

**THE WELS COLLOQUY PROGRAM:
CONSCIENCES CAPTIVE TO THE WORD**

Church History
Prof. Fredrich
May 22, 1989
Gary Kluba11

Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Library
11831 N. Seminary Drive. 65W
Mequon, Wisconsin

THE WELS COLLOQUY PROGRAM:
CONSCIENCES CAPTIVE TO THE WORD

468 years ago Martin Luther stood before representatives of the Roman Catholic Church at Worms. He was put on the spot and told to recant concerning his teachings about faith and free grace which flew in the face of the church's teaching. At the risk of his life he responded:

Unless I can be instructed and convinced with evidence from the Holy Scriptures or with open, clear, and distinct grounds and reasoning--and *my conscience is captive to the Word of God*--then I cannot and will not recant, because it is neither safe nor wise to act against conscience.¹

Luther recognized that the Word of God alone is, properly speaking, the authority of the Church. He could recognize no other. When that church erred and persisted in error he knew he must leave it and speak God's Word in its purity.

This paper is about the WELS colloquy program. It is a program by which servants of the Word, in the Church today, stand boldly for Scripture's pure teaching and despite many obstacles confess their faith. It is a program by which pastors and teachers in false Christian churches enter the ministry of the WELS because of their orthodox confession.

In this paper we will review various areas of the WELS colloquy program. First, we will review the history of the program. Second, we will discuss how the colloquy program

works. Third, we will discuss the experiences of several pastors who have entered the WELS through colloquy.

THE HISTORY OF THE COLLOQUY PROGRAM

The first type of colloquy evident in WELS history served to screen those candidates who were sent by the European mission societies. Such a colloquy program was practiced in the 1850's. Applicants were recommended by a Wisconsin pastor and/or they presented credentials and voiced their confession. Pastors were at times accepted and called; at least one was recommended to receive some further training (to be carried out by pastors in Watertown), but he refused and he never joined the ministerium of the Wisconsin Synod.²

In the 1860's leaders of the Synod attempted at the conventions to clarify the process by which applicants are colloquized. The constitution at that time stated that Prof. Moldehnke should chair the examination of applicants on the floor of the synod convention. This colloquy concentrated on various points of doctrine, but in 1865 several spoke in opposition to its form. Regarding the ensuing discussion at the 1865 convention Koehler quotes:

Regarding any other form, the assembly is unanimous in this that a simple summary question as to the confessional stand of the aspirants and a simple yes as answer will not do, but the discussion of various motions regarding the most suitable form of colloquium leads to no definite resolution. In the present case the assembly decides that the colloquium be closed as having fulfilled its purpose. The definite admission of the applicants, however had to be tabled, for the time being, for other than confessional reasons.³

In the 1860's the fact that the German Mission Societies and the Wisconsin Lutherans were parting paths became obvious. Letters were written from Langenberg and disagreements were voiced by both parties. Among other complaints the Langenberg Mission Society expressed resentment over the colloquizing of their ministry candidates who were sent to the Midwest. The following is an excerpt of a letter which explains the Mission Society's unhappiness:

To be sure, we on our part still deplore various things that, at your last Synod meeting too, have occurred over there, have been said and resolved, and we fear that one or the other of them, especially the Tentamen or "Colloquium" that is still carried on with our already ordained pastors, may be the point at which your synod and our Society may come to the parting of the ways.⁴

The parting of the ways which the men in Langenberg saw on the horizon came just three years later. After the 1868 convention a letter was drafted and sent which politely cut the apron strings. Naturally, this also, for the most part, marked the end of colloquies for candidates sent by the mission societies.

The second type of colloquy program practiced in the WELS, which is still in practice, is the colloquy of pastors who leave a church body not in fellowship with the WELS to seek membership in the WELS and become a candidate for the reverend ministry (crm). I did not find evidence of guidelines for such a colloquy in the early constitutions of the WELS. The form of the early colloquies seems to have

been similar to that conducted with the pastors from Germany, questions about doctrine and confession being the primary content of the interview. Rev. James P Schaefer, from the Committee on Constitutional Matters, remarked that this type of colloquy was carried on by "a couple of district presidents getting together and colloquizing" each applicant. Prior to the formation of the districts this seems to have been carried on by leaders of the Wisconsin Synod. Such a colloquy was not conducted for men who applied for membership from the Missouri Synod between 1868 and 1961 because of the arrangement made in October of 1868 in Milwaukee whereby transfer of pastors between Missouri and Wisconsin "is to be contingent on the certification of honorable release."⁵

The 1937 constitution stated provisions for membership in the Wisconsin Synod:

This Synod shall comprise all congregations, pastors, professors, and male teachers who shall have joined said body through their respective District (Article III, Sec. 1).

These provisions were applied also to the handling of colloquies because no particular guidelines for colloquies had yet been drawn up.

Two years later a model constitution for the districts of the synod was drawn up. Article III (Membership), Sec. 2 provided some guidelines for colloquies:

Pastors, professors, and male teachers desiring admission shall submit a written application together with the necessary credentials. In case they received their standing from other church bodies they must be

ready to submit to a colloquium.

With these guidelines the district presidents conducted colloquies and recommended men for admission at the district and Synod conventions.

Finally the 1959 Synod convention included guidelines for the handling of colloquies in its revised constitution. The Article dealing with membership was greatly expanded to include sections about membership of missionaries and Colloquium Committees. The following is Section 11.03:

Pastors, male teachers, and professors applying for membership from church bodies not in fellowship with the Synod, shall submit a written application to the President of the District within which they reside, or nearest which they reside. Notice of such application shall be published at least twice in the official organs of the Synod. A Colloquium Committee shall be appointed by the President of the Synod composed of the District President, a professor from the Theological Seminary, and a Vice-President of the Synod. The Vice-President shall be Chairman of the Committee. If the applicant is approved by the Colloquium Committee, notice of such approval shall be published in the official organs of the Synod, and the applicant is eligible for a call.

The constitutional guidelines for handling of Colloquies has not changed significantly in the last 30 years. The present constitution (this section is actually in the bylaws) has dropped "and professors" from the first line (probably because it is redundant after stating "Pastors and male teachers"). The present constitution also states "The Northwestern Lutheran" as the specific organ in which applications and results should be published. This section of the present bylaws is attached to the end of this paper (Appendix A).

The actual process by which men are colloquized has not changed a lot in the history of the WELS. The seminary has been involved since constitutional provisions assigned a seminary professor to each Colloquium Committee since 1959. Since that date the seminary has been gradually becoming more involved as Colloquy applicants are more often being requested to spend time in training at the seminary. Rev. Schaefer noted that future changes in the constitution's guidelines for colloquies may state more defined provisions for time spent at the seminary.

HOW THE COLLOQUY PROGRAM WORKS

As much as the constitution provides guidelines which determine the handling of a colloquy application, still the process includes much time and careful work on the part of both applicant and those men who review the application which is not spelled out in the guidelines.

The process begins, as stated in the constitution, when the applicant contacts the District President of the area in which he resides and expresses his intention. This begins the "initial interview" stage which is outlined in a Northwestern Lutheran article by, at that time, Synod Vice-President Carl Mischke:

Every applicant is first interviewed by the District president. At the discretion of the District president one or two others, chosen from among the District vice-presidents, the conference visiting elder, or other area pastors, will be asked to assist with the interview. This initial interview seeks to learn why the applicant is requesting a colloquy, whether he is trying to escape an unpleasant situation or whether he is genuinely concerned about doc-

trinal aberrations in his present affiliation, only to find that his testimony in his present congregation and church body is not being heeded(NWL 4/8/73).

The information which the interviewers work with at this initial meeting includes the applicants personal testimony, a resume prepared by him, and some references, both personal(fellow pastors) and practical(sermons or other writings he has done).

The initial interview will often reveal that the applicant cannot be recommended for a colloquy at the present time. If he is recommended for a colloquy, the announcement of the request must be published in *The Northwestern Lutheran*. In this way the members of the Synod not only have the opportunity but the duty to communicate with the Colloquy Committee if they have pertinent information concerning the applicant(NWL 4/8/73).

This first step in the colloquy process is taken with a cautious approach because there may be different reasons why a man is applying for a colloquy.

The second step in the colloquy process is the meeting of the Colloquium Committee. As the constitution stipulates, this meeting takes place after the two announcements in *The Northwestern Lutheran*. The Vice-president of the Synod chairs the meeting with a Seminary professor, the District president and the applicant. Each appointed Colloquium Committee is an *ad hoc* committee. The meeting lasts about two hours. Much like the first colloquies with the German pastors of the 1850's and 1860's, much attention is devoted to the areas of doctrine and credentials.

The biggest change seems to be in the personalizing of each colloquy. A great portion of the time is spent

reviewing the applicant's personal ministry. This can be done through questioning and reviewing the file which is brought to this meeting. Recommendations of fellow pastors, former instructors and the applicant's District president have been gathered. Sermons, information from the congregation and any other pertinent references are included. The steps which led to this Colloquium Committee meeting also provide information. Generally at least 20-30 pages of material present a good picture of the applicant.

No two colloquies are conducted in exactly the same manner. Obviously, the greater amount of time is not spent on areas of agreement, but on areas in which the Committee has reason to believe that there may still be some unclarity and even disagreement(NWL 4/8/73).

A seminary professor who has served on several Colloquy Committees noted that the questioning done is determined by the individual being colloquized.

The area of discussion at the colloquy meeting which has changed the most over the years and gradually has developed into a major part of the Committee's concern is the handling of practical situations which arise in the ministry:

Much time is also spent on the practical areas of church life in an effort to determine whether the applicant is truly evangelical. It is possible, unfortunately, for someone to know the right answers in doctrinal matters and yet be very legalistic in the care of souls(NWL 4/8/73).

One applicant who had successfully passed his colloquy remarked that this discussion of application questions was the longest section of his Colloquium Committee meeting.

This consisted of a rapid succession of "What would you do if. . .?" questions. A Seminary professor who has served on several Colloquium Committees commented that it is of vital importance to determine the "spirit in which a man carries on his ministry."

Since the Seminary became officially involved in 1959, it has gradually taken on a more and more high profile position in the colloquy program. Not only do its professors sit on the Colloquium Committee, but a Seminary study program for applicants has been implemented. The recommendation that applicants spend a period of time studying at the Seminary has been a standard practice for about the last ten to fifteen years. In recent years, a one year course of study at the Seminary has been a common practice.

Anyone seeking a colloquy today will be coming from a church body that has not been in fellowship with our Synod for more than ten years. For this reason, colloquy committees are finding it advisable to recommend, in the majority of cases, that the applicant enroll at our Seminary for a year or two (NWL 4/8/73).

Since each case is handled individually, certain situations call for a degree of flexibility in the recommending of applicants to a course of study at the Seminary. The time of year may lead the Colloquium Committee to decide that it is inadvisable to tell an applicant to wait a length of time for the beginning of the next school year to begin his study at the Seminary. Certain family situations, such as health problems, may also lead

the Committee to choose a particular course, possibly an abbreviated one, to accommodate the particular situation.

The colloquy application of pastors who wish to join the Synod with the congregation they are presently serving presents another instance in which the course of study at the Seminary is often adjusted. The congregation may be going through a difficult time as it breaks ties with a former group and joins a new fellowship for confessional reasons. For their pastor to leave them for a time, especially an extended time, is considered inadvisable. Fortunately the pastors of such congregations do often take up the encouragement to attend the Seminary at a later time. Of the pastors surveyed, those who did not immediately attend the Seminary for a time because they were already serving a congregation later returned to the Seminary for summer quarters. One of these men found great value in attending five sessions of summer quarter.

This time of study spent at the Seminary is intended to serve both the pastor and the Synod:

This will enable us to become better acquainted with him before he is recommended for a call into our Synod; he, in turn, will have an opportunity to become better acquainted with us(NWL 4/8/73).

The program of study has served as an excellent tool for assisting in the assimilation of colloquy applicants into the ranks of their future colleagues. It has also been of value as a review of, and furthering of, their former Seminary training.

One byproduct of this study period may have surfaced when at least one man reached the point of study and said he wouldn't do it. Throughout the steps of the colloquy program our Synod is concerned about the earnestness of the applicants. A byproduct of this study may be its further role as a test of that earnestness.

Finally, after the applicant has successfully passed through the various steps of the program he is presented as a candidate for the reverend ministry and the result of his colloquy is published in *The Northwestern Lutheran*:

The Colloquy Committee then assists the District presidents, who are responsible for recommending qualified candidates to vacant congregations, in determining the type of ministry in which the applicant can best serve(NWL 4/8/73).

EXPERIENCES OF COLLOQUY PASTORS

The final section of this paper consists of the results of a survey which was sent out to WELS pastors who have entered the Synod by colloquy in the past 20 years. The information which follows is the compilation of 15 surveys. This survey was intended to gather information about the experiences of these pastors and to learn about their views concerning the colloquy program. The survey which was sent is attached to this paper (Appendix B).

The first area of discussion deals with the challenges which a pastor faces in moving from the fellowship of one church body to another. The majority of respondents echoed the convictions of one: "Theologically, emotionally and spiritually we were compelled to join the WELS. It was not

a hard agonizing move." In spite of this firm conviction there were still the difficult areas which many pastors and their families faced. Leaving families (pastor's and his wife's) and colleagues was not an easy move, especially when family and colleagues did not understand why the move was being made. Sometimes there was resentment and bitterness.

One often mentioned challenge was "leaving the congregation I had been called to serve." "I had to trust solely in Jesus Christ to enable me to leave the people of my former LC-MS congregation whom I love." Although some pastors must not endure the departure because their congregations come with them to the WELS, most must leave the congregation behind. One pastor noted an interesting experience in this respect:

As a result of my leaving, several families were found to be like minded who also left, formed a new congregation and asked me to serve them. So the most challenging aspect was trusting that our Lord would bring good out of this act, which He did.

The most often noted challenge was that of acting on one's personal convictions despite the consequences. The following two comments express this great challenge:

The most difficult part was the struggle of finally admitting that the LC-MS was heterodox and either unwilling or unable to discipline the errorists in its midst.

The decision to make a denominational move in obedience to what seemed to be the will of God especially in application of Scriptural fellowship principles was the most challenging.

One pastor summed up all of the challenges and viewed them from a positive perspective:

It hurts to break old ties, go against relatives, move the family and live on a wing and a prayer, but it is all worth it when you weigh all of that against biblical purity.

A second area of discussion dealt with the course of study at the Seminary. This was generally reflected upon as a positive experience. One pastor wrote, "The year of studying was a great time of healing, refreshment and acclimation for both my wife and I." Another pastor echoed the sentiment, "After stormy years in the LC-MS, the stay at the Sem also amounted to a 'detox' program for me personally."

The curriculum also received favorable comments. Most appreciated of all may have been the third quarter Guest Lectures. Two respondents remarked that they appreciated the doctrinal soundness of the instructors in the course on Paul's letter to the Romans. Some also remarked that they found the Isaiah and Romans courses to be good opportunities for brushing up on Hebrew and Greek skills. One pastor also noted that he would like to have been exposed to a greater variety of professors, for example he noted, having more than one Dogmatics professor would have been good. Another particular comment about a pastor's appreciation for Dogmatics class is worth noting:

I have increased my knowledge and appreciation of dogmatics. Previously I was more interested in church history, how men influenced events, than in doctrinal debates. Now I see the significance of Luther's concern with genuine doctrine and false doctrine.

Possibly the most appreciated benefit of the Seminary study was simply the familiarization with the WELS in general. The following comments express the thought in a variety of ways:

The most helpful aspect of my stay was not so much the actual classwork, but rather becoming familiar with the Sem staff, and also various Synodical officials.

Opportunity to meet a number of young men soon to be members of the WELS ministerium. Gave me a "class" in spite of age difference.

One pastor offered the summary thought, "Going to the Seminary helped the transition."

Probably the most enjoyable aspect of learning about the colloquy experience is found in the discussion of the rewards which pastors derived from it. Several pastors mentioned the oneness they enjoy in their Synod and especially at pastors' conferences.

The unity in belief is the most rewarding area both professionally and personally. To know that those at a conference or to whom you transfer members agree with you on God's Word and its meaning is a source of both great encouragement and great joy.

The most rewarding area is to know that your fellow pastors, the circuit pastor, and officials are one in faith and doctrine with you. I don't think the typical member or pastor realizes how unusual this is in Christendom!

Another pastor talked about the reward he found in realizing where our highest allegiance belongs:

Our allegiance can not be to a church body or a congregation, but alone to the Word of God. For the Word remains, as it always has been, the inspired, inerrant, authoritative Word of our God.

I do not believe this comment intends to speak against our allegiance to our Synod or fellowship of believers, but it warns us that priorities exist in our allegiances--the highest going to God alone.

In speaking about the rewards which they derived from the colloquy experience, one often recurring word was 'peace.' Simply being at peace with fellow Christians and at peace with one's own conscience.

Overall, pastors feel the experience of the colloquy was well worth it. However one particular complaint which more than one pastor voiced concerned the "coldness of the process." The process beginning with initial contact and ending with placement in the ministry is often long. One pastor noted that there seemed to be "a lot of waiting around for responses and wasted time between steps." Others noted that they seemed to get the cold shoulder at first and almost a response of disinterest from the WELS. Such remarks were somewhat tempered by one pastor's comment in this regard, "It seems they want to avoid being tagged with the reputation that they are 'Pastor Stealers'." He also remarked, "while the process is more impersonal, the individuals are very caring."

One pastor's remarks seemed to reflect the overall appreciation for the colloquy program:

Although some feel that the WELS Colloquy process is too demanding and therefore keeps some men from joining the WELS, I do not agree. I have the greatest respect for all those I dealt with during the whole Colloquy process, and their legitimate concern for

maintaining the doctrinal integrity of the Synod. At first I resented having to disrupt my family life by spending time at WLS, but looking back I realize that I benefited a lot from the experience and that the Synodical officials were wiser than me! The requirement is a wise one, and I hope it is retained. Once a man has completed the Colloquy process, my experience is that he is really accepted by fellow WELS pastors. That is no doubt because they know their Synod is thorough in its dealings with those who come from the outside.

I will close with the remarks of a pastor who brought his congregation into the WELS more than 15 years ago. His confidence and his summary remarks give us hope for the continuation of this fine program in the future of the WELS:

In summary, what I saw of our WELS colloquy program is excellent. I hear it's even better today. Pray God that it remains so.

ENDNOTES

¹James M. Kittelson, Luther The Reformer (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1986), p. 161.

²John Philipp Koehler, The History of the Wisconsin Synod (Sauk Rapids, MN: The Protestant Conference, 1981), p. 49.

³Ibid., p. 109.

⁴Ibid., p. 112.

⁵Ibid., p. 129.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Kittelson, James P. Luther The Reformer. Minneapolis:
Augsburg Publishing House, 1986.

Koehler, John Philipp. The History of the Wisconsin Synod.
Sauk Rapids, MN: The Protes'tant Conference, 1981.

Personal interviews were conducted with Rev. James P. Schaefer from the synod's Committee on Constitutional Matters and with a Seminary professor who has served on several Colloquium Committees.

Surveys(Appendix B) were sent to 23 WELS pastors who entered the Synod through the colloquy program. Most of the information and all quotations in the third section of this paper are taken from the 15 surveys which were returned.

Information on requests for colloquies and results of colloquies was gathered from issues of *The Northwestern Lutheran* 1970-1989 in order to locate several pastors who entered the synod through the colloquy program.

BYLAWS

prior to the synod convention, the respective boards, commissions and committees shall notify the president of the synod which appointments expire.

Section 7.10 Application for Membership in the Synod

- (a) Pastors and male teachers desiring membership in the synod shall submit a written application together with the necessary credentials to the president of the district within which they reside.
(b) A congregation desiring membership in the synod shall pass a resolution to that effect in a duly constituted meeting. It shall submit its application in writing to the president of the district within which it is situated and shall present a copy of its constitution and bylaws for approval.
(c) Applications shall be acted on by the district in its regular conventions or by a convention of the synod upon recommendation of the district president in years when the district does not convene.

Section 7.15 Colloquium Committee

Pastors and male teachers from church bodies not in fellowship with the synod may apply for membership by written application to the president of the district within which they reside. Notice of such application shall be published at least twice in The Northwestern Lutheran. A colloquium committee shall be appointed by the president of the synod. It shall be composed of the district president, a professor from Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary and a vice-president of the synod. The vice-president shall be chairman of the committee. If the applicant is approved by the Colloquium Committee, he shall be eligible for a call, and notice of such approval shall be published in The Northwestern Lutheran.

Section 7.20 Privileged Communications

- (a) Pastors of the synod in their professional capacity are expected to hear privileged communications.
(b) Members of their congregations are invited to communicate with their pastors in a confidential manner to make confession, to seek spiritual counsel or comfort, or to enlist help in connection with a family problem.
(c) Enjoined by the Holy Scripture and supported by competent legal opinion, the pastors of the synod are expected to keep such privileged communications in complete confidence.

Section 7.25 Jurisdiction in Disciplinary Actions

- (a) In cases of discipline among pastors, teachers and congregations of both self-supporting and mission status, the district in which such pastors, teachers and congregations hold membership shall exercise original jurisdiction. The synod shall exercise appellate jurisdiction.

BYLAWS

- (b) In cases of discipline among the faculties of the synod's schools and of the area high schools and administrators of synodical boards and commissions, the respective board or commission shall exercise original jurisdiction. The district in which the appellant is a member and the synod shall exercise appellate jurisdiction successively.
(c) The two vice-presidents with the concurrence of the district circuit pastors may suspend the district president from his office. Within 60 days thereafter a special convention of the district, called by the vice-presidents, shall meet to consider the disciplinary action. One of the vice-presidents shall preside at the special convention. The president may suspend a vice-president from his office with the concurrence of the remaining vice-president and the district circuit pastor. Within 60 days thereafter a special convention of the district shall meet to consider the disciplinary action. The further conduct of the proceedings shall be governed by Article XXII, Sections 4-8 of the district constitution, except that the district commission of review shall be elected by ballot from a slate of ten candidates submitted by the district nominating committee. The list of candidates shall be ratified by the convention.

- (d) In cases of discipline among missionaries under the jurisdiction of the Board for World Missions, the respective executive committee shall exercise original jurisdiction. The Board for World Missions and the synod shall exercise appellate jurisdiction successively. In the case of the Apache Indian Mission and the Spanish Mission within the confines of the district, however, jurisdiction over pastors, congregations and teachers shall be exercised as outlined in Section 7.25(a).
(e) In all cases of discipline not covered by the above paragraphs of this section, the synod shall exercise sole jurisdiction. Except as set out below, this decision is not subject to review by any judicial or administrative body.

- (f) All correspondence and documentary evidence relative to a disciplinary action together with a detailed report of the proceedings thereof shall be filed by the acting district, board or commission with the president of the synod within 60 days after such disciplinary action shall have been concluded.

Section 7.30 Appeals to the District

- (a) Any person or congregation who has been subject to disciplinary action by a circuit pastor and the district president, or a synodical board or commission, with the exception of the missionaries under the jurisdiction of the Board for World Missions, shall have the right to appeal to the district of which the disciplined party is or was a member. The appellant may address his appeal either to the president of

APPENDIX B

At what age did you enter the ministry of the WELS?

If you spent time at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, how long were you there and what aspects of that time were most valuable?

Comment on the most challenging aspects of your move to the WELS (either before, during or after the transition).
[e.g.- breaking old ties, moving the family, trusting God]

Comment on areas in which the experience has been most rewarding, both personally and in your ministry.

Please use the reverse side for additional space and include any other comments which may contribute to this study.
Thank you for your help!