

GUIDING THE WELS INTO A NEW ERA -  
The Years of Carl H. Mischke's  
Presidency: 1979 - 1993

By

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May 1, 1995

INTRODUCTION

My intentions in writing this paper are to fairly and accurately describe the years in which Pastor Carl Mischke served as the president of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod. In order to accomplish this goal, President Mischke allowed me to interview him at his home on April 20, 1995. This interview serves as the basis for the subject material of this paper. This interview also serves as my prime source of information. President Mischke himself confirms most of the content of this paper. In a few areas, other witnesses have given their input. These exceptions will be documented in the paper itself. Another source not mentioned specifically in the paper would be the video summarizing President Mischke's life presented at the end of the 1993 synod convention. It is titled "A Matter of Duty: The Life and Ministry of Carl H. Mischke." This video was supplied by Pastor Daniel Malchow with the help of Seminary Professor Martin Westerhaus who tracked it down.

## "GUIDING THE WELS INTO A NEW ERA"

The Years of Carl H. Mischke's Presidency: 1979 - 1993

"How will we respond to the challenge placed before us? The easiest response is to pretend that nothing has changed, to continue as always and simply grow older and smaller. But in order that we may by all possible means save some, are we willing to examine carefully the customs, habits, assumptions, standards and approaches that have served us well in the past?"<sup>1</sup> This was the difficult question President Carl Mischke posed to the 1991 Convention of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod. This wasn't the first time. President Mischke was asking this difficult question AND answering it already in 1979 when he first stepped into the chair of president of the WELS. Responding to this important question was one of his primary goals when he was first elected to be the leader of our synod.

When we honestly consider his record of service as president, it becomes clear that President Mischke did not choose to take the easy road in response to this vital question. We see that President Mischke led our synod into and through a critical period of significant change in the WELS. He did it with dignity and integrity. But most importantly, not one word of Scripture was compromised during these years of change. President Mischke himself said at the beginning of his presidency:

"I submit that our highest priority must always be faithfulness to the Holy Scriptures and the Lutheran

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<sup>1</sup> Proceedings of the 51st Biennial Convention of the WELS - 1991, p. 25

Confessions. That will not change this year, or next year, or the next decade, or as long as God permits the world to stand and us to be a part of it. We must never lose sight of the fact that under God, it is faithfulness to the Word of God that has made the Wisconsin Synod what it is today."<sup>2</sup>

Keeping these words in mind, it will be the primary goal of this paper to take a close look at the many years of Carl H. Mischke's presidency and how he dealt with this question: "In order that we may by all possible means save some, are we willing to examine carefully the customs, habits, assumptions, standards and approaches that have served us well in the past?"

In 1987 at the worship service commemorating President Mischke's forty years of service in the public ministry, the first vice-president of the synod, Pastor Donald Bitter, preached. In his sermon he said, "From the day of your birth to this hour, you are a chosen vessel, chosen by the Lord for salvation first of all, but chosen by him also for special service in the church."<sup>3</sup> In what ways prior to 1979 had the Lord been preparing Carl Mischke for his special service as president?

Carl Herbert Mischke was born on October 27, 1922 in the town of Hazel, South Dakota. He was the youngest of eight children and he put in his share of hard work on his father's farm. Life was particularly hard during the vacuous years of the Great Depression. His parents wanted him to think about the public ministry, so they sent him to Martin Luther Academy in New Ulm, Minnesota for his

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<sup>2</sup> Mischke, Carl "WELS - 1980" Paper presented to the Northern Wisconsin District Convention August 5, 1980, p. 8.

<sup>3</sup> Northwestern Lutheran - 1987, p. 314

high school education. After doing quite well in his studies in high school, Carl decided to attend Northwestern College in Watertown, Wisconsin. During his college years, Carl showed once again that he was not an average student. He finished his college academic career second in his class (he claims he finished "a distant second to Wilbert Gawrisch"). This brought with it the honor of giving the German oration at the graduation ceremony in 1944.

Convinced the public ministry was what he truly wanted to do with his life, Carl headed to the Seminary in its new location in Thiensville, Wisconsin. Since there was no vicar program in place at this time, Carl graduated from the Seminary in three years. The class of 1947 was quite a talented and influential group of men. Carl's classmates included Ralph Baur, Kurt Eggert, Wilbert Gawrisch, James Schaeffer, William Zell and a few others who later became quite prominent in the C.L.C. and the L.C.-M.S.

The summer of 1947 was also a very special summer for the new Seminary graduate in a much different area of his life than academics. On July 6, Carl would marry Gladys Lindloff, the woman he had been courting for ten years. For all forty-six years of his ministry, Gladys would be a very active and supportive partner. In fact at his retirement from the ministry in 1993, President Mischke stated that he would not be standing before the synod as president if it wasn't for his wife whom the Lord had given to him. The Lord blessed this union with four children: Joel, Susan, Philip and Steven.

^ assistant pastor at the two thousand member congregation of First Lutheran in LaCrosse, Wisconsin. The young Pastor Mischke experienced the incredible demands of the ministry very quickly. He recalls that the first time the head pastor left for a number of weeks he was in charge of the weekly services that were held in both German and English, six funerals and an unmanageable list of shut-ins. Despite not having a car, Pastor Mischke still was able to make seventeen shut-in calls in one day.

In those days, it wasn't expected that anyone would remain as an assistant pastor for too long. This was also true for Pastor Mischke. After two years in LaCrosse, he accepted a call to serve in Goodhue, Minnesota. From 1949 to 1954, he served both the congregation of St. Peter's and also the congregation of St. John's. Then in 1954 Pastor Mischke received and accepted a call to serve the people of St. John's Lutheran Church in Juneau, Wisconsin.

Pastor Mischke came to Juneau at the age of 32 and would serve as the sole pastor until the age of 57. Pastor Mischke served the 1,000+ member congregation faithfully through the difficult years of the WELS' break from the Synodical Conference. He oversaw many building projects as the congregation grew and looked to provide sufficient, modern facilities in which the work of the gospel could best be carried out.

It was during these years that Pastor Mischke began to become involved in the work of synod administration. In the late fifties he was voted to be a circuit pastor for his area. In 1962 he was

voted in as the second vice-president of the Western Wisconsin District. But during the next biennium of the district, President Richard Mueller was kept from performing his duties as district president because of serious health problems. So in the '64 district convention, he determined it best to step down from his position as district president. The district overwhelmingly elected Pastor Carl Mischke to be the new district president.

It was not long after this, 1967 to be exact, when synod President Oscar Naumann appointed Pastor Mischke to be the second vice-president of the synod. This was the beginning of Pastor Mischke's triple-faceted ministry. From '67 until '79 he would have to balance his duties between his local congregation, his district position and also his synod administration position. With so much responsibility, it was impossible to tackle everything he would have liked to attempt to accomplish in each of these three areas. Despite the great workload, he also found a unique blessing which came with his new positions in the ministry.

"You really could never get down on yourself about anything because about the time something went wrong in the parish, something on the district or synod level would perk you up, or vice versa."<sup>4</sup>

In 1967 first vice-president of the synod, Pastor Norman Berg, accepted a call to be the Executive Secretary of the Home Mission Board. This led to Pastor Mischke being appointed to the position of first vice-president of the synod where he would remain until the death of President O. Naumann. During his years of involvement

<sup>4</sup> Interview with President Mischke, 4/20/95

with synodical matters, Pastor Mischke had to deal with important doctrinal issues such as fellowship (especially in view of Missouri's false teachings), church and ministry and stewardship. As chairman of the synod finance committee, he had a great deal of involvement with the Missio Dei special offering of the late sixties. He also played an influential role as the synod considered its worker training system, particularly whether Milwaukee Lutheran College (now Wisconsin Lutheran College) was still necessary as a teacher training college since New Ulm was doing so well.

It should also not go without saying that the Lord was also preparing Pastor Mischke for his future service through his close relationship with President Naumann. Pastor Mischke had the utmost respect for President Naumann and President Naumann had complete trust in his vice-president. This type of trust was something which later on, President Mischke would have in all of the people he appointed to serve as administrators of synod affairs.

On June 19, 1979 the Lord called President Oscar Naumann to his heavenly home. Although President Naumann had already announced that he would be stepping down at the next convention, much still needed to be done to prepare for the convention scheduled to begin the first week of August. For the next six weeks, first vice-president Mischke travelled back and forth between Milwaukee and Juneau feverishly working to help organize the convention. To add to this difficult task was the knowledge that on the agenda for the upcoming convention were some very



important and controversial subjects. What direction would the synod now take with long-time President Naumann no longer overseeing the debate?

Carl Mischke obviously had the trust and respect of his peers as he was overwhelmingly elected to be the next President of the WELS. It became very clear early on that President Mischke was willing to face the challenges which confronted the synod as he confidently led the synod through major changes in many important areas.

"Admittedly, changing the customs, habits, assumptions, standards and approaches that have served us well in the past is not easy to do, especially in the church. For over time such things as liturgies and music, Bible translations and worship styles, educational approaches and ministry forms take on a certain sanctity. So change is often met with resistance, hostility and conflict."<sup>5</sup>

These are again words President Mischke spoke in 1991 to the convention at New Ulm, Minnesota. But when he spoke these words he was speaking from experience because every one of the things he mentioned were items which were examined and changed in some way during his presidency. Each one of these changes was met with some resistance, hostility and conflict. The one individual who hears it the most and who ultimately deals with the conflict most often is of course the president. Let's take a look at some of the significant areas of change which President Mischke oversaw.

One of the first big changes he had to deal with was the 1979 convention's decision to accept the New International Version of

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<sup>5</sup> Proceedings of the 51st Biennial Convention of the WELS - 1991, p. 25

the Bible as the translation which would be used in all future instructional materials and other printed materials of the synod. It would also be the recommended translation for congregations to use in their worship services. This was a monumental change when you realize that the King James Version had really been the only translation used in the synod since congregations began switching to the English language.

Strong pockets of resistance and opposition did exist and expressed their concerns. But the synod had taken a huge step forward and President Mischke was all for it. This decision would allow the synod to communicate the Gospel message much more clearly and in more understandable language to a world which no longer was familiar with Elizabethan English. This decision paved the way for an important change in the materials we would use to educate our youth.

The next step for our synod would be a revision of the exposition of the catechism. This change occurred rather rapidly. The Board for Parish Services had appointed Professor David Kuske to work on the project in 1979. By 1981 the project was completed and approved.<sup>6</sup> I remember it well because I was in the seventh grade when the finished book came out. The fear and concerns we young people had were quickly put to rest as we found that the new language was much easier to speak and made more sense to us. The same could probably be said of the parents.

President Mischke strongly supported both of these important

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<sup>6</sup> Report to the Ten Districts of the WELS - May, 1982, p.37.

changes. The next natural step as he saw it would be to revise the hymnal so that the language of the new translation and the new catechism would also be used in our liturgies and worship supplements. This is exactly what was brought before the 1983 convention and it was agreed that a committee should be established to begin work on this project.<sup>7</sup>

This news however was not received very enthusiastically in all circles of the synod. In fact President Mischke shares that this was the item of change which brought the most letters of concern and disagreement across his desk, much more than the new translation. He recognized a couple of reasons for this strong reaction. One reason is the simple fact that people feel comfortable with the familiar. They don't like drastic changes being made to the liturgies, creeds and hymns they know so well. Another reason is the often made association of any type of change with liberalism. In 1980 the Missouri Synod changed their hymnal and many conservative Missourians blame that with the liberal slide of their synod. Some of the same feelings came out among members of the WELS when the change to a new hymnal was recommended.

President Mischke made a point of answering every letter he received. In this case especially, but also in the other cases of change which met opposition, President Mischke had the advantage of being on this earth a little bit longer than those who were voicing their opposition. He had lived through a tremendous period of change in the thirties and forties when everything which had been

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<sup>7</sup> Northwestern Lutheran - 1983, p. 263

done in German for centuries was then being changed to English.

English, an entirely different language, was what the sermons, hymns, catechisms, Bibles, liturgies would be written and spoken in. Yet despite the radical change, the synod stayed doctrinally pure in every area. This was the experience President Mischke could point people to as he assured them that he had lived through a much more drastic change than this and yet liberalism didn't result because of the changes. He could assure them that the new hymnal and the synod would continue to remain faithful to the Word of God.

Just a side note about President Mischke's way of dealing with letters from concerned members of the synod. As I already stated, he would answer each one. Pastor James Schaeffer, who worked with President Mischke in synodical administration for twenty-six years had this to say:

"President Mischke had a knack for summarizing a person's concerns and then answering them in a sufficient way in one letter so that the dispute wouldn't carry on indefinitely. Whatever important thoughts he wanted to convey he could do in one letter or in one visit and he could do it in such a way that he would usually satisfy the person with whom he corresponded."<sup>8</sup>

In 1993, at his final convention as president, President Mischke was presented with a copy of the completed version of the revised hymnal entitled *Christian Worship*. This was a special moment for him. Pastor Kurt Eggert, a classmate of President Mischke in college and the seminary, had been the chairman of the committee working on this hymnal project for the last ten years.

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<sup>8</sup> Interview with Pastor James Schaeffer - 4/11/95

But earlier in the summer of '93, the Lord saw fit to call him to his heavenly home.

The new project was well done. President Mischke points out that time was an important factor in the acceptance of the new hymnal. Over the ten years of the project, many of the initial protests subsided. The synod leaders were also wise to introduce the hymnal slowly, only after instructing the members of the synod, rather than forcing it upon them with no explanations. Contrary to what might have been expected after the initial reactions in the early years of the project, it appears that the revised hymnal has been widely and excitedly received by the members of the synod.

But the changes during the Mischke years did not only have to do with new translations and versions, there were also some big changes in other areas, for instance, worker training. In 1979 the very difficult question came before the synod concerning the prep school in Mobridge, South Dakota. This topic was doubly difficult for President Mischke because of his strong feelings for his home state.

Despite the heartfelt pleas from those associated with the school at the convention, the matter was really already decided. Synod finances at the time were not good, in fact they were at crisis proportions. The feasibility of sustaining the prep school in South Dakota was seen as nearly impossible at the time and the convention voted to close the school.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Proceedings of the 45th Biennial Convention of the WELS -  
1979, p. 77

At the same time a change was in action with Martin Luther Academy of New Ulm, Minnesota - the high school President Mischke attended in the late thirties. The synod decided to purchase a large campus in the town of Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin at what was an exceptional price (2.8 million for a campus estimated at near 200 million<sup>10</sup>). The idea was that Martin Luther Academy would be relocated to Prairie du Chien and New Ulm would continue to train teachers at the college level. This is exactly what happened.

But already in 1985, with the synod once again forced into severe budgetary restraints, a commission was created to "continue to monitor carefully the need for three preparatory schools."<sup>11</sup> Could the synod afford to maintain three prep schools, two colleges and one seminary? Was this truly the best arrangement? Another committee was later appointed to research in more detail the feasibility of amalgamating two prep schools and the two colleges.

The feeling that a change was necessary for the good of the synod began to become strong in 1991 as much of the convention's discussion centered on this topic. In 1993 the convention had to deal with the situation one way or another. Otherwise, Martin Luther Prep was in danger of becoming an expensive lame duck with no hope for successful recruiting (much like happened to Northwestern in Mobridge, S.D.). After a very close vote, the majority decision was to amalgamate two of the prep schools and

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<sup>10</sup> Northwestern Lutheran - 1979, p. 302.

<sup>11</sup> Proceedings of the 48th Biennial Convention of the WELS - 1985, p. 57

also amalgamate the two colleges on one campus.<sup>12</sup>

President Mischke recognized the difficult dilemma this idea caused. All through his presidency finances were a major issue. Amalgamation could improve the financial situation in which the synod found itself. But at the same time a large shortage of pastors and teachers was being predicted throughout the eighties. Projections showed a severe shortage happening in the mid-nineties. Would separating the colleges from the prep schools make this situation even worse in the future?

President Mischke certainly understood the importance of the worker training system, but he also believed strongly in kingdom balance (which will be explained further later in this paper). The fact was that the annual cost of operating Martin Luther Prep School was unproportionately high. Projections for how this expense would continue to affect the synod's budget in the future were not positive. Something would eventually have to be changed and President Mischke knew it. "Are we willing to examine carefully...the standards that have served us well in the past?" Is a three prep school, two college system the best and only way to do things?

He was surprised, however, at how quickly the synod moved toward this decision. The worker training issue was one of the factors which played into President Mischke's decision to retire after the '93 convention. He knew that a monumental change in our worker training system would take a lot of energy and enthusiasm

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<sup>12</sup> Northwestern Lutheran - 1993, p. 348.

and extra work on the part of the president to help it be successful. Experience told him that in this case, someone younger would be able to apply <sup>himself</sup> themselves with more vigor in these areas than he at this time in his life.

Another area of major change during the Mischke presidency came in the area of the educational approach of the synod. The heavy emphasis upon the importance of Lutheran grade schools has been a crucial part of our synod since its very beginning. This emphasis will certainly continue in the future as well. But the drastic decline of the family in our modern society has raised important questions for the church.

If our old people are messed up, what are the chances that their children will not be? They are not good. Will an excellent grade school program be able to straighten out the kids despite the parents? The answer in most cases is unfortunately "No." If our synod dropped everything else and poured all of its money into the grade schools would we eventually build a stronger synod? The answer again would be "No" since the adults and teens would still be messed up. This would naturally have a great affect upon the children no matter how good the grade school structure. The grade school was never meant to replace the home.

President Mischke and the other leaders of the synod saw that the breakdown of the family was also affecting our synod. In 1987 Parish Education reported that within our congregations were found poor attendance at worship services, infrequent participation in holy communion, low enrollment in Bible classes, a lack of



involvement in lay ministry and a great number of "backdoor" losses.<sup>13</sup> All of these things were of course not caused only by the breakup of the family, but were the result of many different problems among the adults of our synod.

The more President Mischke and other synod leaders studied this situation, the more they believed that the solution was to move the focus of our efforts in the area of education from the young children to the adults. This of course didn't mean abandoning in any way the education of our children. We already had strong, established grade schools. Also, in the long run the better education of adults would naturally improve the education of our children. This would mean making a concerted effort to initiate intensive and extensive nurturing programs in the local congregations.

In '87 this effort began under the description "Spiritual Renewal."<sup>14</sup> This special program has become the ongoing emphasis of the Board for Parish Services even though it no longer carries the official title "Spiritual Renewal." Because of the shift in emphasis, the BPS has grown and is much more capable today of providing nurturing assistance to pastors and members. Much work still needs to be done to get more individual adults active in Bible study, but the synod is working in the right direction.

The final area of change I would like to mention has to do

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<sup>13</sup> Proceedings of the 49th Biennial Convention of the WELS -- 1987, p. 100.

<sup>14</sup> Proceedings of the 49th Biennial Convention of the WELS -- 1987, pp. 99-101.

with the handling of the financial matters of the synod. When John Brenner became president he inherited the burden of the financial difficulties which came with the Great Depression. When Oscar Naumann became president he inherited the debate with the Missouri Synod and the eventual split from the Synodical Conference. This also brought the challenge of whether the small Wisconsin Synod could survive on its own financially. When Carl Mischke became president he inherited the headache of having to deal with a debt which could honestly be considered at the point of being a genuine crisis. Even dangerously drastic cutbacks would not have been enough to balance the budget at this point.

A number of items contributed to the state of the budget. First of all was the rise in inflation which affected all parts of society at this time. The great mission expansion of the last decade also contributed as many of the home missions were now consumed with their building projects. This often meant cutting back on contributions to the synod for awhile. The fact was that the shortfall in offerings to the operating budget was a synod-wide occurrence at a time when the synod really needed increased giving to be occurring in all parts of the synod. By 1979 the synod was also faced with the responsibility of supporting 25% more missionaries overseas. Finally, the formation of Martin Luther Prep School along with the building and remodeling projects at Michigan Lutheran Seminary added another 5.1 million dollars to the debt as well.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Northwestern Lutheran - 1979, p. 302 - 303.

What could be done to change the tide? The proposal of the synod was to begin a six year budget cycle which would gradually lower the debt over a six year period with a gradually higher increase in Synod Mission Offerings. The plan called for implementing a vigorous program to present the needs of the synod to the local congregations. At the same time an appeal would have to be made for congregations to raise their level of support. The plan set the goal of an increase in support by three million dollars over two years. Two special offerings were to be initiated in the next two post-Easter seasons to supply rapid reduction in the size of operating deficits. President Mischke stated that these were "only a band-aid, but it would be better to do this rather than bleed to death."

President Mischke and Pastor James Schaeffer began an extensive tour throughout the synod to directly carry the message to the congregations. President Mischke spoke about the importance of "kingdom work balance." What does this phrase mean exactly? This is a hard concept to define, but President Mischke explained it this way:

"In its simplest terms it means that we are not serving the kingdom well when we do one area of the Lord's work at the expense of another...Suppose that a congregation decides to open a Christian day school...When the church finds that dollars are hard to come by, the temptation is very real to hold the line on our synodical subscription, perhaps even to lower it...this congregation will need to understand that while they are expanding this area of the Lord's work, they must simultaneously and immediately increase their support of the Synod's work for the training of additional teachers."<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Mischke, Carl: "WELS - 1980", p. 10

Many congregations simply were not aware of how this delicate balance worked. Speaking about kingdom work balance helped to put the situation of the synod into some perspective for the people he addressed.

The first two years saw significant increases in overall giving to the synod. President Mischke knew that such increases could not be expected to continue forever. It also became apparent that inflation was keeping pace with the increases in giving. With inflation continuing to be the major problem, the six year budget cycle was not going to be as effective in reducing the deficit as was anticipated or as was necessary. This is when President Mischke became interested in the concept of special giving.

President Mischke didn't see a deficiency in our preaching and teaching Gospel motivation in the area of giving. But he did feel that we were ignoring St. Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 16:2 which state that "each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with his income." The person who has been blessed with the special gift of musical ability should make faithful use of that gift. No pastor has a problem with asking a talented organist to play the organ during worship services. In the same way, the individual who has been blessed with the special gift of money should make faithful use of that gift. But many pastors did have a problem with singling out those who were richly blessed financially and encouraging them to use their special gifts for the good of the synod. President Mischke felt very strongly that the personal gift of money should not be treated differently from other

personal gifts of which the Lord calls us to be faithful stewards.

President Mischke saw the synod also was not helping the stewardship of those to whom the Lord had given much. He learned that there were many strong Christians who fit this category who sincerely wanted to put their money toward the work of spreading the Gospel, but they didn't know how to do it. If a wealthy individual wanted to send a large sum directly to the synod rather than to their congregation, they didn't have a good way to do so.

President Mischke points to a number of reasons why such an individual might want to give directly to the synod. One reason is that they realized that it's not good for a congregation to rely on a few wealthy individuals to provide for most of the needs of the church. The overall stewardship of the congregation would suffer greatly. Another reason might be that they weren't confident that the money would get to the synod as they would like through the congregation's SMO. Another reason would have been that they simply weren't aware of the specific needs of the synod. They couldn't see how their money could be specifically put into use by the synod.

President Mischke felt the bottom line was that the synod was not helping all of its members to be good stewards. In some cases, the synod may have even been hindering the stewardship of individuals in the synod. President Mischke hoped that a special offering project would help to improve the overall stewardship of the synod.

The special project was given the title, "Reaching Out." The

goals for this project were to raise funds (goal set at 10 million<sup>17</sup>) which would be put specifically toward missions - both the training of missionaries and also the building of churches and other buildings in missions fields. Another major goal was to help the stewardship life of the synod by giving high visibility to the importance of this part of a Christian's life.

Pastor Daniel Malchow was called to be the director of this immense project<sup>18</sup>. President Mischke gave him his full support in this matter. As the project was in progress, a few problems arose. One objection was over the fact that the synod sought the help of an outside company from New York in coordinating this effort. Others had difficulty with the synod contacting individual members who were more financially blessed. President Mischke once again answered the objections while continuing to support the project and those working on the project. For the most part his responses sufficiently answered the objections people raised. In a few cases, discipline needed to be exercised because of continued divisiveness. Change is often "met with resistance, hostility and conflict."

The overall results of Reaching Out are incalculable. The final commitments reached over 21 million dollars<sup>19</sup>, far greater than the original goal of 10 million. This money was distributed

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<sup>17</sup> Northwestern Lutheran - 1981, p. 314.

<sup>18</sup> Report to the Ten Districts of the WELS - 1982, p.159.

<sup>19</sup> Proceedings of the 49th Biennial Convention of the WELS - 1987, p. 195.

between Home Missions, World Missions and Worker Training divisions for numerous building and remodeling projects. The manner in which the synod worked together to bring about this incredible offering was a clear indication of the Holy Spirit moving hearts through the Word.

At the '85 convention, as Mischke spoke about the lessons taught by the Reaching Out project, he said this:

"(We have learned that) through the Spirit-filled Word our members hear in their congregations week after week, God has given us highly motivated members who stand ready to contribute generously for the work of the kingdom if we but show them the work that God is calling us to do and give them the opportunity to respond."<sup>20</sup>

In view of the lessons learned from Reaching Out, President Mischke informed the '85 convention delegates that a committee had been appointed to study the whole area of designated and/or special giving for the operating budget. This concept was later officially approved. President Mischke had led the WELS into what is sometimes referred to as a "three stool support system"<sup>21</sup> in the area of the operating budget. One stool would be the congregations support. Another stool would be the support given through estate planning and deferred giving. The third stool would be the area of special giving. (This is the system that has been used for a long time by larger synod's like the E.L.C.A. and L.C.-M.S.) President Mischke predicts that the full benefits of such a system will first be felt around 2020 A.D. or so when estate planning and the like

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<sup>20</sup> Proceedings of the 48th Biennial Convention of the WELS - 1985, p. 29.

<sup>21</sup> Interview with Pastor James Schaeffer - 4/11/95.

begin to pay dividends for the synod.

Reaching Out had been a tremendous blessing in the area of mission work. In 1989 the synod convention saw the need to propose another special project which would have the primary goals of gaining support for mission expansion and also support for the on-going work of the synod. The new project received the title Lift High The Cross. It would run from 1990 to 1993 with the minimum goal set at 16 million dollars.<sup>22</sup> Sixty percent of the offerings received would be put towards mission expansion and the other forty percent would go into the operating budget.<sup>23</sup> This special giving offering was also richly blessed by the Lord and it made it possible for the synod to do many things which otherwise would have been shelved because of a lack of funds.

President Mischke guided our synod through an important period of change. All of the many changes in our synod I have mentioned (and there are others, the total restructuring of the synod's administration for example) could not have been accomplished in such a short time without solid, wise leadership. This is what President Mischke provided in each one of these areas. He appointed men he knew could handle the job and then he trusted them to carry out their assignments. He was certainly highly involved in all of these endeavors, but his leadership never gave the impression of second-guessing or undermining the authority of the individuals he appointed to head these matters.

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<sup>22</sup> Proceedings of the 50th Biennial Convention of the WELS - 1989, p. 59.



"All those working in the synod administration building have enjoyed a tremendous blessing in working with a man who has shown to us loyalty. This was not a blind trust. He didn't agree with everything we came up with. But he did show a trust that what we did we did because we in our hearts believed that this was good - good for the Lord's work and good for the WELS."<sup>23</sup>

President Mischke could see the value in doing things differently, but the one area where nothing changed during his presidency was doctrinal purity. I have already covered the area of stewardship earlier in this paper. But it can be said again that in all the changes in the way the synod dealt with deficit reduction, the Scriptural principles of stewardship were not changed in the least.

People had difficulty seeing that we were all in this financial situation together. Synod, districts, congregations and individuals all bore the responsibility of being good stewards with God's gifts. The synod has every right to speak to individual members about the mission of our synod. People also had difficulty understanding the capacity in which the outside company was working with the synod during Reaching Out. This was something new. This was a cooperation which was hard for many to understand. The synod learned an important lesson about the way in which it needs to conduct special giving projects. But at no point in time were the principles of stewardship ever pushed aside in order to reach the goals at any cost.

Another issue which ballooned during the eighties was the discussion on the roles of man and woman. In 1981 this issue was

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<sup>23</sup> Pres. Carl Mischke Retirement Dinner Video, 1993. This video was provided by Pastor Daniel Malchow.

assigned to the Conference of Presidents for an in-depth study of the Scriptural principles. This was (and is) of course a sensitive issue, so President Mischke showed much patience in dealing with the questions people raised. It wasn't until 1989 that the COP finished two documents titled "Man & Woman In God's World."<sup>24</sup> These documents were to be study guides for congregations to use in educating their members about this topic. A brief, formal doctrinal statement was prepared and approved in 1991.

The way in which this doctrine was handled by the synod during Mischke's presidency was very commendable. The thorough manner in which the synod studied the principles and the tactful way it dealt with questions and problems which arose were a textbook example of how to approach difficult doctrinal questions. By 1995, this issue has quieted down considerably. Only a few isolated pockets of resistance are apparent in the synod at this time.

President Mischke considers the doctrine of fellowship to still be a key doctrine on which our synod must concentrate and in which it must remain steadfast. This was also a key issue during Mischke's presidency. A good example of this would be the synod's association with fraternal benefits organizations. President Mischke felt such organizations were a tremendous help to the synod. He also did not feel the principles of fellowship applied in the same manner as they would for example between two churches, because organizations like Aid Association for Lutherans are really

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<sup>24</sup> Proceedings of the 50th Biennial Convention of the WELS - 1989, pp. 65-66.

businesses, not church bodies. Their constitutions make this clear.

A committee was appointed to look into this specific area. This committee made a thorough study of the Scriptural principles concerning fellowship, stewardship and Christian liberty. In applying these principles to the synod's receiving support from outside sources, the committee came to this basic conclusion:

"All of the above persuades us that receiving grants from the AAL does not in and of itself compromise our confession."<sup>25</sup>

They also listed a number of cautions to watch out for in this area.

Again, President Mischke did not step in as president in 1979 and stomp on the consciences of believers who were not comfortable with this relationship. President Mischke patiently led the synod to a correct understanding of what was involved in this matter. At the same time, he never spurned AAL's willingness to help support certain projects. Over his years as president, he maintained a very positive working relationship with AAL and others which in the end have been a tremendous blessing for the work of our synod.

The final area of President Mischke's presidency I would like to cover is the important area of missions. One member of the COP stated that "rarely, if ever, did a speech, sermon or President's Report go by in which President Mischke did not strongly emphasize

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<sup>25</sup> Proceedings of the 45th Biennial Convention of the WELS - 1979, p. 61.

missions."<sup>26</sup>

Some might look at the great mission expansion of the late sixties and seventies and come to the conclusion that when Pastor Mischke became president, the emphasis on missions stopped. But this could not be further from the truth. What many don't realize is the balance that must be maintained between strengthening the local congregations and expanding missions.

What happened during the days of the great mission expansion was that the WELS received many large groups of mature Christians who had terminated fellowship with the Missouri Synod. Because of these large groups coming to the WELS, mission congregations were formed which were able to become self-sufficient much more quickly than normal. By the late seventies this phenomenon was for the most part over. The work of establishing mission congregations suddenly became much slower and much more difficult. Missions had to once again start totally from scratch.

By 1979 the synod's budget also had an enormous amount of catching up to do. Now that the many missions were established, the synod's financial responsibilities had grown considerably. President Mischke states that whenever the world mission board was getting self-absorbed, he would remind them that without the support of the local congregations, we would have no world missions to worry about. Missions, especially world missions, do not produce anywhere near enough money to support themselves. They are dependant on the support of the local congregations and growth at

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<sup>26</sup> Interview with Pastor John Guse - 4/10/95.

home. This explains in part the important balance between the local congregations, home missions and world missions.

Missions did not stop during the Mischke presidency. The Reaching Out offering helped make it possible to send out a record number of world missionaries - thirteen - in 1985.<sup>27</sup> Many missions grew considerably during the eighties and worked at becoming self-supporting. After much in-depth research, a brand new mission was opened in the highly populated country of Brazil. Lift High The Cross offerings made many new missions possible, such as in the Dominican Republic. The research of possible missions in Russia and Bulgaria began under President Mischke as well.

In 1989 President Mischke and the synod convention went about drawing up a new mission statement for the synod complete with objectives and also with a five part vision statement. Mission Vision 2000+ as it was called (it was later changed to 2003+), listed as some of its goals: three hundred new congregations, ten new cross-cultural missions in urban centers, an expansion of the missionary corp from fifty to seventy and a doubling of personal offerings for the Lord's work, including a doubling of gifts for our mutual mission and ministry as a synod.<sup>28</sup>

These were of course very optimistic goals for a small synod to reach. Many thought these <sup>goals</sup> gifts were completely unrealistic. Others objected to the fact that the synod was setting goals at all

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<sup>27</sup> Northwestern Lutheran - 1985, p. 288.

<sup>28</sup> Proceedings of the 50th Biennial Convention of the WELS - 1989, pp. 55-57.

because they felt this was programming the Holy Spirit. But President Mischke clearly responded to these criticisms in his address to the 1991 convention:

"It's been said that our self-appointed goals for the 90's are unrealistic given our current and projected manpower situation. That may well be! Only God knows. There's nothing sacred about those numbers. They only represent what we mortals hope our synod will be and do. We know in advance that God may have other plans. But that does not relieve us of the responsibility to do careful planning. Our failure to reach a self-determined goal is not inherently a cause for disappointment nor does it automatically call for repentance. But it is, and it does if we have been unfaithful in our service."<sup>29</sup>

President Mischke was truly excited by the many opportunities which presented themselves to the WELS in the nineties. With new technologies and a trend toward people returning to the church to find some authority in their lives, the area of missions poses a great and welcome challenge to our synod. We will have to wait and see what the Lord's plans are.

Changing when change was necessary to best serve all people with the Gospel of Jesus Christ, standing firm when the truths of Scripture were at stake and always emphasizing the mission of Christ's church are a few descriptions which appropriately fit Carl Mischke and his many years as president of the WELS. This paper was written two years after President Mischke retired so that we might have the facts straight. I will be very interested to read what the history books write about the Mischke years twenty to thirty years down the road if the world is still standing.

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<sup>29</sup> Proceedings of the 51st Biennial Convention of the WELS - 1991, p. 27.

The years of the Mischke presidency were a critical period of transition for the WELS. The Word of God did not change and the mission of the church did not change, but the environment in which the church served did change dramatically. President Mischke, with dignity and integrity, guided the synod to examine all that we did, how we did it and why we were doing it all so that we might best reach out with the Gospel to the world in which we live.

If our synod is prepared to meet the significant challenges the 21st century will bring, it will be only because of the bold changes which came about during the Mischke presidency. The manner in which the synod was led through these changes while at all times remaining faithful to the Word of God is a tremendous witness to the special gift the Lord gave to the synod in President Mischke.

Here are President Mischke's own words, spoken during his final report to the synod convention in 1993:

"The names and faces keep on changing. The word alone endures. Let God in all things be glorified. That's what matters. That's all that matters!"