General Synod. He was always campaigning for orthodox doctrine and practice and was a champion of our Lutheran Confessions. All this is attributed to one young, stubborn man.

But everything in his life story has a connection. The history books might remember him as a great man, but they don't always tell the whole story. It is my attempt then, in this paper, to recount the important events in his life story. Only then will one see the intricate, living link that existed between different synods and different events. Things turned out the way they did mainly because of him. I've labeled this paper then: "Johannes Heinrich Sieker: The Living Link ~~Between~~ Conservative Lutheranism."

As I said earlier, my interest in the latter half of the 19th century has more to it than just the history of Sieker. It also has something to do with my family history. Events

in that history play an important role in what happens later. Sieker himself recounts some of those events in early autobiographical writings that were compiled while he was pastor in New York and which he thought were important to understanding his character. Sieker's niece, Lillian Sieker, who compiled a family history also adds her own recollections.

Johannes Heinrich Sieker (Henry) was born Oct. 21, 1839 in Schweinfurt, Bavaria during a period of great political unrest in all of Europe. In Germany, Bismarck was trying to form the German Empire. Austria and Prussia were vying with each other to unite the German states and be the controlling power in them. Revolutions in America and France opened avenues for freedom-seekers who didn't want to see their families disrupted by war.

One of them was my great-great-great grandfather, Christian Sieker. He was considered a liberal dissident. He had taken part in the Citizen's Army during the 1847-1850 revolt, even though he felt it was only as one defending the city in case of attack. Because he was always under suspicion, he greatly desired to get out of a land where his six sons would surely have to enter Bavarian military service.

Henry recalls those vivid events of 1850. His father sold their home property at a great loss, giving up most of their many possessions, and undertook a trek that had them headed for Australia and freedom. Henry was the third son and apparently the oldest one to make the journey. Older brothers Christian and George would join the family in America later.

When this young family arrived at Bremen, they met a family called the Hemschemeyer§ who had experienced some bad luck. They too wanted to emigrate, but in a mix-up were left without funds for the journey. Because they had relatives in Manitowoc, WI who described the land as "flowing with milk and honey," and because reports abounded of the freedom and spaciousness of America, Christian§ Sieker§ helped pay their passage over here. Together they undertook a long journey across the Atlantic ocean to New York, to the Great Lakes and finally to Sheboygan, WI.

From here the Hemschemeyer§§ induced them to travel north a short distance to Manitowoc County. Here they were disillusioned. Instead of paradise, they found a cruel, virgin forest. Henry Sieker was to grow up in the roughest lands one could imagine. Historical records of that day show that Wisconsin had roughly a total population of 30,000 scattered mostly in the southern part of the state. The entire northern half, including Manitowoc, was still an absolute wilderness.³ I won't recount all the details of those days, but merely summarize their travails. Christian Sieker was swindled into buying cheap land. He took sick with dysentery, his crops failed, he had only two young sons who had to try to take care of things, money was soon scarce, and Indian scares abounded. Generally life was at its toughest. Having lived in a comfortable setting in Schweinfurt, they were wholly unaccustomed to this kind of living.

Lillian Sieker then points to what helped them get through

all these hard times. "The bright spot in the lives of this family was the religion of their ancestors which they brought with them."⁴ Thus we have some interesting tidbits about the early religious life of a soon-famous Christian. Records indicate that the Sieker family in Europe was under the control of the state-run religions. In Schweinfurt, that happened to be Reformed. When they got to Manitowoc however, the one or two-year-old Wisconsin Synod was in the area. It was the only religion around. Young Rev. Wilhelm Streissguth was then a Lutheran pastor at Newton, WI. Services were held in a block house which served also as a school for the community. Pastor Streissguth, who later would play a very important role in many areas of Henry's life, reports that neither rain, mud, snow, nor any other elements of weather kept the Sieker family from attending church, school, or confirmation instructions. In the story of Sieker's biography, we're told how his father Christian would walk ahead of the four children who were taking instructions, and they would step in his footprints because of the mud. Christian would sing in German: "I walk with Jesus all the way." Years later as a pastor, Sieker would recount this to his confirmands and tell them also to walk in the footsteps of Jesus.⁵

Streissguth did his best to teach young Sieker his catechism instructions. He noted how bright Sieker was compared to the rest of the students. When Streissguth left Manitowoc, Rev. Philip Sprengler finished off his instructions and confirmed him in 1857.

Because Henry was a superior student in religion, Rev.

Streissguth advised Christian Sieker to send him to Manitowoc to further his studies under Rev. Goldammer. Once there, he lived in a small room in the church tower and helped out Goldammer a great deal. During this time the first notice about Sieker appeared in the Synodical Report of the Wisconsin Synod at St. John's in Milwaukee. Mentioned among the "advisory members" was Teacher Henry Sieker.⁶

That report mentions that Sieker was one of four young men who after examination on knowledge of the Bible was recommended for further studies for the ministry. He had a pious character and certainly possessed the talents for that ministry. It was therefore recommended that the Wisconsin Synod would assist *him* in further training under the direction of Prof. C. F. Schaeffer at Gettysburg Seminary in Pennsylvania. The Wisconsin Synod at this time didn't have its own training school and still was connected with the more liberal Eastern synods.

The Seminary Years

The next era in Henry's life was also to play an important role in shaping many things to come. At the age of 19 Henry went to Gettysburg as a poor farm boy. He studied quite diligently but was never satisfied with his work. He was in college for only one year and so followed a selected curriculum which he studied through thoroughly. He reports how he would stay awake most of the night to study and would submerge his feet in cold water in order to keep alert.⁷ In the judgment of the President of the Gymnasium, his behavior was in every respect an example for the 203 students. He always included

prayers with his studies. He always looked forward to the day when he could be a faithful servant working in God's kingdom, and disliked those who would goof off. His prayer went, "May this studying help to prepare me for the service of God in the Gospel."

Because he learned his subjects so well, Henry was excused from many mundane courses and skipped on to the two years of seminary training. In Ehrendenkmal we're told he had a love for the Lutheran confessions. "Already at the Seminary, he was always a zealous and fearless confessor and proclaimer of the strict symbolic teaching of the Lutheran Church."⁸ We're also told that he loved the writings of Luther so well and made this notation: "the closer to Luther, the better the theologian." He also followed what was going on in the Missouri Synod by reading their theological writings, the Lehre and Wehre and Lutheraner. Finally Henry Sieker graduated in August of 1861, receiving two diplomas, one in German and one in English.

In order to understand those years even better, we have the unfavorable opinion of one of his classmates recorded in his own memoirs. Henry Jacobs makes several points that help to explain Sieker's behavior in later disputes.

"Sieker, who even when in Prep, took delight in absorbing the time of his class by disputing with the tutor concerning the interpretation of Virgil. He was so superior to the rest of us that, at one bound, he had vaulted from the Preparatory Department to the Gettysburg Seminary, leaving the rest of us to plod along in the regular college course. He was a crude, conceited German, of large build, carrying himself, when a Preparatorian, with the bearing of an Archbishop,

and wearing a coat with remarkably long tails."⁹

Apparently Sieker spent a lot of time formulating his own opinions and divulging them. As a brash young man, as we'll soon find out, he would have no trouble in expressing those opinions and questioning those he felt were in error. And I guess with his large build and his reputation for brilliance from school, everybody looked up to him and listened to what he had to say.

Salem--Granville

In September, 1861, Henry Sieker was ordained in his first parish--Salem Ev. Lutheran Church in Granville, WI. This congregation was one of the three founding congregations of the Wisconsin Synod. Lillian Sieker recalls those years from 1861--1867. "It seems his stay here at first was none too pleasant. The people were Pennsylvania Dutch, noted for their economy and thrift, but Henry was dynamic and a forceful leader and preacher and needless to say won his parishioners."¹⁰ His salary was \$200 a year and it often wasn't paid.

During these years, Sieker soon had a flourishing congregation. In 1863, they dedicated a new church that would serve as the main facility for 110 years. Only recently this building was dedicated as the Wisconsin Synod's Historical landmark and museum.

During these early years, Sieker was also designated as secretary and treasurer of an organizational committee designated to raise scholarships for the new synodical school--Northwestern College at Watertown in 1867. For this purpose

he traveled extensively in Wisconsin and Minnesota and succeeded in raising \$44,000, a lot of money in those days.

Another event that occurred during these years also will help explain events later. On Aug. 28, 1861 Sieker married Julia Sophie Streissguth of Lohr Baden. Pastor Wilhelm Streissguth who had been Sieker's most influential confirmation pastor, induced his sister to come to America and meet Henry Sieker. They wrote letters, fell in love, got married, and had a short honeymoon through Salem's cemetery and to a nearby neighbor's home.¹¹ Now remember the importance of this marriage, because later as Streissguth's brother-in-law, there would always be a natural tie to keep these two people together in later discussions.

Trinity--St. Paul, MN

John P. Koehler then theorizes how Sieker's next call came about. "His Eastern schooling and the influence of Father Heyer serve to explain his call to St. Paul and early election as praeses of the new synod."¹² His travels to Minnesota for Northwestern College probably helped a lot in putting him on their call list. From 1867--1876 Sieker served at Trinity Lutheran Church in St. Paul, MN.

In Minnesota now, a whole new era in Sieker history begins. Sieker was released from his dear Wisconsin Synod and within six months became president of an even younger Minnesota Synod. He was only 29 years old. Historians record those years very favorably for Sieker. It is here that he first gained recognition.

When the Minnesota district of WELS wrote its Golden Jubilee History it looked back at those years. And in the slim records that remain, absolutely no other names stand out besides Sieker. "When attention is given to those who exerted a good influence on Minnesota's theological position, the name most frequently mentioned is that of Johannes Heinrich Sieker."¹³

But in order to understand why this can be said, one must look back at Minnesota's founding years. Again the records show that, "the early years of the Minnesota Synod were marked and marred by laxity in doctrine and practice."¹⁴ Other records show that before Sieker came, those churches in Minnesota were in desperate need for ministers, yet only got screwballs. "The members of the synod were neither doctrinally nor ideologically in full harmony."¹⁵ "Unionism, fellowship with adherents of false doctrine, was the order of the day and remained unrebuked."¹⁶

Pastor Fachtman, who had preceded Sieker at Trinity, had done much to mess things up. He professed allegiance to the Confessions, but neither taught nor practiced such a position. We in the Wisconsin Synod remember him as a great missionary but can't condone some of his theology. In fact, later in 1871, the Minnesota Synodical reports tell about Fachtman's expulsion and denounced him as a unionist, a liar, and as one who had misused his office.¹⁷

Into this situation Sieker now came. In 1866, Minnesota had left the General Synod and proceeded to join the General Council. Pastor Heyer, the founder of the Minnesota Synod

had wanted this and Minnesota could hardly divest itself of its Eastern ties. The General Council at first appeared to have a splendid new confessional stance. But practice didn't always agree with doctrine.

The Wisconsin Synod at this time saw through the false front of the General Council and promptly withdrew from the new grouping. The question was, would the younger, more liberal Minnesota, do likewise?

Sieker chose to make a more gradual withdrawal. We have to remember Sieker's background. At the Seminary he liked to question his professors. Here in Pennsylvania he also wanted to do the same thing. Sieker raised the question of the Four Points against the General Council. These Four Points brought up questions on chiliasm, lodges, pulpit fellowship, and altar fellowship. His particular questions were labeled the "Minnesota Memorial"¹⁸ Basically he was asking what the Council would do with errorists. Some historians will say it was Iowa or Ohio that brought up these points, but they fail to understand that it was really Sieker and his own personality that was challenging the General Council's orthodoxy. This is evidenced by the fact that the General Council did all it could to shun Sieker's questions on parliamentary grounds. Henry Jacob's Memoirs point out however, that "the questions propounded by this very inexperienced delegate from Minnesota were deemed worthy the attention of a committee consisting of Drs. Seiss, Krauth, and C.W Schaeffer(his old seminary professor) and convulsed the entire church."¹⁹ The General Council did

finally answer Sieker. They said, of course, there would be no fellowship with errorists. But they qualified that by saying only intentional ones. That answer could be taken either way and still allowed fellowship with so called "unconscious" errorists. In 1871 Sieker and Minnesota severed their ties with the General Council and suddenly found themselves all alone.

Yet not really that alone. Here again Henry Sieker plays a leading role as a living connection with other synods. One can read all about how both the Wisconsin and Minnesota Synods soon had the same doctrinal and ideological practices. Sieker did a lot to bring that about. But Sieker also had family and friends back in Wisconsin. Also his own wife was related to Vice-President Steissguth. Sieker grew up in the Wisconsin Synod and naturally wanted to keep close ties. The only thing that stood in the way was a group of stubborn Wisconsinites who still remembered the unorthodoxy of Fachtman and the Eastern influences of Heyer. Now Sieker had shown that Minnesota would stand by the confessions and avoid all the errors.

We're back-tracking here, but this is how it all came about. In May, 1869, Streissguth represented Wisconsin at the Minnesota Synod meeting. The following month Streissguth and Sieker reported to the Racine meeting of the Wisconsin Synod that Minnesota wished to join with Wisconsin. President Bading approved and recommended that such a proposal be worked out.

Since Wisconsin had already withdrawn from the General Council and Minnesota had not, some felt that an immediate union with Minnesota would annul the effects of this break with

the General Council. Thus at the Sept, 1869 meeting at La Crosse, Wisconsin wouldn't join with Minnesota fully but agreed that there was a very definite link between the two synods. In fact, in 1871, Wisconsin adopted a formal resolution, recognizing the full orthodoxy of the Minnesota Synod.

Sieker eventually realized that the fight with the General Council was proving futile, and at the Minnesota Convention of 1871, formally terminated fellowship with the General Council. At the same time, Sieker's brother-in-law, Streissguth, was on hand with J.P. Koehler to work out the details of a union with Wisconsin.

Having been accepted by Wisconsin, union was also made with Missouri. Sieker's accomplishments had brought about a recognition of Minnesota's orthodoxy. When the Synodical Conference was organized, Missouri and Minnesota were now tied together. How much of this can be tied to Sieker is hard to tell. Koehler says that Sieker's intercongregational experience at St. Paul's would argue that he was everything but a pro-Missourian.²⁰

This can be traced back to a breakoff congregation in St. Paul called Zion. Zion broke off from Trinity congregation because of the unionistic practices of Fachtman and joined the Missouri Synod. Sieker arrived in Minnesota just in time to tell his departing members that they were sinning in this break. Zion asked Sieker why they were still in the unionistic General Council. Angered, Sieker said Trinity would start a new off-shoot congregation right next to Zion and get back

some of its members. Needless to say, things calmed down once Sieker got Minnesota out of the General Council, but what influence that had on Missouri--Minnesota relations, we don't know. The rift couldn't have been too great, because only a few years later Sieker would join the Missouri Synod when he was in New York.

But before we get into that era in Sieker's life, there are two sidenotes to Sieker's Minnesota years. When Minnesota and Wisconsin joined in 1871, Sieker furthered the link by serving as co-editor of Wisconsin's paper--the GemeindeBlatt. Thus you might say Sieker had one more connection with Wisconsin Synod History. The other noteworthy thought was Sieker's appointment by the Synodical Conference to study the question of State synods. It could be said that he thrashed these problems out quite a bit. Sieker knew however, that if the plan went into effect, the Minnesota Synod would literally dissolve out of existence. However, in 1875 he reported that he hadn't had the time to carry out the full assignment.²¹ This delayed the resolution until Wisconsin could nix the idea. And a few months later, Sieker was gone.

St. Matthew's--New York

During Sieker's hectic schedule at St. Paul, he was quite surprised to receive a call in March, 1876 from St. Matthew's Lutheran Church in New York. This church had been formed in 1646 when New York was New Amsterdam and belonged to Holland. Since it was one of the wealthiest congregations it depended little on outside influences. Under Pastor Ruperti, she had remained quite confessional and was now looking for a con-

servative successor. Since Henry Sieker had been trained in the East, since he had friends and acquaintances in the East, since he had become well-known as a champion of confessionalism, since he was a dynamic preacher and had been successful in most of his endeavors, and since some few read his articles in GemeindeBlatt, his selection for candidacy was without question. At first he hesitated to accept the call and after long deliberation asked the Missouri Synod Seminary in St. Louis for advice. They told him he was the best man to tackle the job. In May, 1876 he was installed as preacher. For 28 years he served as her pastor until his death in 1904.

However, we don't want to pass over these years too quickly. During his tenure at St. Matthew's, Sieker now had to deal with the New York Ministerium. This brought him new challenges. Again he went up against some of the same men he had fought against with his Four Points in the General Council. In 1881 he *disassociated himself from* the Ministerium and joined the Missouri Synod. He took several pastors and their congregations with him. They found that Sieker was just the ally they needed and he helped lead them on to greater confessional stands.²² Four years later in 1885, he even took St. Matthew's, at the time the largest Lutheran congregation in the United States, along with him. The reason he joined Missouri and not Wisconsin or Minnesota, after championing their causes so long, was because Minnesota and Wisconsin didn't have any presence in the area. Whereas Missouri was stronger and closer at hand.

It might also be noted that from New York, Sieker became

an ardent supporter of the St. Louis Seminary as well as the one still in Watertown. His sons Adolph, and Otto, and Henry all attended both of them.

During his illustrious career at St. Matthew's, Henry Sieker also became noteworthy for many other endeavors. He founded the Concordia Collegiate Institute in Bronxville and encouraged St. Matthew's to be her most generous supporter.²³ He started the Inner Mission and many other charitable institutions.

Conclusion

The story of Johannes Heinrich Sieker could go on for hundreds more pages. Pastor Paul Roesener of St. Stephanus in New York found it essential to write a 134 page booklet Ehrendenkmal to remember this man. Sieker's own niece, Lillian Sieker chose to spend most of her time writing about "dear Uncle Henry" in her family history dating back to 1738. Certainly the Wisconsin Synod owes a lot to him, even more does Minnesota, and to a great degree Missouri.

A long list of confessionally-minded pastors are his heirs. They too must look up to this stubborn German who stood by his convictions. In fact, it's my own father, William Hein, who I liken him to the most. He was born in the ALC, grew up and was reared in Missouri, vicared in the ELS, and became a pastor in WELS. And in WELS he found his true convictions. In his dealings with Missouri Synod's Racine Lutheran in the 1960's, I can still remember the stand my father, while pastor at Trinity, Caledonia had to take. And he stuck by his guns

just like I think Henry Sieker would have done.

Aside from that, I hope that understanding all the connections Sieker had made between different bodies of Lutherans, one might better appreciate the living link he really was between confessing conservative Lutherans. And I guess great-great-great grandfather Christian Sieker's words, "I walk with Jesus all the way" were of great importance in that exemplary Christian life. May we never forget that that was the true basis for bringing all these like-minded Lutherans together. As long as the clear teachings of Christ are there, you can't keep them apart.

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¹George U. Werner, The Lutherans of New York (New York: The Petersfield Press, 1918), p. 65.

²Ev. Luth. GemeindeBlatt, Vol. 40 #1 (Jan. 1, 1905), p.13.

³Otto F. Hattstaedt, History of the Southern Wisconsin District of the Ev. Luth. Synod of MO, OH, and Other States (Madison: Wisconsin Historical Records Survey, 1941), p. 4.

⁴Lillian Croll Sieker, A History of the Christian Sieker Family (Milwaukee, 1956), p. 13.

⁵Ella Hesse Fick, "Young John Henry Sieker," Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly, Vol. 57 #3 (Fall, 1984), p. 106.

⁶Ibid., p. 107.

⁷Ibid., p. 107.

⁸Paul Roesener, Ehrendenkmal des Pastor Johann Heinrich Sieker (West Roxbury, Mass.: Martin Luther Orphanage Press, 1905), p. 16.

⁹Henry E. Horn, The Memoirs of Henry Eyster Jacobs (Huntingdon, PA: Church Management Service, 1974), Vol. II, p. 191.

¹⁰Sieker, op. cit. p. 20.

¹¹Ibid., p. 20.

¹²John P. Koehler, The History of the Wisconsin Synod (St. Cloud: Sentinel Publ. Company, 1970). p. 172.

¹³Manfred J. Lenz, Golden Jubilee History of the MN District of the WELS and its Member Congregations, 1918-1968 (Minneapolis, 1969), p. 19.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 18.

¹⁵M. Lehninger, Continuing in His Word (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publ. House, 1951), p. 101.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 103.

¹⁷Koehler, op. cit., p. 128.

¹⁸Willard D. Allbeck, History of the Lutheran Church in America (Burlington, IA: The Lutheran Literary Board, 1934), p. 239.

¹⁹Horn, op. cit., p. 191.

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²⁰Koehler, op. cit., p. 173.

²¹Ibid., p. 143.

²²Allbeck, op. cit., p. 188.

²³Erwin L. Lueker, Lutheran Cyclopedia (St. Louis: Concordia Publ. House, 1954), p. 976.

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