

WELS-LCMS Relations 1993-2007

First hand perspectives on the similarities, differences and relations of the WELS and the LCMS and their probable future interaction.

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Daniel Iwinski

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§ Introduction §

In a busy airport two men representing the nation's second and third largest Lutheran denominations in the United States met informally. Karl Gurgel, President of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS), and Dr. A.L. Barry, President of the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod (LCMS) met for the purpose of getting to know one another and professional courtesy. Forty years prior the respective church bodies were in fellowship with one another and with the ELS in the Synodical Conference, a union shared since 1872. How did the two church bodies with such strong ties and shared history get so far apart? Despite so much in common and despite congeniality a clear absence of doctrinal and church fellowship stood.

This paper seeks to give some context and answer the question as to why the WELS and the LCMS were and are so far apart theologically and practically. This paper is about the relations between the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod and the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod during the years of the mid 1990's until 2007 from first hand accounts and perspectives. It is not an accounting of "official" meetings at the synodical level but rather is told from the firsthand perspective of one who was educated at Concordia Theological Seminary in Fort Wayne, Indiana, in 2000, and who was ordained and served as an LCMS pastor for seven and a half years ending in the Summer of 2007. Included in this are observations and conclusions on the state of the Missouri Synod including an interview with the Reverend Daniel Preus, former First Vice President of the LCMS. Following this is an interview with president emeritus of the WELS, Karl Gurgel. The greatest weakness of this paper may be its most appealing character to readers further in the future: this paper, while interacting and seeking first hand accounts of key people within the WELS and the LCMS, also rests largely upon the first hand experiences of its

author. While first hand experiences are subjective and somewhat “elastic” to an individual, oftentimes they may contain the most vivid accounting of people, places and events.

The WELS and the LCMS are separated doctrinally on the doctrines of church and ministry and church fellowship; further, the two synods are separated by different approaches to ministry internally and externally. This gulf is real, widening and in the opinion of many (my own included) permanent.

§ Concordia Theological Seminary--Fort Wayne §

Concordia Theological Seminary--Fort Wayne during the mid 1990's was an interesting and often conflicting amalgamation of students and professors. I arrived as a neophyte to Lutheran theology. I could not have easily identified the “Book of Concord” as the book of Lutheran Confessions. At times this ignorance was a blessing as I was learning theology and the organization and functioning of the LCMS; at other times my lack of knowledge hurt and even excluded me from certain fraternal fellowships. It took some time to finally understand all of the dissensions and tensions within even the faculty.

It was difficult as a student perceiving the unity yet division within the faculty of the seminary. Unlike the problems at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis during the 1970's when deep theological convictions about the nature of Scripture came to a head in the Seminex walkout, the problems in the 1990's at Concordia Fort Wayne focused on the ministry, liturgy, worship, and the nature of ‘church’ as expressed through synod among other issues.

To a man all of the faculty unhesitatingly held to an inerrant understanding of the Bible and a *quia* subscription to the Book of Concord. Likewise, the faculty was clearly in strong support of Christian education, mission work and I believe each in ^{his} their own unique way a

support for the Missouri Synod.

An interesting show of disparity amongst the faculty was in the infrequent but occasional debates or open talks between professors on the campus. One such event was on the nature of John 6 and whether or not Jesus was speaking sacramentally or not. The debate consisted of Dr. Scaer who argued in favor of a sacramental understanding of the text and Dr. Walter A. Maier II who spoke against such an understanding. A Corinthian rivalry amongst the students showed as students favored one professor over another. No real conclusion was drawn at the end of the debate which in itself seemed illustrative of the coexisting attitudes and approaches to Scripture interpretation.

§ Theological Issues Within the LCMS §

Perhaps no other area of doctrine has been so perennially debated among American Lutherans as the doctrine of church and ministry. In the LCMS in general and Concordia Theological Seminary in particular struggled, debated, and often fought over these issues. While the official position of the LCMS is that of Walther as expressed in his “Church and Ministry” many challenged the office of ministry, church and synodical polity and hierarchy of the synod. An example of one such debate rested on the “gift” of one ordained into holy ministry.

Dr. Scaer of the Fort Wayne faculty taught that an ordained clergy had received a special “gift” of the Holy Spirit via the laying on of hands that took place at ordination. He based his teaching on 1 Timothy 4:11-14:

Command and teach these things. Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity. Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching. Do not neglect your **gift**, which was given you through a prophetic message when the body of elders laid their hands

on you. (1 Timothy 4:11-14 NIV, emphasis mine)

It was argued that Timothy received a “gift” that he could neglect, hence he received something indelible.¹ While it ^{lies} beyond the scope of this paper’s thesis to critique the exegesis and conclusions this teaching raises, it is indicative of the kind of teaching approaching something very close to the ontological change in ordination as taught by the Roman Catholic church. Did the faculty as a whole support this teaching of Dr. Scaer? No. However, little was done to counter or stop it.

§ Divisions Within The LCMS §

Understanding the LCMS (especially since the 1990's to the present) is not an easy task. Certainly the synod’s situation is politically more complicated than the 1970's when a liberal-conservative polarity amongst the pastors and laity existed. To help put into perspective the state of the Missouri Synod the theological divisions I believe may be delineated along five competing groups as follows:

1. High Church
2. “Waltherian”
3. “Gospel Only”
4. Charismatic
5. Liberal

The “High Church” proponents within the LCMS were particularly interested in the theologies of Grabau and Loehe. They supported a clericist position on the office of holy ministry, often spoke very highly of “apostolic succession” and were fond of a bishop focused church hierarchy much like that found in Scandanavia and many Continental Lutheran churches. Students of this persuasion often were great sympathy and support for Professor David Scaer on

the faculty who through writings and public speaking proposed such a theology for the synod. Another champion of this position is (now deceased) LCMS theologian Arthur Piepkorn who espoused such views in the 1950's and 1960's.

To be sure not all the proponents of this theological persuasion are of the same zeal but they are often highly motivated, vocal and well organized; despite their comparatively small numbers they have a bold voice in synod with seminary faculty (Fort Wayne) highly sympathetic and often fostering this position.

An example of this group is Pastor John Rutowicz who authored the public essay, "An Argument for Lutheran Episcopacy." In his paper Pastor Rutowicz states:

I would like to make an argument for episcopal polity in the Lutheran Church. Episcopal polity is not the only option that is open to Lutherans, but I would suggest that it is the best option. It is an important component in the well being (bene esse) of the church...In the current situation, a change in polity is not possible, but I hope at least to help someone think in a broader way, a way that is different than the reality he or she knows. And if it is not ^{too} much to hope for, perhaps I will see, and be a part of, a Lutheran episcopacy in my lifetime.²

For Pastor Rutowicz, the dream of a Missouri Lutheran episcopacy seemed too far off and out of reach within Missouri. Like many others he left Missouri beginning an independent Lutheran church.

The next group is undoubtedly best represented numerically within the Missouri Synod. Most of the students and faculty would be considered "Waltherian" in their doctrine on church and ministry and church polity. These people could most easily identify with the Synodical Conference of a past era and often showed deep concern ^{for} of the direction of the Missouri Synod. This group however would disagree with the WELS on the nature of the office of ministry but who may agree with the WELS on issues of fellowship.

A group that undoubtedly exists but is harder to identify because they have no one specific publication or proponent is what may be labeled “Gospel only” approach to ministry and theology. Many see the function of gospel proclamation and preaching not that of law and gospel but rather gospel only in the sense that people are beaten down in day to day life (and hence encounter the law) and need only to hear of God’s forgiveness and acceptance. People such as these are increasing in number within the synod and are having a tremendous effect on the practical theology of the parishes. What do such pastors believe? They are against traditional LCMS/Biblical teachings such as closed communion. Hence, there are many LCMS churches that practice open communion without the least bit of fear or concern of discipline from the synodical districts. In addition, the issue of cohabitation is no longer seen as sinful but simply a societal phenomenon that lies beyond the mission of the church. As time goes on this group is probably having the greatest impact on the Missouri Synod because it is operating within the churches rather than within the seminaries non official groupings of synod.

A publication that began in the 1990's is “Jesus First” may be best representative of this group. One essay entitled, “Recognize as Orthodox As Many As Possible, Not As Few,” which speaks of looking for common points of agreement on doctrine rather than contentious points of doctrine so as to increase to the greatest extent the fellowship of the church is representative of this movement.

Over one thousand pastors at a time not too long ago supported a group and publication entitled “Renewal in Missouri” or “RIM.” This is a charismatically oriented group that downplays synodical and church fellowship in favor of seeking fellowship based on experiences of the Holy Spirit.³

Finally, there are certainly pastors and theologians within the LCMS who are simply liberal. I never encountered an LCMS professor at either Concordia Seminary who denied the inerrancy of Scripture but there are not a few liberal pastors who would be quite at home the in Evangelical Lutheran Church of America. Such pastors are in great sympathy with the ecumenical movement. Pastors who openly reject the inerrancy of Scripture, the gender of God, the role of man and women and other such Biblical teachings do exist.⁴

§ Call and Experiences with the North Wisconsin District §

Upon graduation and ordination into the public ministry I served a rural congregation of the North Wisconsin District. The North Wisconsin District had some two hundred thirty congregations and was led by President Arleigh Lutz, a highly respected and influential district president, who served from 1985 until 2006 one of the longest district presidencies in the synod's history.

In the early Spring of 2005 I was appointed Circuit Counselor of the Stevens Point and Wisconsin Rapids (Circuit #17) Circuit. An unusual experience occurred beginning the summer of 2005: out of a circuit of eleven churches five of them at one point were in the process of calling either a senior/sole or an assistant pastor. As circuit counselor one of my primary duties was to help churches in my circuit go through the calling process. The call process within the LCMS is somewhat different than that of the WELS. In the LCMS each rostered pastor of synod has a "Personal Information Form" (PIF) which is filled out by the District President. This form has the essential information of a pastor such as family information and education background, this form also contains a brief review and evaluation of a pastor's strengths and weaknesses. A second document called SET (Self Evaluation Tool) is filled out by the pastor and is updated

every couple of years. This is an eleven page document in which the pastor details his strengths, weaknesses and his approach to ministry. Questions dealing with a pastor's stand on women's suffrage, close(d) communion, worship style, and position on the charismatic movement are among the dozens of questions on the form.

A calling congregation receives both forms from the district to help them make a godly and educated decision in calling a pastor. These forms actually do provide a pretty good overall picture of what a pastor is like and what "category" he falls into within the scope of synod. A concern on my part arose as the calling congregations increasingly purged from the potential calling list those individuals who were in favor of close(d) communion. In short, if a pastor was against open communion and for the agreed upon practice of close(d) communion as confessed and agreed upon by members of synod then he was deemed not evangelical enough in his approach

I was not alone in my concerns for synod and its increasing antinomianism. In the Professor Kurt Marquart of Concordia Fort Wayne published an article in the Theological Observer on the increasing antinomianism in practice. It is entitled, "Antinomian Aversion to Sanctification?":

An emerited brother writes that he is disturbed by a kind of preaching that avoids sanctification and "seemingly question(s) the Formula of Concord . . . about the Third Use of the Law ." The odd thing is that this attitude, he writes, is found among would-be confessional pastors, even though it is really akin to the antinomianism of "Seminex"! He asks: "How can one read the Scriptures over and over and not see how much and how often our Lord (in the Gospels) and the Apostles (in the Epistles) call for Christian sanctification, crucifying the flesh, putting down the old man and putting on the new man, abounding in the work of the Lord, provoking to love and good works, being fruitful . . .?" I really have no idea where the anti-sanctification bias comes from. Perhaps it is a knee-jerk over-reaction to "Evangelicalism": since they stress practical guidance for daily

living, we should not! Should we not rather give even more and better practical guidance, just because we distinguish clearly between Law and Gospel? Especially given our anti-sacramental environment, it is of course highly necessary to stress the holy means of grace in our preaching. But we must beware of creating a kind of clericalist caricature that gives the impression that the whole point of the Christian life is to be constantly taking in preaching, absolution, and Holy Communion - while ordinary daily life and callings are just humdrum time-fillers in-between! That would be like saying that we live to eat, rather than eating to live. The real point of our constant feeding by faith, on the Bread of Life, is that we might gain an ever-firmer hold of Heaven-and meanwhile become ever more useful on earth! We have, after all, been "created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them" (Eph. 2:10). Cars, too, are not made to be fueled and oiled forever at service-stations. Rather, they are serviced in order that they might yield useful mileage in getting us where we need to go. Real good works before God are not showy, sanctimonious pomp and circumstance, or liturgical falderal in church, but, for example, "when a poor servant girl takes care of a little child or faithfully does what she is told" (Large Catechism, Ten Commandments, paragraph 314, Kolb/Wengert, page 428). The royal priesthood of believers need to recover their sense of joy and high privilege in their daily service to God (1 Pet. 2:9). The "living sacrifice" of bodies, according to their various callings, is the Christians' "reasonable service" or God-pleasing worship, to which St. Paul exhorts the Romans "by the mercies of God (Rom. 12:1), which he had set out so forcefully in the preceding eleven chapters! Or, as St. James puts it: "Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, to visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world (1:27). Liberal churches tend to stress the one, and conservative ones the other, but the Lord would have us do both! Antinomianism appeals particularly to the Lutheran flesh. But it cannot claim the great Reformer as patron.⁵

Following a quote from Luther, Marquart concludes:

What are the "practical and clear sermons," which, according to the Apology, "hold an audience" (XXIV, 50, p. 267)? Apology XV, 42-44 (p. 229) explains: . . . the chief worship of God is to preach the Gospel. . . in our churches all the sermons deal with topics like these: repentance, fear of God, faith in Christ, the righteousness of faith, prayer . . . the cross, respect for the magistrates and all civil orders, the distinction between the kingdom of Christ (the spiritual kingdom) and political affairs, marriage, the education and instruction of children, chastity, and all the works of love. "Grant, we beseech Thee, Almighty God, unto Thy Church Thy Holy Spirit, and the wisdom which cometh down from above, that Thy Word, as becometh it, may not be bound, but have free course and be preached to the joy and edifying of Christ's holy people, that in steadfast faith we may serve Thee, and

in the confession of Thy Name abide unto the end; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord. Amen."⁶

Increasingly frustrated and notwithstanding good and personal relationships among several fellow clergy, I began to wonder if any real hope for confessionalism was left in the LCMS. The lack of brotherly counsel, the cacophony of voices all under the head "Missouri," the lack of desire and even ability of synod and district to confront these challenges all personally came to a head for me in the Fall of 2006 at the synod's Circuit Counselor's Convention in Milwaukee. This was the first gathering in over a decade of all the synod's circuit counselors as well as each district's and the synod's presidiums for a three day meeting to discuss and debate issues within synod. The meeting was co-hosted by Dean Wenthe, President of Concordia Theological Seminary in Fort Wayne, and Dale Meyer, President of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. While the meeting was very cordial and positive in tone no discussion of the issues of communion, ministerial nomenclature, prayer fellowship, or even the recent lawsuits within the synod were addressed. The meeting's sole purpose, it seemed, to show that pastors could agree to disagree and turn their focus from "incessant internal purification"⁷ to spreading the Gospel of Jesus Christ as understood by each individual clergyman. This meeting served as a watershed moment in helping me make the decision to resign from the LCMS and to colloquy into the WELS.

Prior to my final decision however, I did have the opportunity to dialogue with then First Vice President of the LCMS, the Reverend Daniel Preus. What follows are my questions to him regarding the status of the LCMS and what its future held. The first question I asked Rev. Preus

was: “What if anything is the final breaking point of Synod? (Women's ordination?; altar/pulpit fellowship with the ELCA?; etc.)” He replied:

Although I believe a breaking of fellowship would be merited by either of the scenarios you mention, I do not think they are the only two. For example, recent decisions by conventions of the Missouri Synod, especially its last convention, have done quite a bit to make our church body more hierarchical. Combine this fact with the fact that the right of lay people to charge their pastor with false teaching has been dissolved and the fact that already very few District Presidents are practicing church discipline properly and we face the possibility, perhaps even the probability, that doctrinal discipline may become a thing of the past in the Missouri Synod. If this happens, it would be a proper reason for breaking fellowship. Another issue is worship. It simply is not true that worship is an adiaphoron. Even worship style is not an adiaphoron. Another major issue is closed communion. Who knows what other dangers may be out there when many of our church leaders seem to be interested more in numbers than in truth?⁸

Following this I asked: “What legitimate hope can I share with my congregation who desire very much to remain faithful as a congregation and part of a Synod that is faithful to the Confessions and Scripture?”

The church is always the church militant, which means there will never be a time when we will not have to contend for the faith. If ever there is peace in the life of the church, it will only be an apparent peace, never a real one. The only real peace is that which we receive through the life, suffering, death and resurrection of our Lord. Until the last day Satan will always be contending against the truth of the Gospel. Where the Gospel is most purely taught – there will his attacks be most vicious. We should therefore not be surprised to see the terrible disruptions he is causing in the life of the LCMS. How could it be otherwise? Our mistake was becoming complacent after we thought we won the battle for the Bible back in the early 70's. We may indeed have won the battle for the Bible, but it has become apparent through the influence of “Jesus First” and DayStar and many of the decisions made and trends followed in our LCMS that we may not have “won” the battle for the Gospel and for the preservation of true Lutheran theology. Any time we think we can settle back and take a rest from our calling to contend for the truth, the peace we think we see justifying such a posture is an illusion. President Kieschnick's plea for a retreat from “incessant doctrinal purification” is a plea for the church to lay down its calling as church. We are the church militant and will

be until Jesus returns. The church is also always under the cross. We should not be surprised when we see orthodox teachers assaulted, orthodox pastors vilified, orthodox congregations mocked and the importance of Christian doctrine minimized. Jesus tells us in Matthew that we are blessed when we are persecuted for His sake. If we are faithful, we will suffer for it. And this suffering is an honor God gives to us. "Blessed are you..." In suffering we follow the example of His Son and are identified as His faithful followers. Of course, we do not seek this suffering. Crosses are never chosen by those who bear them. Even Jesus prayed that, if possible, the cross would be removed. But it was not possible for Him; neither is it possible for us. Is this of comfort to those who wish to remain faithful? Yes – but only if we understand well our theology of the cross. For this theology not only tells us that we will bear crosses, it also assures us that the Son of God is our Advocate before the Father and that His prayers incessantly plead our cause to the Father. Of what comfort is His promise that where two or three are gathered together in His name He is there, if we have no real sense of need for His presence? It is precisely because our need under the cross is so great that He comforts us with this promise of His presence. A truly Christian congregation will be characterized by an overwhelming desire for mercy, not success. But it is precisely mercy that our Lord provides in abundance, in fact a mercy that covers all our sins and failings and it is this message which must be our comfort. Therefore, the only hope we have is in Christ our Lord. What hope do we have for the preservation of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod? I don't know. I gave up prophesying a long time ago. What hope do we have for the preservation of God's truth among His people? The hope that lives from His promises which cannot fail. This is always the only hope for the church. If our objective is simply the preservation of the Missouri Synod, the Missouri Synod will cease to be an organization that will be suitable for confessional Lutherans. Our objective needs to be the preservation of the confession and the pastors and congregations who are faithful need to continue teaching and preaching and treasuring the truth. Then they need to act in our church and synodical life according to that truth. Then perhaps the Synod will survive as a bearer of the true Lutheran Confession.⁹

Pastor Preus' comments were well received by me and my congregation; yet they were telling. One of the main differences between the WELS and the Missouri Synod is the understanding of the nature of "synod" itself. It is fair to say that the Missouri Synod's position is that the synod is not "church" at least not in the same mandated way that each congregation is. This is opposition to the WELS' teaching and understanding that synod is church, along with individual congregations, it is simply church in another form.

Missouri's understanding of synod keeps it from any strong internal correction. If synod is only advisory then how active can she be in rooting out the theological diversions of her members? This is especially more problematic in a milieu of such divergent practices and competing theologies. The truth is that the Missouri Synod is not only unwilling to correct herself, she may in fact be unable to do so.

§ LCMS-WELS Relations 1993-2000 §

From 1993 until 2000 what may have been a very special and unique opportunity occurred. This seven year period was the time when Karl Gurgel served as president of the WELS and Al Barry served as president of the LCMS. Both men were confessional, conservative and interestingly graduates of the same seminary: Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Mequon, WI. (Al Barry had studied for the ministry in Springfield, IL, but finished his studies at WLS in 1956.) From an earthly perspective perhaps no other time since the dissolution of the Synodical Conference afforded the presidencies of each synod such a special connection with which to dialogue and work together.

I had the opportunity to speak with president emeritus Gurgel on this relationship and period. The leaders of the WELS, LCMS, and the ELS met informally more than once to communicate and share with each other. ~~President Gurgel, speaking of the meeting states:~~

Speaking about an unofficial meeting in Milwaukee President Gurgel states:

Each of us shared with the other two what was happening in our respective synods. The tone was relaxed and friendly and in the end talked over some items of mutual interest or concern to all of us. All of us had agreed to have no public announcement concerning our meeting and there was no joint, or even individual declarations following it. While it was obvious Dr. Barry felt comfortable in our presence, there was no effort to hide areas where points of view differed. Though

he did not state it, it seemed to me he felt the clock could only be turned back on issues like women suffrage and prayer fellowship with a great deal of difficulty.¹⁰

This wasn't the only meeting, in fact President Gurgel's recollection was that the Presidents met informally once a year for about three years.

I asked President Gurgel if Dr. Barry's WELS past created any unique opportunity for serious theological discussions. I asked, "Did Barry's past ties and relation to the WELS (having graduated from WLS in 1956) beneficially impact the relations of the two church bodies? He replied:

Dr. Barry's past ties with the WELS gave him a good understanding of where we were coming from. However, it is my impression, he was sincerely interested in keeping the LCMS from straying any further from confessional Lutheranism and was devoting all his time to that goal and may have felt, at that time, it would be futile to spend any effort at changing too many things from the past. He clearly knew there were theological differences between our church bodies.¹¹

In the winter of 2000 Dr. Barry while visiting family in Florida was taken ill. While he was in the hospital he developed a staph infection and passed away quite quickly to the surprise and consternation of all. First Vice President Robert Kuhn became the President of the Missouri Synod. For reasons known to him he decided not to run for the synodical presidency in 2001. At that convention in a very close vote Texas District President Gerald Kieschnick, was elected LCMS President. Kieschnick's style was a departure from Kuhn and from Barry.

§ WELS-LCMS Relations 2001-2007 §

Gerald Kieschnick of the Missouri Synod brought to the presidency a high energy enthusiasm for the job and for the future of the LCMS. Without a doubt President Kieschnick desired more than anything else to have the LCMS get over theological disputing and fighting,

“incessant internal purification” (sic) and to “keeping the main thing the main thing.” This meant missions and church growth—numerically and organizationally.

What did this change of leadership mean for President Gurgel’s relationship with the LCMS presidency? I asked him: “Since Kieschnick’s election what have the relations between he and the WELS president have been like?” President Gurgel states:

In a couple of similar settings, there were brief contacts with him [Kieschnick], all with somewhat the same result. It may be just my impression, but unlike the rather warm relationship with Al Barry, it was much more distant with Gerald Kieschnick. Only once, also in an airport in St. Louis, did we have what might be called a friendly exchange, though not regarding theological matters. He happened to be on the same flight back to Milwaukee, heading for a national circuit pastors conference. We did not talk business and the conversation lasted only a few minutes.¹²

Few of even President Kieschnick’s most ardent critics doubt his sincerity and passion for ministry. However, President Kieschnick, bold and enthusiastic as he is, can give the impression of wanting too much too soon. For example, while the LCMS continued talks and dialogues with the ELCA an impression at the same time was made that a serious effort to open serious theological discussion with the WELS and ELS. Under normal circumstances this would be a good, right and salutary action, however, what seems hard to understand is how President Kieschnick could speak against the “incessant internal purification” to members of his own synod sincerely wanting theological reconciliation and at the same time seemingly opening the door to serious talks with the WELS and the ELS. In the November 2003 newsletter of the International Lutheran Council President Kieschnick implied that perhaps helpful and meaningful talks between the LCMS and the WELS were taking place. The short article is as follows:

President Gerald Kieschnick has asked his counterparts in the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS) and the Evangelical Lutheran Synod (ELS) for church-body talks on areas of disagreement and on ways to support each other. In separate letters to WELS President Karl Gurgel and to ELS President John A. Moldstad Jr., Kieschnick asked for a meeting with each of them and "a couple of representatives" from each respective church body. Kieschnick wrote that the purpose of each meeting "would be to discuss together possible ways for us to address those areas of disagreement which stand in the way of church fellowship between our churches, and also to discuss ways that we can support and assist each other as we face contemporary attacks against the Gospel of Jesus Christ." He wrote that doctrinal disagreements between the Missouri Synod and each of the other two church bodies "cannot and will not be resolved apart from patient and fraternal discussions together." Until some 40 years ago, the three church bodies were in altar and pulpit fellowship with one another. The WELS and ELS, which broke off fellowship with the Missouri Synod, remain in fellowship with each other. Among differences, Kieschnick in his letters cited the church bodies' respective views of prayer fellowship, the doctrine of the ministry and woman suffrage.¹³

For many including President Gurgel the sincerity on the part of the LCMS seemed wanting and no further dialogues took place.

§ Interview with President Emeritus Karl Gurgel On WELS and the LCMS §

During the early part of this decade Aid Association for Lutherans and Lutheran Brotherhood decided to merge into what became Thrivent Financial. A special ^{was held} meeting which included ELCA's Bishop Hansen, WELS' President Gurgel, and LCMS' President Kieschnick ~~all~~ were in attendance. Because this occasioned a unique meeting amongst the leaders of all the major Lutheran denominations in America (ELCA, LCMS, WELS, ELS) president Gurgel's recollections are worth relating.

When they agreed to merge, they invited a number of people from each of the three large Lutheran bodies to a retreat center in Arizona. I believe the meeting had one primary purpose: it was to explain to all of us [in attendance] at once what this merger was all about and how it might, to some degree, impact all of us since all of us had been receiving grants from the old organizations.

I believe the leaders of Thrivent were sincere in their intent and respectful of especially our fellowship principles. At this meeting there was no attempt to begin and end with prayer. Though both the Chairman of the Board and the President of Thrivent at the time were both ELCA members they did strive to avoid anything that would be offensive to us. However, underneath it all, perhaps a hoped for agenda, was to see if they might be able to promote a greater cooperation among Lutherans. It didn't happen and I believe, they astutely realized it would not happen.

At the last day of this meeting, each of the three synod presidents was given a few minutes, basically to say anything. If I'm remembering correctly, Bishop Hansen of the ELCA went first. It was very obvious where he stood, consistent with his other public statements. ELCA was interested in promoting the social gospel whenever and wherever they could. My turn was second and as I remember it, I briefly laid out the Biblical case for the mission and ministry of the church, throwing in some Scriptural reminders for the proper practice of church fellowship...I remember using the parts of a watch as an analogy, pointing out without all the parts of the watch being in perfect harmony, it would be impossible to tell time...Gerald Kieschnik went last, right after me. The only point I remember he stressed were the words "that they may be one." He said it saddened him that we could not strive for a more organic sense of oneness though there were differences. He seemed quite emotional, perhaps I was too at the time seeing his words as somewhat of an attack on our position.¹⁴

So where does this leave the LCMS and the WELS today and in the near future?

Doctrinally, the WELS and the LCMS are separated by church and ministry and the doctrine of fellowship. I asked President Gurgel: "Do you personally believe that the LCMS and WELS are at a theological impasse on the doctrine of church and ministry and church fellowship? He responds:

Yes, I believe we are. There is too much water over the dam and the rivers running to the dam are so different. In both cases, it seems to me, withing the LCMS many wonder what's all the fuss about, how imprtant can these things be. Such arguments reveal a deeper, underlying division: adherence to the authority of Scripture. When you don't say the same thing to "This is what the Lord says," how can there be meaningful discussion or decisions?¹⁵

How far has this gone however? What about the issue of fellowship? Is this alone enough to consider the division between the LCMS and the WELS permanent? I asked President Gurgel: "Did you ever experience at least a willingness on the part of the LCMS to open dialogues on church fellowship?" He responded: "I would have to say no. Again, it may be only my personal judgment, even the suggestion of theological discussions, only seemed to be an inducement for us to talk about something which others believed was really important. And, very honestly, I don't recall any really serious, official invitations to theological discussions."¹⁶

What does the future hold for the WELS and the LCMS? Only God knows. How about hope for the two with so much common history coming together again doctrinally? I asked President Gurgel: What do you see as the future relationship between the WELS and the LCMS? President Gurgel clearly states: "Though I pray it could be different, I personally don't see any hope for the relationship getting better without a call, from within the LCMS, for a return to its roots, allegiance to the Scriptures in everything it says and a turning away from ecumenical endeavors to promote a physical oneness of the church on earth."¹⁷

§ Conclusion §

At the opening of this paper I stated: The WELS and the LCMS are separated doctrinally on the doctrines of church and ministry and church fellowship; further the two synods are separated by different approaches to ministry internally and externally. This gulf is real, widening and from an earthly perspective--permanent. Do any signs of genuine dialogue and reconciliation of these two church bodies exist today? Not really and there is no indication of such anytime soon.

Endnotes

1. Taken from personal class notes of the author, on "Church and Ministry" a dogmatics class taught by Professor Scaer at Concordia Theological Seminary.
2. Rutowicz, John. "An Argument For Lutheran Episcopacy"
<http://reformationtoday.tripod.com/chemnitz/id35.html>
3. The author had an encounter with a leader of RIM in which this leader spoke of a time when he lived next door to a Roman Catholic priest. This leader stated that he received a word from the Lord which told him to "not separate what God has joined together." The leader's understanding of this 'word' was that certain expressions of fellowship were permitted between himself and the priest.
4. At a LCMS North Wisconsin District Pastor's Conference at which Ken Ham a prominent creationist of "Answers in Genesis" made a presentation on the literalness of Genesis 1-2 an LCMS pastor from the Appleton confronted Ken Ham during a break stating that Genesis chapters 1-2 were metaphorical and not literal history. In his opinion Adam and Eve were not historical individuals but were literary characters to state spiritual truths. Ken Ham was taken back and somewhat shocked that an LCMS pastor would hold to such an idea and vocalized the encounter to everyone. No overt action was taken by the District President at that time.
5. Marquart, Kurt E. "Antinomian Aversion to Sanctification?" *Concordia Theological Quarterly*, Volume 67:3/4 (pages 379-381)
6. Marquart, Kurt E. "Antinomian Aversion to Sanctification?" *Concordia Theological Quarterly*, Volume 67:3/4 (pages 379-381)
7. Rev. Gerald Kieschnick, President LC-MS 2002 Synodical Convention of The Lutheran Church-Canada, June 6-10, 2002,
<http://www.lutheranchurch.ca/synod2002/fri-greetings.html>
8. private correspondence with LCMS First Vice President, Rev. Daniel Preus, April 28, 2005.
9. private correspondence with LCMS First Vice President, Rev. Daniel Preus, April 28, 2005.
10. private correspondence with President Emeritus, Karl Gurgel, September 23, 2007.
11. private correspondence with President Emeritus, Karl Gurgel, September 23, 2007.
12. private correspondence with President Emeritus, Karl Gurgel, September 23, 2007.
13. ILC News, (International Lutheran Council), Vol. XIV. No. 4, November 1, 2003.

14. private correspondence with President Emeritus, Karl Gurgel, September 23, 2007
15. private correspondence with President Emeritus, Karl Gurgel, Spetember 23, 2007.
16. private correspondence with President Emeritus, Karl Gurgel, Spetember 23, 2007.
17. private correspondence with President Emeritus, Karl Gurgel, Spetember 23, 2007.