

THE SPIRITUAL WELFARE COMMISSION:
THE WELS' ANSWER TO THE CHAPLAINCY QUESTION
DURING WORLD WAR II

by

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What do you do when nearly 10% of your church body is serving in the armed forces, and you are unable to provide most of them with the Word and Sacrament personally? This is the problem that the Wisconsin Synod faced during World War II. At the height of the the war, the synod had over 20,000 of its members in the service, a number which seems staggering today. The logical way to serve the spiritual needs of these men and women would have been to commission chaplains who could serve them personally both stateside and abroad. And that's what many, including the U.S. Government, the Missouri Synod, and even some of its own members thought the Wisconsin Synod should do. But the Wisconsin Synod decided that this was not an option because of doctrinal reasons, and thus the Spiritual Welfare Commission was born, serving the synod's military personnel mainly through a massive mailing campaign.

The chaplaincy question had not always been a point of contention between the Missouri Synod and the Wisconsin Synod. During World War I there was complete cooperation between the two synods in serving the spiritual needs of young men serving in the military. Rather than providing pastors to serve as chaplains, an Army and Navy Board was established to provide religious materials, civilian camp pastors, and other services. During the war more than 80,000 hymnals and prayer books, 12,000 New Testaments, 425,000 sermons and 260,000 tracts were distributed. In addition, 30,000 copies per month of the Synodical Conference's "Soldiers' and Sailors' Bulletin" were issued.¹

But sometime between World War I and World War II, the attitude of the Missouri Synod changed toward chaplaincy. The proceedings from the 1935 convention of the Missouri Synod show how dramatically changed the Missouri Synod's position had become. A Missouri Synod committee found nothing contrary to the doctrine, tenets and practice of the Lutheran Church in a Lutheran pastor becoming a chaplain. The committee considered the chaplaincy a necessity for serving "our boys" and also a tremendous mission opportunity in reaching out to unchurched servicemen. Thus it was resolved that the synod appoint an Army and Navy Commission which would be empowered to recommend men for chaplaincy, supervise calling them and monitor reports from them. Although it was noted that there would be difficulties in allowing chaplains, yet the committee was "assured by brethren that our principles will be honored by the government."²

In its 1937 convention, the Wisconsin Synod responded to Missouri's actions by appointing a commission to study the chaplaincy question. It was evident that the Wisconsin Synod was not convinced by the Missouri Synod that it could enter into the chaplaincy without compromising any of its doctrinal positions. Thus it was stated at the convention that any Wisconsin Synod pastor who entered the chaplaincy was doing so without the sanction of the synod.³

The Missouri Synod in its 1938 convention stated that it was confident that it could enter the chaplaincy program and still retain its doctrinal integrity. The report from the Army and Navy Commission for Chaplains stated that the regulations for chaplains included: "(Applicants) will not

violate principles of separation of Church and State nor be involved in unionistic practices."⁴ The commission further stated that

although (chaplains) are under the authority of the commanding officers, the provision does not imply any dictation as to their spiritual ministry; consequently the conscientious Lutheran chaplain can avoid all unionistic practices. This has been corroborated by pastors who have been in the army.⁵

The Wisconsin Synod did not concur with these findings. Its Committee on Chaplaincies reported to the 1939 synod convention: ~~the~~

Your committee on Army and Navy chaplaincies after a thorough study of all available information and literature is of the unanimous opinion that we do not commission pastors to function in this capacity according to governmental regulations.⁶

The report then went on to give the reasons for this decision. Basically, there were three reasons. First of all, the committee did not find it necessary that the synod commission chaplains, since "any ordained pastor is at liberty to minister unto men in service."⁷ (This reason became invalid, of course, when the U.S. entered the war and began to send soldiers overseas.) Secondly, the committee felt that the chaplaincy program violated the separation of Church and State, since the government paid the chaplains and had the final choice in which pastors would be commissioned as chaplains. And finally, the committee concluded that Wisconsin Synod chaplains would inevitably be forced into unionistic practices, despite the fact that it had been given assurances to the contrary. The conclusions of the committee formed the basis of the Wisconsin Synod's position on the

chaplaincy question throughout World War II. After this time, no progress was ever made toward Missouri and Wisconsin coming to an agreement concerning the chaplaincy question. The 1941 convention of the Missouri Synod summed it up when it reported that its Army and Navy Commission "has not been able thus far to make any arrangement with the brethren of the Wisconsin Synod whereby they would cooperate with us."⁸

Meanwhile, while all the wrangling over the chaplaincy question was going on, the United States was being pushed closer and closer to the brink of war. No matter what conclusion the Wisconsin Synod came to concerning chaplains, it became evident that extraordinary efforts would have to be made in order to serve the growing number of its members who were entering the military. The November 3, 1940 issue of the Northwestern Lutheran reported that the synod's General Mission Board was preparing to make provision for spiritual care of Wisconsin Synod servicemen. No definite plans had been made at that point, but the Board requested the names and addresses of all synod members currently serving in the military.⁹

On January 30, 1941, the "Spiritual Welfare Commission, Ev. Lutheran Synod of Wisconsin and Other States, for Men in Military Service" was formed at a meeting in Milwaukee. The executive committee of the Spiritual Welfare Commission (from here on referred to as the SWC) met on February 20. It determined that caring for the spiritual needs of the synod's enlisted men should be a permanent part of the synod's work. While no definite plan of action was made, the SWC

requested that congregations submit names and addresses of enlisted members, maintain close contact with them, increase their contributions for mission work, and send the Northwestern Lutheran to all enlisted men.¹⁰

The task that lay ahead for the SWC was enormous, a fact which became more and obvious as time went on. Yet the SWC was determined not to lose sight of its obligation not to make any doctrinal compromises despite the temptations and pressures the synod was facing as World War II approached. In the March 23, 1941 edition of the Northwestern Lutheran, the SWC reported:

Our church is greatly concerned about the spiritual welfare of our membership serving in military and naval bases and in providing them with such spiritual care, but this must be done sanely, not hysterically, not under emotional pressure at the cost of Christian principle and practice.¹¹

But the SWC did begin to take action. In the same article, the SWC reported that it had established a Bureau of Records to file all the names and addresses of the synod's enlisted men. It began to send copies of the Northwestern Lutheran to the names of servicemen in its file. It promised to produce literature to send to the servicemen and to publish pertinent articles in the Northwestern Lutheran. It was in the process of securing the names of Synodical Conference pastors near all camps and bases who could serve synod servicemen located there. And it promised to re-study the chaplaincy question.¹²

And so the SWC did re-study the chaplaincy question. The findings of three pastors, Prof. Carl Schweppe, William Nommensen and E. Benjamin Schlueter were compiled into a

report. All three pastors came to the conclusion that the synod could not enter into the chaplaincy program. The reasons stated were basically that 1) the manner in which chaplains are commissioned violated the doctrine of the call; 2) chaplains would be required to conduct services not only for members of their own denomination, but also for members of other denominations and even non-Christians; 3) chaplains would be required to conduct burials for any soldier whose family requested it, no matter what his faith was; and finally 4) chaplains would also be required to perform services outside of their pastoral duties, such as supervising recreation. According to this report, the chaplaincy was clearly a violation of Church and State separation and would necessarily involve a compromise of doctrine.¹³

The findings of this report were disputed by the Missouri Synod, and an essay to counter this report was written by Martin Graebner, who was serving as president of Concordia College of St. Paul. The gist of this essay was that the Missouri Synod's position on the chaplaincy was in keeping with Christ's Great Commission, since the chaplaincy provided excellent opportunities to reach out with the gospel to men who desperately needed it. Graebner claimed that a Lutheran chaplain could be legitimately called by the synod, and that he could serve without compromising his confessional stance. For proof, Graebner interviewed a Missouri Synod chaplain who claimed that he had never been called upon to perform any service which would have compromised his call.¹⁴

Apparently some Wisconsin Synod members were convinced

by Missouri's arguments. In September of 1942, Frederick Knoll, a Wisconsin Synod pastor in Warren, Arizona, wrote to the president of the synod, John Brenner, requesting a letter of endorsement so that he could enter the chaplaincy of the U.S. Navy.¹⁵ President Brenner promptly replied to Knoll that he had no business applying for a commission as a chaplain.¹⁶ But evidently another Wisconsin Synod pastor had the same idea, for a letter from Pres. Brenner to the Chief of Chaplains in Washington D.C. reveals that one minister "had resigned from the pastorate of one of our churches and received his ecclesiastical indorsement from the Army-Navy Commission of the Missouri Synod without our approval."¹⁷ This unnamed pastor must not have been Knoll, for Knoll's name continued to appear on the roster in the Wisconsin Synod yearbooks throughout World War II.

Not only was the Wisconsin Synod being pressured to enter the chaplaincy from the Missouri Synod and from some of its own members, even the War Department of the United States began to pressure the synod. A letter to Pres. Brenner from Willian R. Arnold, Chief of Chaplains, implied that the Wisconsin Synod should commission one chaplain for every 10,000 members of the synod. Since the synod had about 250,000 members at this time, the War Department requested 25 chaplains from the synod. Arnold closed the letter by stating:

It is our feeling that the very future of our religious institutions and freedoms in America and the world may depend on the manner of the response of our religious leaders to the call for chaplains now.¹⁸

In order to settle this whole matter once and for all, the Wisconsin Synod commissioned Prof. Schweppe to write a booklet evaluating the chaplaincy, to be distributed to all delegates at the 1943 synod convention. By quoting extensively from the manual of chaplains' regulations and from Scripture, Prof. Schweppe once again came to the conclusion that the Wisconsin Synod could not have any part in the governmental chaplaincy program.¹⁹

It was clear that the Wisconsin Synod would not commission chaplains during World War II. How, then, did the SWC respond to the enormous task of providing for the spiritual care of the synod's enlisted men? By mid-year 1944, the SWC had over 1,500 names of servicemen in its files. To each of these servicemen, a personal letter was sent, letting him know that his synod had not forgotten him.. These letters were sent out at regular intervals. In addition to these personal letters, a daily devotional booklet was sent every six weeks. The SWC also encouraged the local congregations to stay in contact with their own members in the service by mailing out bulletins and letters. The SWC did not send Bibles or prayer books to servicemen.²⁰ It should be noted, however, that the government issued New Testaments to all servicemen during World War II.

All of the work of the SWC took place in its office, located in what was formerly the parish hall of Salem Ev. Lutheran Church, 1916 E. Thomas Avenue, Milwaukee. The work was carried out under the direction of executive chairman Rev. E.R. Blakewell, a World War I veteran, who did this

on a part-time basis while continuing his work as a parish pastor.

When the Wisconsin Synod met in convention in 1941, it was apparent that the entire synod took the work of the SWC very seriously. The August 24 issue of the Northwestern Lutheran reported from the convention that "while economy was often expressed in connection with other proposed projects, not one voice was raised in support of the idea to keep the expenditures of the Spiritual Welfare Commission at minimum."²¹ Indeed, the amazing sum of \$25,000 for the budget of the SWC was proposed and accepted.²² By 1945, the SWC's budget had grown to \$48,000!²³

Besides sending literature to the servicemen of the synod, the 1941 convention called for the SWC to send camp pastors to several larger camps and bases. Pastor Erwin Scharf was called on August 18, 1942 to serve Wisconsin Synod men located in four large camps in the vicinity of Alexandria, Louisiana. He was given a one-year leave of absence from his congregation in Wisconsin, but due to the large number of synod members located at these bases, his tour of duty was extended to February, 1944.²⁴

By the time Christmas came in 1941, the Japanese had bombed Pearl Harbor and the United States had entered the war. For Christmas that year, the SWC sent out a special mailing to the servicemen consisting of a complete devotional service, Christmas hymns, prayers, Scripture portions, sermon, etc., printed on a colored folder with an accompanying Christmas card. By this time, the SWC files had grown

to include over 2,000 names.²⁵

Obviously, mailings such as the SWC sent out could never have taken the place of personal contact, but nevertheless the servicemen greatly appreciated the SWC's efforts. Throughout the war, the Northwestern Lutheran would frequently publish letters of appreciation sent to the office of the SWC from servicemen all over the world. This letter came from the Canal Zone:

I have been receiving the "Daily Devotional" booklet for some time now and I would like to thank you from the bottom of my heart. They are really the only attachment to the church that I have.²⁶

From the Balboa Canal Zone: "I would like to keep on getting the spiritual material which you mail out to us boys, it keeps me with my God."²⁷ From New Hampshire: "I read a sermonette you sent me and enjoyed it very much. It really helped to clear a few things up for me when I was in doubt."²⁸

From Africa: "During the past sixteen months in which I have seen much of the world, no mail came through as regularly as yours."²⁹ From the South Pacific: "Your much-appreciated literature reached me in the field of action in the Solomons." "Your most welcome sermon and letter found me in the jungles of New Guinea."³⁰ "Even the natives of New Guinea who have learned the English language read our spiritual literature."³¹ From Ireland:

I have been unable to attend a Lutheran church since I have been in the army. Therefore the only means I have of receiving God's Words are through the literature you send me, literature from my pastor at home, and reading the Bible.³²

And from Italy, a writer sent a money order for fifteen

dollars along with a note explaining that giving money for God's work was something new to him, since he had only become a Christian after entering the army.³³

As the U.S. involvement in the war grew, so did the SWC's work. In August of 1942, the Northwestern Lutheran reported that the SWC's files contained the names of some 6,000 men.³⁴ By October 31, 1943, the SWC's files listed the names of over 15,000 men and women of the synod serving in the armed forces.³⁵ And less than a year later, the number grown to over 20,000.³⁶ By 1943, the SWC employed six full-time employees and numerous volunteer employees who helped file names and addresses, type and copy letters and sort mail.³⁷ Overcrowding in the parish hall of Salem led the SWC to move its offices twice and to call as full-time executive secretary Pastor John Raabe, since Pastor Blakewell's congregation refused to release him to become the full-time executive secretary.³⁸

Besides informing the membership of the synod about the work it was doing, the SWC's articles in the Northwestern Lutheran also encouraged the laity of the synod to support the government patriotically, and discouraged strongly the practice of being a "conscientious objector." If drafted, the Wisconsin Synod member should serve willingly, according to the SWC. "Patriotic service," stated one article, "is nothing less than serving God and Lord."³⁹ The SWC addressed the fact that many people's consciences were bothered by U.S. involvement in the war, but it reassured them that the government has the right to enter war.⁴⁰

Although the Missouri Synod held the advantage over the Wisconsin Synod in that it could send its pastors to where its members in the service were, even overseas, there was one area where even military chaplains could not serve their members: the P.O.W. camps. But when many Wisconsin Synod members were taken prisoner by the Japanese and the Germans, the SWC was still able to reach them with its literature, through the cooperation of the International Red Cross.⁴¹ One of the most poignant letters published in the Northwestern Lutheran by the SWC came from a Wisconsin Synod member interred in a Nazi P.O.W. camp. The letter was reproduced photographically, complete with Adolph Hitler postage stamp and "Stalag 11" cancellation mark. Amazingly, the writer reported that he was still receiving SWC literature regularly.⁴²

As the war drew to a close, the SWC's work shifted from the battlefields to the hospitals. Peacetime did not mean the end of the SWC. It continued to send literature to the troops still stationed at home and abroad. The work slowed down, albeit temporarily, with the Korean conflict just on the horizon. Throughout World War II, the SWC had served over 25,000 men and women, mostly through literature sent through the mail. The amount of mail that must have passed through the SWC office is staggering.

How effective was the work of the SWC? That's a tough question to answer. Obviously, much more effective work could have been done through the personal contact that the chaplaincy offered. While the pages of the Northwestern Lutheran

during the war years were filled with letters of appreciation, the pages of the Lutheran Witness were filled with accounts and photographs of Missouri Synod pastors preaching the gospel (often from Jeeps!) and administering the Sacrament personally to Lutheran servicemen at home and overseas. But considering the conditions which the government imposed on military chaplains, the Wisconsin Synod had no choice but not to enter the chaplaincy. The Wisconsin Synod today owes a great debt of appreciation to the men who had the wisdom not to go along with the Missouri Synod in this matter, despite all the pressure they faced. And the synod especially is indebted to the Spiritual Welfare Commission, whose mammoth efforts effected the lives and spiritual lives of thousands of servicemen and women during World War II.

NOTES

¹"A History of Spiritual Services for Military Personnel" (Paper authorized by the Military Services Committee of the Special Ministries Board of the WELS, October, 1982), p.2.

²Proceedings of the Convention of the Ev. Lutheran Synod of Missouri, Ohio, and Other States, 1935, p.133.

³Proceedings of the Convention of the Ev. Lutheran Joint Synod of Wisconsin and Other States, 1937, p. ~~444~~ 55.

⁴Proceedings, Missouri Synod, 1938, p.160.

⁵Ibid, p.161.

⁶Proceedings, Wisconsin Synod, 1939, pp.67,68.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Proceedings, Missouri Synod, 1941, p.212.

⁹Northwestern Lutheran, November 3, 1940, p.351.

¹⁰"A History of Spiritual Services for Military Personnel," p.3.

¹¹Northwestern Lutheran, March 23, 1941, p.93.

¹²Ibid.

¹³(Untitled, undated report from SWC) (Seminary Verticle File)

¹⁴Martin Graebner, "Army Chaplains." (Seminary Verticle File)

¹⁵Letter, Frederick Knoll to John Brenner, September 16, 1942. (Seminary Verticle File)

¹⁶Letter, Brenner to Knoll, September 23, 1942. (Seminary Verticle File)

¹⁷Letter, Brenner to War Department, March 31, 1943. (Seminary Verticle File)

¹⁸Letter, William R. Arnold to Brenner, March 19, 1943. (Seminary Verticle File)

¹⁹Prof. Carl Schweppe, "The Government Chaplaincy, an Appraisal."

²⁰Northwestern Lutheran, July 27, 1941, p.232.

²¹Northwestern Lutheran, August 24, 1941, p.266.

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- ²²Proceedings, Wisconsin Synod, 1941, p.43.
- ²³Proceedings, Wisconsin Synod, 1945, p.37.
- ²⁴"A History of Spiritual Services for Military Personnel," p.5.
- ²⁵Northwestern Lutheran, December 14, 1941, p.391.
- ²⁶Northwestern Lutheran, October 19, 1941, p.328.
- ²⁷Northwestern Lutheran, March 22, 1941, p.88.
- ²⁸Ibid.
- ²⁹Ibid.
- ³⁰Ibid.
- ³¹Northwestern Lutheran, October 31, 1943, p.345.
- ³²Northwestern Lutheran, May 28, 1944, p.116.
- ³³Ibid.
- ³⁴Northwestern Lutheran, August 9, 1942, p.250.
- ³⁵Northwestern Lutheran, October 31, 1943, p.345.
- ³⁶Northwestern Lutheran, August 6, 1944, p.164.
- ³⁷Northwestern Lutheran, February 7, 1943, p.38.
- ³⁸Northwestern Lutheran, October 31, 1943, p.345.
- ³⁹Northwestern Lutheran, March 8, 1942, p.72.
- ⁴⁰Northwestern Lutheran, June 28, 1944, p.199.
- ⁴¹Northwestern Lutheran, May 28, 1944, p.116.
- ⁴²Northwestern Lutheran, October 15, 1944, p.204.

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