

What Went Wrong at Immanuel Evangelical Lutheran Church of Waukegan, IL

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Immanuel Evangelical Lutheran Church of Waukegan, IL was founded in 1891. Through the years Immanuel congregation has developed along the lines of many of the venerable Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod congregations of today.. Strong Christian families supplied generation after generation of active and devout members, lending the church outward stability. At the same time, the long line of Synod-trained pastors called to the church provided the inner stability, as each met the church's spiritual needs with law and gospel. Though this pattern was interrupted somewhat through the middle of the 20th century by the long ministry of liberal-minded pastor (promotion of Boy Scouts and Lodges), his influence largely dissipated soon after his retirement¹.

By the late 1980s, Immanuel had become accustomed to a certain kind of pastor. The two shepherds that served in succession from the 1960s through the 1980s, while certainly faithful in providing gospel comfort, were noted for their strict, authoritative style, and their firm use of the law in their preaching and teaching. In 1989, after the second of these two, Rev. Kenneth Gawrisch, accepted a call to another congregation, Immanuel called Robert Rhyne as pastor.² Excerpts from Immanuel's installation day service insert provide the story of his background.

Robert Y. Rhyne, Jr., comes to Immanuel from Greenville, South Carolina, where he had been serving Abiding Peace Lutheran Church, one of the WELS' mission congregations, since 1981 having been assigned there as a seminary graduate. He is originally from Brevard, North Carolina, where he grew up as a member of a Lutheran Church in America congregation. He began his college career in 1971 studying music (bassoon) at the University of Cincinnati. There he met his future bride, Melissa Bruce, a music student (viola) and a Southern Baptist from Lexington, Kentucky. During their second year in Cincinnati they began visiting the WELS mission there, attended Pastor Koelpin's Bible Information Class, and became members of the Wisconsin Synod in 1973.

¹ Gullickson, Richard. Personal interview. 15 Nov. 2003.

² ibid

After describing how Robert and Melissa eventually became WELS called workers, beginning their studies at Northwestern College and Dr. Martin Luther College, respectively, in 1973, the inset provides this tidbit concerning Robert. "Pastor's hobby is producing things to print (tracts, brochures, newsletters, bulletins, bible studies), a hobby which recently got a big boost through the purchase of a computer." It is doubtful whether Immanuel congregation and the Chicago Conference of WELS received as big a boost from Rhyne's hobby, with which they would soon become well acquainted.

From Rhyne's first day at Immanuel, members knew they were getting something different. Compared to his forceful predecessors, Rhyne was both meek and charming. "He was a breath of fresh air", in the words of a long-time Immanuel member³. The air was fresh with hope for the congregation. In succeeding steps over the next years, they would plan the building of a new sanctuary. Looking back, some might say that a spiritual razing would also be taking place, gradually and simultaneously, from within.

October 18, 1990 Immanuel held a special voters' meeting and voted unanimously to place the church and parsonage property on the market, with a view to relocate at the school property⁴. Months later, at an annual voters' meeting in 1991, Rhyne made the motion to rescind the 10% of the building funds then being offered to the WELS' "Lift High the Cross" mission. While presumably acting in the best interests of his congregation, Rhyne's controversial, failed motion struck some congregation members as autocratic and strange⁵. June 4, 1991 the church accepted the offer from Waukegan's

³ Bandman, Carol. Personal interview. 15 Nov. 2003.

⁴ Good News Letter. October, 1994: 2. Hereafter cited as GNL.

⁵ ibid

Latin Pentecostal Church of God and sold the properties above for \$340,000. In August of that year, a new parsonage was purchased to replace the one just sold.⁶

Besides leading in a different style, Rhyne began to show signs that he was leading in a different direction than his predecessors. As the front page article to the February 1992 Good News Letter (Immanuel's monthly newsletter), Rhyne presented excerpts from A Walk with the Serenity Prayer, Daily Devotions for People in Recovery.

The article promotes finding comfort from earthly hardships through rational arguments but says nothing about Christ's cross. The article closes with the following words.

If we have comprehended the security found in God's accepting and forgiving love, if we can grasp that God loves us just as much whether we succeed or fail, then we can set aside fear and be free to risk. Fear can be replaced with trust and courage to face new challenges.

As WELS congregational newsletter articles often take on a practical, informal nature, Rhyne could not be faulted for leaving out clear gospel, and for referring to secular and non-WELS publications on occasion. Unfortunately, this happened more than occasionally. Meanwhile, Rhyne's teachings began to come under attack. Around Easter of '92, in a private meeting with their pastor, a group of Immanuel men questioned his lack of emphasis on both the law and close communion. In a phone conversation with Circuit Pastor Vaughn Vogel in April, Rhyne admitted his fault and pointed out his recent improvement in these areas⁷. Still, his questionable writings continued. The lead article to the September 1992 "Good News Letter" comprised a series of block quotes from The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse. It opened with the following.

⁶ GNL. October, 1994: 2.

⁷ Vogel, Vaughn. Personal record. 12 Apr. 1996.

How many of us have been taught to fear "too much grace?" How many of us suffer from a fear that if we take off the "yoke" of spiritual performance and release the load of guilt and pressure, what in the world will restrain sin? What's going to motivate people to obey God? We believe the Holy Spirit of God who lives *in* them is fully able to do that.

Such quotes offer a glimpse at Rhyne's nebulous teachings to his congregation during that time. The Chicago District of WELS was left to mull over the spirit of Rhyne's beliefs during that same period, when he presented his paper Sanctification by Grace Through Faith at the Chicago Pastors' Conference on September 15, 1992.⁸ In this paper, which became one of the defining controversies of his WELS ministry, Rhyne gave a personal testimonial of his new-found peace and realization in faith. He admitted the overwhelming burden he felt at his first parish of being personally responsible for the care of souls, and the workaholic behavior that resulted. He disclosed that at Christmas of 1984 he became addicted to renting VCR movies. Then he explained the remedy to his addictions that he eventually discovered.

In January of 1991 a shift began which has changed everything. I learned about *surrender*. I learned the truth expressed in Galatians 2:20 explained thoroughly in Romans 6-8, that I had been crucified with Christ and Christ wanted to live through me. It was so simple: If only I would give up striving in my own energy and surrender to Jesus as *Lord* of my life, he would do it all.⁹

Throughout the course of the paper, Rhyne quoted Evangelical and secular authors – the same authors he quoted in his previous and subsequent church newsletters – as well as C.F.W. Walther and Siegbert Becker to support his point. His basic point is summarized in the above quote. "Surrender" seemed to be his theme, as the paper repeated forms of this word again and again. He declared that since the Christian is no longer under law, all obligation, all call to action ceases. The Christian no longer lives,

⁸ Radunzel, Steven. Personal interview. 5 Nov. 2003.

but Christ in the Christian – sanctification by grace through faith. He included comments from Immanuel members who noticed his new approach to ministry, including these.

"I've been a member here for 63 years, why haven't I heard this before?"

"I tried what you said about giving up and turning it all over to God, and it works!" [said by at least five people, and still counting] "I can't believe that something I've struggled with for fifty years just went away!"

"I think you need more law in your sermons."¹⁰

The paper concluded with Rhyne telling a recurring dream of his. In the dream his neighborhood friends tried to replace a real bird, that had given them rides but did not fly where they wanted, by constructing their own "crude, wooden contraption". The man-made construction failed to fly at all. Rhyne compared the real bird of his dream to the Holy Spirit, who cannot be nailed down or replaced. He closed with these words.

My purpose in life now is to call to all the children, "Forget your junk! Climb on this beautiful white bird! He's safe! He'll take us to the sky!" I don't know by what route the friendly bird is taking me to his Home, and I don't care. I plan just to enjoy the ride.¹¹

To what degree Rhyne and Immanuel congregation enjoyed their ride is unclear, but the ride was to be a wild one.

The Chicago Conference did not initially accept Rhyne's paper, but requested that he clarify its contents due to imprecise wording. Rhyne did so by submitting his Explanatory End Notes to "Sanctification By Grace Through Faith" for the January 11, 1993 Chicago Pastors' Conference. The twelve page, double-sided set of notes included quotes from Luther, J.P. Koehler, and C.F.W. Walther to support its ideas. As the notes

⁹ Rhyne, Robert. Sanctification by Grace Through Faith. 15 September 1992: 3.

¹⁰ *ibid.* 13.

¹¹ *ibid.* 16.

were not sufficiently explanatory to the desire of the assembly, Rhyne was asked to "homogenize" his paper and his end notes in the form of one document.¹²

Immanuel's new building program continued to progress. On January 26, 1993 a voters' assembly gave approval to begin working drawings for the new church, prepared by Daniel Robison Architects¹³. Rhyne's concept of religion continued to "progress" as well. The opening article to the February 1993 Good News Letter repeated his anti-law theme for the life of the Christian. The article continued his apparent emphasis on lifestyle improvement and psychological peace over eternal life as a benefit of salvation, and included this excerpt near the end.

. . . If we think the law remains, it dooms us to a life of sinning. The man who walks into the porno shop is trying to fill a void which only God's love can fill, but he doesn't know it. When the Holy Spirit sets him free from the law and pours Jesus' love into his heart his appetite for pornography will be spoiled.

The same newsletter contained a notice for the next praise worship service, to be held on Sunday, February 14, at 6:00 p.m. Pastor Phil Merten and his wife would be leading the congregation in its favorite praise songs. The praise service concept sparked debate among Immanuel members. Rhyne promoted the service as a less formal way to praise the Lord. He wrote an undated, one page article explaining his appreciation for contemporary praise worship, which included the following excerpt.

When we clap in a praise service we are expressing our worship of God (see Psalm 47:1), and also perhaps giving thanks to him for the gift of music, or anything else we enjoy in the course of worship. Sometimes clapping goes on for a while for no particular reason except that the worshippers are happy to be in the presence of the Lord. When we clap our hands after songs, are we applauding God or the performance by the praise leaders? Answering only for myself, I'm clapping for both. Isn't it appropriate to express our approval of those who serve us?

¹² Semenske, Douglas M. Business letter. 1 Jan. 1994.

¹³ GNL. October, 1994: 2.

Two things Rhyne mentioned here – spontaneous clapping, and the idea of praising human "performance" brought ire to some Immanuel members. At one particular praise service, Rhyne called for testimonies from the people, and then stepped aside and sat down. One stood up and praised Pastor Rhyne himself. Rhyne made no response, but his face was beaming.¹⁴

Generally, younger people who enjoyed the new elements of worship would attend these services. Conflict arose, however, when these elements began to emerge in the traditional worship services. On one occasion during Sunday morning worship a young member began to clap his hands after the choir finished a song. Ignoring the request of an older member to refrain, the young member could not ignore the veiny hands that proceeded to restrain his own.

Another Sunday morning, Rhyne announced before the service that there would be clapping. Immanuel member Dave Moll proceeded to walk out of church. Confronted later by an angry Rhyne, Moll replied, "Thanks for the warning, so I didn't have to sit through that." Eventually, members began to hear songs, recitals, and instrumentals in church referred to admiringly as "performances".¹⁵

A Lenten service led by the Mertens somewhat later also raised eyebrows. At the time, Phil Merten served as a called worker in the Wisconsin Lutheran Institutional Ministries. Agreeable to Rhyne's contemporary style, he would travel with his wife and three daughters to Waukegan to assist in leading their Sunday night praise services. At least once, at the request of Rhyne, he also led a Lenten service with his family. To the

¹⁴ Bandman, Carol. Personal interview. 15 Nov. 2003.

¹⁵ Moll, David. Personal interview. 15 Nov. 2003.

shock of the uninitiated, the three Merten daughters stood up in front of the congregation, aiding worship by dancing in place and waving their arms up and down.¹⁶

As a section within the congregation bristled at these outward changes, more outsiders began to question Rhyne's teachings. Several area pastors corresponded with Rhyne through the course of 1993, taking issue with the terminology and ideas contained in his paper. District president David Rutschow informed him by letter on May 6, 1993 that "homogenizing" the paper meant a rewrite.

Rhyne had an ability to temporarily compromise, to explain away criticism, and to gradually introduce new ideas.¹⁷ Members critical of Rhyne's lack of law preaching noticed an improvement after the January 1993 Pastors' Conference, but by March complained to the circuit pastor that he had reverted to his former ways.¹⁸ Principal Barry Fischer noted that he felt comfortable with Rhyne's answers, but not his writings.¹⁹

Called as Principal and Teacher in 1991, Fischer was one of the congregation's first outspoken critics of Rhyne. In one exchange in March of '93 he convinced Rhyne that he should not have shared his reservations about the WELS position on close communion with his Bible Information Class (BIC), as Rhyne had done recently. Significantly, as Fischer opposed Rhyne he also had to deal with a problem of his own – the allegation that he had been physically and verbally abusive in the classroom on at least one occasion.²⁰

Later on in March of '93, 15 men from Immanuel met privately to discuss their concerns with Rhyne and his ministry. On April 1st, they brought their crystallized

¹⁶ Bandmann, Art. Personal interview. 15 Nov. 2003.

¹⁷ Runge, Pat. Personal interview. 15 Nov. 2003.

¹⁸ Vogel, Vaughn. Personal record. 7 Mar. 1993.

¹⁹ *ibid.* 8 Mar. 1993.

concerns to Rhyne. In his response on the next worship Sunday, Rhyne presented a written survey for the congregation to fill out in order to decide what they wanted and did not want in their sermons. At the time, the Board of Education was also concerned about Rhyne's child's attendance at the Our Savior, Zion grade school (WELS), instead of at Immanuel's.²¹ This situation arose from the strained relationship between Rhyne and Fischer, and their respective allegations.

Parts of the lay membership continued to question Rhyne's teaching. A long-time Immanuel member wrote the circuit pastor in July of '93, questioning Rhyne's July 7 sermon. Due to the fraternal spirit common and proper among WELS pastors, Vogel took Rhyne's words in the kindest possible way. When asked whether the sermon was acceptable, he read it and responded, "If I didn't know who wrote it, I'd say no. But since I know where he's coming from, I can accept it."²²

Around that time Rhyne came under fire for his dealings with a visitor to the congregation known variably as the "Moody man" or the "Baptist man". He had been attending Thursday morning BIC for several weeks. Though informed of Immanuel's close communion practice, he came to the rail during distribution on June 20, and was communed by Rhyne. Some members were disturbed and upset. Straining things further, Rhyne allowed the man to lead the BIC in prayer on Thursday mornings. These fellowship issues were addressed at the voters assembly on June 29. While no notable motions were carried, emotions ran high. Some took their criticism to the extreme. One

²⁰ *ibid.* 2 Feb. 1994.

²¹ *ibid.* 12 Apr. 1993.

²² Runge, Pat. Personal interview. 15 Nov. 2003.

shouted in exasperation. "If we're acting like a non-denominational church, let's be one!"²³

Meanwhile, Immanuel stepped closer to a new church building. The Army Corps. of Engineering granted the church an exemption from the moratorium on building permits in Waukegan. A special voters' meeting resolution on September 19, 1993 directed the building committee to begin seeking bids on the building plans. Months of adjusting the plans and negotiating with contractors ensued, in order to stay within the set price range.²⁴

As the winter of '93 approached, Immanuel congregation was still worshipping temporarily in their school gym. They had to deal with uncertainties regarding the funding of their new building, the teaching of their pastor, and the conduct of their principal. On November 18, 1993 the elders of Immanuel tried to address one of these issues with a letter to the chairman of the Chicago Conference of the WELS. As Rhyne's teachings and practices were becoming ever more controversial, the elders now sought the results of a valuable litmus test – a doctrinal evaluation of Rhyne's paper Sanctification by Grace through Faith by the WELS governing body that had officially received it.

The letter expressed the congregation's dismay. "We have heard comments about the essay from WELS pastors ranging from highest praises to the word 'heresy'. . . . Until the questions regarding this paper are resolved, there is a cloud of confusion over our ministry." Above all, the elders of Immanuel desired to know why the conference could not, "endorse or accept" Rhyne's paper if it contained no false doctrine. In fact,

²³ Vogel, Vaughn. Personal record. 1 July 1993.

²⁴ GNL. October, 1994: 2.

just months earlier in September of '93, Rhyne had submitted to the Chicago Pastors' Conference Sanctification By Grace Through Faith: *Amplified, with Notes*, the revision and compilation of his aforementioned paper of September 1992 and notes of January 1993.

The reply of the Chicago Conference to Immanuel's elders came on January 1, 1994. Writing on behalf of the conference, Chairman Douglas M. Semenske identified the, "cloud of confusion" regarding Immanuel's ministry as resulting from, "a lack of clarity and precision in the paper 'Sanctification by Grace Through Faith'". The chairman explained that Rhyne's, "homogenized" document of September 1993 was still being considered by the conference. False doctrine could not be proved or disproved in the original due, again, to its, "lack of clarity".

The letter also noted that at least five members of the conference had thus far written to Rhyne with concerns about his paper. In this way, the chairman assured Immanuel's elders that the Chicago Conference was already trying to reach an understanding with their enigmatic pastor. Some area WELS pastors, though, were not pleased with the way the paper was being dealt with in general.

Rev. Greg Gibbons, then pastor of Mount Zion, Kenosha, WI, came upon Rhyne's Sanctification by Grace Through Faith shortly after it was first presented in September 1993. His alarm at the content was immediate. "To me it jumped off the very first page. It didn't sound anything like confessional Lutheran writing." What upset Gibbons most was the manner in which he received the paper. A member of the Shoreland Lutheran High School Ladies' Group passed it on to him, giving it high praise. Apparently, despite the fact that the Chicago Conference had requested clearer language, Rhyne was

distributing the unaccepted paper to such lay groups. Gibbons also criticized the general reaction to Sanctification by Grace Through Faith among his fellow pastors.

It was met with more apathy than outrage. They asked me, "Why are you upset?" I would hear, "It's not my problem". It became my problem when he's handing it to my members. Then it became my problem!²⁵

Immanuel congregation also sought to resolve matters concerning its principal. On December 26, 1993 a special council meeting was called to deal with the allegations of several parents that Fischer had used "excessive force" in the classroom. Several letters from Rhyne, not in attendance, were read in support of the allegations. Fischer went on to explain his side of the events. In the end, the council carried Richard Gullickson's motion to have Ruth Peikert, of Wisconsin Lutheran Child And Family Service (WLCFS), evaluate the situation.²⁶ Some outside counsel certainly seemed warranted. Letters from two council members around that time revealed just how split Immanuel was becoming.

The day after the meeting, Bob Dretske wrote a vigorous letter in support of Rhyne, including the following excerpt. "It upsets me very deeply that our Pastor is being attacked for trying to resolve the problems and the complaints coming from parents of our students, as if he's the problem."

On February 23, council member David Klein, wrote a letter of equal passion to the district president, in support of Fischer. Besides explaining that the congregation's previous principal had resigned two years earlier for cause, Klein went on to give his assessment of the new principal's treatment.

Barry Fischer was the recommended teacher to call for principal at the very beginning. The congregation disagreed and called 4 other teachers

²⁵ Gibbons, Greg. Phone interview. 4 Dec. 2003.

²⁶ Gullickson, Richard. Special Council Meeting Minutes. 26 Dec. 1993.

before sending Barry Fischer a call. As you can see Barry was not wanted by all congregation members, including the one person he needed the most support from, our Pastor.

Klein also brought up an issue still plaguing the congregation – the still pending Synod assessment of Rhyne's paper, now revised, Sanctification by Grace Through Faith. He addressed several valid points of concern.

I do not feel that this congregation is a WELS church. Pastor Rhyne is now presenting his paper (that was not accepted by the Pastor conference) to the Bible class. This paper is bringing up much discussion. One phrase that bothered me, is when Pastor Rhyne told the class he just couldn't understand why the Pastors couldn't get it (the it is referring to meaning of the paper). Many members of our congregation are agreeing with Pastor. Why didn't they (the Pastors) get it? My question is if Pastors in our conference who have many years of experience in the theology of our Lutheran church didn't get the paper as it was written. (sic) How can Pastor Rhyne be allowed to teach it to his bible class, when most of them are not half as knowledgeable in the bible as a called Pastor.

Klein also pointed out his main gripe with Rhyne's sermons.

I know that with grace there must be repentance. We no longer hear that in our sermons. What we hear week after week is the personal relationship that we should have with our Father. Repentance is seldom mentioned. How can we have a personal relationship with the Father if one is not repentant of one's sins?

Additionally, Klein noted the damage that this ongoing controversy was causing his congregation. Many Immanuel members were transferring. One such family was Richard and Audrey Gullickson. After more than 25 active years at Immanuel, they transferred to Faith, Antioch, IL (WELS). In their letter to Immanuel's elders and church council, dated February 21, they cited several reasons for their action, including the lack of proper balance of law and gospel in the pulpit, and Rhyne's recommendation of books with questionable doctrine to Immanuel members.

On April 19, 1994 the circuit pastor wrote a letter to Immanuel's elders, in reaction to their meeting of April 7, which he had attended. The main agenda for the meeting involved the accusations against Rhyne's controversial teachings and practice. On the whole, the circuit pastor expressed satisfaction with the proceedings.

I was happy to hear near the end no one voiced a desire for the resignation of their Pastor. They wanted to let their shepherd know what was bothering them. Your Pastor listened attentively, responded calmly, apologized for leaving misunderstandings and explained well the reason for his actions or inactions. He also cleared up where he stood in many doctrines and practices in which members who came stated they were confused where in fact he did stand based on statements he made in Bible Class lectures and sermons.

The circuit pastor also suggested that Immanuel strengthen its close communion practice, stop allowing, "non-members" to lead BIC prayers, and start counseling their pastor to be careful not to leave members unclear about his, and the WELS', teachings. Finally, he advocated an open line of communication between members and Rhyne.

In June 1994, the Rhyne vs. Fischer tension within the congregation reached its breaking point. On Monday June 6, a special congregational meeting was held, "to discuss Pastor Rhyne's call and also discuss Principal and Teacher Fischer's call". The intent of this meeting was to finally settle the conflict, even requesting resignation(s) if found to be appropriate.²⁷ In the course of the meeting, Fischer asked the congregation to release him from his call. The ensuing vote of 47 Yes to 11 No votes supported his resignation. Then, a written review of Rhyne's call was discussed. After lively debate, the congregation voted 51 to 8 in support of his services.²⁸

While the evaluation by WLCFS counselor Ruth Piekert of the allegations against Fischer prior to his resignation was not available for this history, her final clarification

²⁷ Moll, David. Personal interview. 15 Nov. 2003.

letter to the circuit pastor was. Writing some time in July, she stated that Fischer was, "very vehement with the fact that he wanted a (new) call". She also noted that he had undergone various stresses while at Immanuel, mostly at the hands of Rhyne. She affirmed Fischer's statement that she approved of him receiving a new call. Her recommendation included the stipulations, "with middle grades and supervision".

On August 21, 1994, Immanuel installed Wisconsin Lutheran College graduate Lance Meyer as Fischer's replacement. On September 15, construction began on the new church property. Despite these positive developments, a fresh controversy was just beginning to swirl for the congregation, from the usual source.

Rhyne had been giving hints of his nonconformist view on church fellowship for months. He permitted non-WELS members to lead BIC prayers, as mentioned. Already back in May of 1994 he had revealed his questions on church fellowship to District President Rutschow at the Spring Pastors' Conference. He followed Rutschow's advice and went on to explore WELS doctrinal statements on the subject more closely with his circuit pastor, Vaughn Vogel. Both men found "disturbing" statements according to Rhyne. They set up a meeting with the men responsible for developing those doctrines, Armin Schuetze and Edward Fredrich, WELS Professors emeriti. A letter Rhyne wrote to the professors prior to the meeting outlined his concerns. He quoted the WELS Doctrinal Statement of 1970 on the subject, including the following.

A Christian confession of faith is in principle always a confession to the entire Word of God. The denial, adulteration, or suppression of any word of God does not stem from faith but from unbelief. John 8:31; Matt. 5:19; I Pet. 4:11; Jer. 23:28, 31; Deut. 4:2; Rev. 22:18. We recognize and acknowledge as Christian brethren those who profess faith in Christ as their Savior and with this profession embrace and accept His entire Word.

²⁸ GNL, August, 1994: 3.

Rhyne then went on to give the gist of his objection, including this excerpt

Before I began re-studying our statements, I thought the doctrine was this: that although I can recognize members of heterodox church bodies to be fellow Christians, I do not have the luxury of joining in fellowship with them because of the need to make a clear confession. But now, having looked at our statements more closely, the doctrine appears to be that I cannot even recognize members of heterodox church bodies to be Christians. Such recognition is itself an expression of fellowship which would be forbidden by the unit concept of church fellowship.

On October 6, 1994 Rhyne, Vogel, Rutschow, and Paul Kelm met with Professors Edward Fredrick and Armin Schuetze at Northwestern College to discuss the matter. In Rhyne's words, "following that meeting it appeared to the other pastors that there was a need to take another look at the doctrine"²⁹.

At the turn of the new year of 1995, it is unclear how much Immanuel members were aware of this new dispute. Rhyne did tend to undermine WELS teachings in BIC. He had stopped using Luther's catechism for instruction since 1993. Teaching in general, he would rarely use WELS materials, preferring instead the Evangelical and secular books that he often quoted from in his newsletters and writings. He routinely used the congregation's money to buy stacks and stacks of such books, which, in turn, he would urge his members to buy.³⁰

Early in 1995 a study group of WELS pastors in Rhyne's proximity delivered to him a paper that summed up their objections to his final revised Sanctification by Grace Through Faith: Amplified with Notes. Only the "working copy" of November 7, 1994 was available for reference. In this copy the pastors disputed Rhyne's repeated phrase, "Christ lives his life through me". Using Ga. 2:20 and Romans 6 as their basis, which was

²⁹ Rhyne, Robert. Letter to Immanuel Voters' Assembly. 31 October 1995.

³⁰ Bandman, Carol. Personal interview. 15 Nov. 2003.

also Rhyne's, they showed by an exegesis of those Scriptures that the sinful nature is not completely eliminated from a sanctified person, but loses its control.

Against Rhyne's claim that there are no commands for the Christian, the pastors referred especially to Jesus' commands to his followers in the gospels, e.g. Matthew 5:17, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them". The group also opposed Rhyne's idea of a second great exchange, which he had articulated in his final paper, especially in the section below.

I cannot live the Christian life. Love for Christ can move me to desire but cannot enable me to live a Christian life. Gratitude for salvation can move me to desire but cannot enable me to live a Christian life. Only Christ can live the Christian life, and he is living his life through me as I surrender myself to him and stay out of the way, under grace.³¹

The study group paper responded forcefully to this teaching of Rhyne.

This second great exchange is not much salvation actually. It requires removal of you. But Jesus didn't come to remove you; he came to seek and find and save you. Your guilt, your sins, your enslavement to passions and ultimately to sinful nature – he has removed all that. It is not inherently bad to be human, so removal is not salvation. If you are removed, you are still lost. Jesus came to restore you to paradise of Eden.³²

Possibly the two sides were talking past each other. Rhyne claimed throughout his WELS ministry that his fellow pastors were misunderstanding his teachings³³. A sampling of Rhyne's sermons of 1994 seems to reveal, though, that he was of a different spirit entirely.

His sermons throughout 1995 marked his increasing distaste for the law and his growing fascination with the Holy Spirit. His sermon of May 14, 1995, "Honor the

³¹ Rhyne, Robert. *Sanctification by Grace Through Faith: Amplified, with Notes*. September 1992: 15.

³² Pastors' Study Group. *Comment's on "Bob's" Paper*. (Working Copy) 7 November 1994: 6.

³³ Berg, John.. Phone interview. 4 Dec. 2003.

Word" had Acts 13:44-52 as its basis. Near the end of the sermon, Rhyne curiously wrote.

If you want to believe all that the Bible says to New Testament believers, you've got to deal with the teachings about the Holy Spirit. There is potential embarrassment in that. As soon as you begin talking seriously about the Holy Spirit a lot of churchgoers will dismiss you as being neurotic. . . . There is potential embarrassment also because the Holy Spirit *does* things. He isn't just a concept or a doctrine, he's a powerful Person who makes things happen. He's a mighty river; he's a blazing fire; he's a rushing, mighty wind. You never know quite what he might do if we give him permission.

In addition Rhyne regularly urged his listeners to surrender themselves to Christ's saving work, instead of proclaiming it theirs. In his sermon of May 7 based on John 10, entitled "Trust Your Good Shepherd", he wrote.

When Jesus calls us sheep, he wants us to see we have neither the instinct nor the power to achieve spiritual life on our own. We must give up believing in ourselves and trust our Shepherd.

His July 23 sermon, "Grace Frees Us For Spiritual Living", based on Galatians 5, also seemed to make God's grace dependent on proper personal preparation

We follow repentance with faith, believing that Jesus Christ has forgiven us by his death and has given us new eternal life by his resurrection. The next step is surrender, turning our lives and wills completely over to Jesus as Lord of our lives. When we believe in God's grace we can confess our sins to him each day, asking forgiveness also from people we wrong, making amends when possible. . . . Jesus really can do it. He won't help us with *our* agenda, but if we surrender to him he'll give us the life he created us to enjoy. That's a promise!

Any reader who reasonably objects that these quotes are taken out of context is urged to explore the same Rhyne sermons in their entirety in Immanuel's archives to see just how much they represent his spirit of preaching. As hard as Rhyne worked to avoid preaching law, he was just as apt at stifling clear gospel.

Rhyne's preaching in 1995 also carried somewhat of an anti-establishment theme. The July sermon just referenced focused on the idea of, "spiritual" vs. "religious", with the former being preferred. After quoting Galatians 2:19, he wrote.

So, when we talk about living a spiritual life we're not talking about being religious. We're talking about living in fellowship with God; basking in his love, conscious of his presence, depending on his power operating in us.

"Religious", on the other hand, had the connotation of, "external, religious exercises". Rhyne equated, "religious" with Paul's former, strict life as a Pharisee. "Paul says he used to be the most religious person he knew and it was worthless." Rhyne had compared Paul's former life to, "religion" in his earlier May 2 sermon, "Religion or Jesus?". In that sermon, based on Philippians 3, the way Rhyne extended the comparison seemed to betray his true feelings about WELS. His misgivings about, "religion" may very well have been a veiled attack against WELS' strict confessionalism. The sermon began with a section criticizing, "religion", including the following.

A loving relationship with Jesus makes a far greater impact on our lives than religion does. Religion asks for compliance with certain duties but it doesn't change us on the inside. Jesus transforms us from the inside out.

After quoting Paul's profitless boast concerning his own upbringing, which the apostle, "consider(ed) loss for the sake of Christ" (Phil. 3:4), Rhyne made an intriguing comparison/application.

What positive qualities do we have on our list? On what basis do we hope for God's favor? We could paraphrase Paul like this: "If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: Confirmed in the eighth grade, a member of the Wisconsin Synod, descended from 3 generations of pastors and day school teachers, a Lutheran of Lutherans; in regard to doctrine, a conservative." There's certainly nothing wrong with any of those things. . . . But however we want to classify ourselves as to what we've done or who we are, none of it

is worth anything unless we have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ by faith.

Such sermon language revealed the Rhyne of 1995 and the direction in which he was headed.

As the year progressed, Rhyne continued to blur Immanuel's WELS affiliation. He gathered a group in the congregation to attend workshops by Tony Evans, an evangelist whose nationwide ministry states that, "strengthening the family is the single greatest need in our society"³⁴. Rhyne attended and promoted Promise Keepers functions and also Moody Bible Institute gatherings in Chicago on a regular basis. On October 26, 1995 he received a letter from Rev. Richard Kaeske, of St. Mark's Evangelical Lutheran Church in Waukegan (ELCA). Kaeske considered Rhyne a kindred spirit, and mentioned Rhyne's apparently secret request.

Thank you for indicating your interest in speaking to our people on the work of the Holy Spirit in the individual Christian and the congregation. . . . I believe this has forced our church to emphasize the Word at the expense of the Spirit, -- and it has been the Lutheran Church's loss. . . . I understand that speaking at St. Mark's is an adventure which your elders and deacons have to approve and support.

Finally, on October 31, Rhyne made public his disagreement with the WELS doctrine of church fellowship, at an Immanuel voters' assembly. Rhyne may not have stumbled upon that day by chance, for in his letter to the church council on October 26 asking for permission to proceed before the voters, Rhyne wrote.

If this really is a false doctrine being promoted by our church body, how do I (or we as a congregation) go about correcting it? This Sunday is Reformation Festival -- should I duct tape my "theses" to the church door?

At the Reformation Day meeting Rhyne offered the voters two choices – his resignation or a Bible study on church fellowship. According to Rhyne's later

recollection, the vote demonstrated the tremendous support he still maintained in the congregation³⁵. The extreme nature of his ultimatum, though, seemed to play into his own hands. Voters directed Rhyne without a dissenting vote to share his ten page, Questions concerning the WELS' Doctrine of Church Fellowship with the congregation and plan a series of Bible classes on the doctrine³⁶. The document's seven questions were each expounded by references from the church fathers and Scripture. In his letter to the voters, Rhyne showed that he was already actively defending the dissident position he articulated in his new paper.

Questions about this doctrine are currently causing painful controversy in our sister congregation, Faith, Antioch, where Pastor Darald Gruen is on a paid leave-of-absence because of his disagreement with the doctrine. A couple of weeks ago, I, along with about 15 other pastors, signed a letter addressed to our District President, Pastor David Rutschow, asking that Pastor Gruen's concerns be carefully considered.

Rhyne also noted in the letter that the synod was planning to conduct a synod-wide study of church fellowship in the Fall of 1996.

Unlike his previous infamous work, which was never fully accepted by the Chicago Conference in any form, Rhyne's Questions was not presented at a conference. Nevertheless, this new paper also received wide exposure across WELS, due both to the author's distributing zeal and to the prominence of the controversy. Various WELS pastors began to voice their concerns to Rhyne in the months that followed.

On December 31, 1995 Professor Armin Schuetze wrote a letter to Rhyne. Initially unsure about Rhyne's reaction to their meeting of October 6, 1994, Schuetze had

³⁴ <http://www.tonyevans.org/about/believe.cfm>

³⁵ Rhyne, Robert. Personal letter. 6 Jan. 1995

³⁶ Rhyne, Robert. Personal letter. 5 Nov. 1995

recently received a copy of Questions. He now felt the need to respond in a spirit of brotherly admonition. He noted the dangerous implications of Rhyne's position.

. . . I do want to point out that by taking the position you do, you are in effect saying that the synod erred in suspending fellowship with the LCMS in 1961. . . . You are, in effect, saying that Luther erred at Marburg when he would not fellowship with Zwingli even though the Zwinglians accepted the Marburg Articles that held to justification by faith without works.

Schuetze also pointed out Rhyne's dishonesty in respect to his ordination vows, a reproach later echoed by Rev. John Berg, then pastor of Bethany, Kenosha, WI, in his own letter to Rhyne on February, 26, 1996. Here Schuetze wrote.

You are, in effect, acting contrary to the promise you made at your ordination to teach according to the Lutheran Confessions because they are a true exposition of Holy Scripture. That promise was made on the basis of the confessions as you had learned to know them in the Wisconsin Synod. This includes the proper understanding of Article VII and what it says about the true unity of the church and how this applies to fellowship practice. . . . That is also what you promised at your installation at Immanuel congregation.

Additionally, Schuetze gave his understanding of the synod-wide study of church fellowship that was planned for the Fall of 1996, hinting at the possibility that Rhyne was misrepresenting the purpose of this study to his congregation.

I don't question that every new generation needs to gain certainty of this doctrine from its own study of Scripture and not simply as a tradition handed down. I would expect, however, that the purpose of such a study is not based on the premise that the doctrine we held for so long is in error and must be changed, but to reassure ourselves of its correctness from our own study of Scriptures. If indeed someone arrives at a different conclusion, he will need to acknowledge that he is rejecting many centuries of study and confessing by faithful Christians.

On January 6, 1996 Rhyne responded to Schuetze with a letter of his own. He claimed that he had sincerely promised to abide by the Lutheran confessions, including the articles on church fellowship, at his ordination. He then explained himself further.

I was also aware at that time that the Wisconsin Synod's view of what is required for fellowship goes beyond what the majority of Christians think. I was happy to disagree with most Christians because I believed we were right and they were wrong. I believed that was what Scriptures taught. But I did not cease my study of the Scriptures when I made my promises. I continued to study and learn, and the Scriptures have revealed to me a flaw in my former understanding.

In the early months of 1996, Rhyne became engaged in an extended correspondence with the new circuit pastor of the Chicago Conference, Rev. Glen Schaumberg. They exchanged several vigorous letters defending their separate positions. They held three cordial meetings to discuss the content of Rhyne's Questions. At the third meeting, Rhyne mentioned that he had never received a formal response to Questions. Schaumberg obliged. His letter to Rhyne on June 3, 1996 brought the correspondence, and the whole controversy, to a head.

The letter's first ten pages defended from Scripture the WELS position on church fellowship. The eleventh and final page offered Rhyne three choices to consider, from the circuit pastor's perspective. The following is the opening sentence of each scenario.

1. "You could withdraw your charges of false doctrine and practice against the WELS in regard to church fellowship."
2. "You could resign from the WELS ministry."
3. "You could continue to teach against the WELS doctrine of church fellowship and wait to see if you will be disciplined and suspended from the WELS ministry."

A pivotal moment in a church council meeting days later seemed to have an impact on Rhyne's final decision. At this meeting the future of Immanuel congregation was being discussed. The discussion became heated. At one point, Jim Svehla, Sr. raised his voice and vowed to Rhyne these or similar words, "If you try to take Immanuel out of

the synod, I will sue you! Try me on that. See if I won't do it!"³⁷ It is debatable whether Svehla, Sr.'s threat was legitimate. Though treasurer of the congregation, that privilege may not have entitled him to use the congregation's funds against Rhyne in court, either according to state law or Immanuel's constitution.

Rhyne enjoyed majority support in the congregation at that time, notably from most of the teaching staff and many of the young member families. The sizable minority which Svehla, Sr. represented, though, was a tenacious minority, a group that had weathered the storm for so long and was not about to be cast from the ship now. This group held a deep-seated jealousy for Immanuel Waukegan's confessional WELS pedigree and heritage. An anonymous letter of June 28, 1996 expressed the feelings of Svehla, Sr. and his contingent.

Not only Pastor Rhyne, but also the church council and the elders of this congregation have promised God and the members to be faithful to teachings of the Wisconsin Synod. If they feel the Synod is in error, they are free to leave and form their own denomination. However, the physical property belongs to Immanuel members who adhere to the Wisconsin Synod teachings. Any attempt to seize Immanuel property, would be theft, perpetrated by fraud.

Regardless whether or not Svehla, Sr.'s like-minded threat to Rhyne at the council meeting had legal backing, Rhyne got the message that if he were to take Immanuel out of the synod, he would have to put up his own money for the legal battle. Taking Immanuel out of the synod seemed to be Rhyne's ultimate goal. Rhyne reportedly sent a letter to his elders soon after this meeting, suggesting that if he resigned they could call him back to the church as a non-denominational pastor³⁸.

³⁷ Bandman, Art. Personal interview. 15 Nov. 2003.

³⁸ Runge, Pat. Personal interview 15 Nov. 2003.

On Sunday June 23, 1996, Rhyne put his final document to print as a WELS pastor. He distributed to Immanuel members a letter acknowledging his resignation from the WELS ministry and from Immanuel congregation, effective June 24. In the letter he admitted that he was initially torn between the circuit pastor's second and third suggested choices, but finally settled on the second. He also quoted District President Rutschow's report, June 11, concerning the upcoming synod-wide study of the church fellowship doctrine, as a reason for his resignation. Rutschow wrote.

It should be noted that the purpose is not to revise our synod's position on this doctrine. That has been voiced in some quarters. Rather, the purpose is to give all of us an opportunity to review and study the doctrine so that it might be our own as individuals and as a body.

Rutschow's phrase, "voiced in some quarters", referred especially to Rhyne. Since Rhyne was now aware that WELS was not planning to budge on this doctrine, that Prof. Schuetze's appraisal of the upcoming study had been correct, he found it timely to cut ties with the synod. Still, Immanuel's WELS devotees were not out of the woods yet. Rhyne closed his resignation letter with a reminder. "Immanuel will need to begin the calling process for a pastor at the Voters' Meeting on July 2." A discerning eye would notice that Rhyne did not include the word "new" before "pastor".

The voters' meeting on July 2 had potential to be a major showdown. It did not live up to its billing, though, until the very end. The district president and the circuit pastor witnessed the proceedings. Rhyne did not. After a period of discussion, the chairman of the congregation, Jerry Pieper, announced that the formal portion of the meeting was over and that the open forum would begin. Jim Svehla, Jr., Immanuel's secretary, objected that there had been no motion to adjourn.³⁹

³⁹ Bandmann, Art. Personal interview. 15 Nov. 2003.

Vivid proof of the painful division within the church, Svehla, Jr. supported Rhyne as zealously as his father opposed him. Svehla, Jr. had hoped that the assembly would vote to take Immanuel out of the WELS. In the end, no vote took place because Pieper's declaration was met with little clamor besides Svehla, Jr's., despite the fact that a majority of the voters supported Rhyne. Noting that the close of the meeting meant confirmation of Immanuel's WELS status, Svehla, Jr. stormed out of the church in defeat.⁴⁰

Now permanently shut out of Immanuel congregation, Rhyne went on to found Grace Church: An Independent Lutheran Fellowship, initially conducting worship services at Marsh Funeral Home of Gurnee, IL.⁴¹ Immanuel families already separated idealistically, were now torn apart physically, as many sons and daughters and their families left their fathers and mothers to follow Rhyne.

Jim Svehla, Sr., Immanuel's treasurer, saw his son become President of Rhyne's new church. Jerry Pieper, Immanuel's chairman, saw three of his married children leave to join Grace, including his daughter, Chanyn. A teacher in Immanuel's school until Rhyne's resignation, she now began conducting a private Christian school in her home for grades 2-8, on behalf of Grace.⁴² Two of the other three Immanuel teachers, Crystal Voss and Faith Haferman also left to follow Rhyne. Amazingly, Haferman, a well respected teacher at Immanuel for 25 years, confessed in her resignation letter. "My talk and my walk do not line up 100% to the WELS Fellowship Doctrine. They haven't for about 25 years." Only Principal Lance Meyer remained on Immanuel's teaching staff.

Grace Church seemed to begin promisingly. The lead article to the September 1996 Grace Notes, the second issue of Rhyne's new newsletter, spoke with excitement.

⁴⁰ Moll, Dave. Personal interview. 15 Nov. 2003.

⁴¹ Grace Notes. September 1996: 1.

Worship services have begun! We got off to a wonderful start on August 18 with a capacity crowd of about 150 worshippers, including many friends from the area and even from out-of-town. Our second service, on the 27th, numbered 100.

In December, Rhyne moved Grace Church from Marsh Funeral Home to the Brett Theater of Waukegan High School's west campus. In the January/February 1997 Grace Notes, Rhyne thanked Pastor Johnnie Jenkins of Cornerstone Community Church for suggesting this new Sunday morning rental agreement. In the newsletter, Rhyne also announced his drafting of a statement of faith for the congregation. To his credit, he based the statement on This We Believe of the WELS, but, "the section on Church Fellowship has changed, and content under the headings of Sanctification and the Holy Spirit has been added".

By March 1997, Grace Notes amounted to an ecumenical bulletin board. A joint Good Friday service sponsored by the churches of the Greater Waukegan Ministerial Association⁴³ would be held March 28. A monthly joint worship service of Waukegan's United Ministries for Christ was planned for April 13, with Rhyne as preacher. A Promise Keepers event at Soldier Field in Chicago was announced for May.

In another article of the same newsletter, Rhyne thanked Rev. Del Rossin, a local Missouri Synod Lutheran (LC-MS) pastor, for guest preaching at Grace on February 23. That morning Rossin also taught an Adult Bible study on, "How to Pray for Healing". In the article, Rhyne added. "We thank Jesus for healing a lady guest from Madison, WI,

⁴² *ibid*

⁴³ An association made up of about 25 Waukegan evangelical and independent Christian churches, of which Rhyne was elected secretary. Grace Notes. January/February 1997: 2.

who was suffering a migraine headache." The article lent credence to Grace Church's eventual association with faith healings, in addition to speaking in tongues.⁴⁴

Whether disenchanted over Rhyne's now unrestrained Pentecostal and unionistic tendencies, or discontent with the now humble worship setting, a large part of Rhyne's core Immanuel following left Grace over the next several years. Some returned to Immanuel Lutheran, but most joined other area LC-MS and Evangelical congregations. Around the year 2000 with his numbers dwindling, Rhyne joined forces with the pastor of another small, local independent church to form Grace Light Church of Waukegan, a congregation the two are still believed to serve today.⁴⁵

For Immanuel Lutheran, after Rhyne's resignation of June 23, 1996, the pruned vine began to bear fruit. Rev. Steven Radunzel was called shortly after the July 2 voters' meeting as the congregation's vacancy pastor. Starting on July 24, 1996 he began a series of Bible studies based on his own paper, The Doctrine of Fellowship and its Applications, which explained the WELS' Scripture-based church fellowship principles. In November 1996, he was installed as Immanuel's shepherd.⁴⁶

Long-time Immanuel members, reflecting on his calling, marvel at the LORD's providence. They noted that Radunzel's stable presence and patient instruction were just what Immanuel needed at the time.⁴⁷ He serves the congregation to this day, and is presently Circuit Pastor of his circuit.

While Immanuel's grade school enrollment was more than cut in half for the school year after Rhyne's resignation, the numbers have returned. While about fifty

⁴⁴ Schaumberg, Glen. Phone interview. 6 Dec. 2003.

⁴⁵ Radunzel, Steven. 5 Nov. 2003.

⁴⁶ *ibid*

⁴⁷ Bandman, Carol. Personal interview. 15 Nov. 2003.

members left to follow Rhyne initially, Immanuel's membership has also grown back.⁴⁸

Far more meaningful than the numbers, though, is the fact that the full Word of God, the respect for a pure confession of faith, and the focus on Christ's free sacrifice for sin have all returned to Immanuel Evangelical Lutheran Church of Waukegan, IL.

⁴⁸ Radunzel, Steven. Personal interview. 5 Nov. 2003.