

Explosion in Their Centennial Year:  
St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church  
Red Wing, Minnesota  
by Dennis Belter

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Senior Church History  
Prof. E. Fredrich  
April 15, 1981

As Spring 1981 approaches, the members of St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church in Red Wing, Minnesota, have anniversaries on their minds. This Spring this Wisconsin Synod congregation has celebrated the 35th anniversary of their pastor, the Reverend Gerhard A. Horn, in the pastoral ministry.

At this same time, others are already thinking ahead to 1983 for the celebration of the 125th anniversary of the founding of St. John's Church. Both of these celebrations are sure to bring joy and happiness to the members of St. John's. Such was not the case when this congregation was preparing for its 100th anniversary.

About 23 years ago, St. John's Church was eagerly awaiting and carefully planning for their 100th anniversary as a congregation. Despite the optimism of St. John's members at that time, certain outside factors were already at work that would disrupt and nearly cancel completely the centennial celebration of this congregation. Through this writing, we will attempt to identify those factors, note the explosion that resulted, and then review the efforts made to put the pieces of this congregation back together.

To gain a proper understanding of the situation that led up to the explosion and renting of this congregation, a review of those influential outside forces is necessary. The events influencing St. John's Church were the intersynodical debates and struggles going on from approximately 1935 between the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod and the Lutheran Church -

Missouri Synod. (Certainly we recognize the limitations we are under due to the passage of time and the fact that this author did not live through this period of history. Nevertheless, based on interviews and records of the time, an attempt will be made to highlight those actions playing upon and leading up to the explosion in Red Wing.)

In 1961, the Wisconsin Synod officially suspended fellowship with the Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod for reasons based upon the fellowship doctrine of the Missouri Synod. It had taken many years to reach this impasse, and there were many shattered congregations and resigned pastors in its wake. Why did this come to this conclusion?

Because of the unionistic practices by the Missouri Synod, our Wisconsin Synod felt bound by God's Word to admonish and point out problem areas cropping up within the Missouri Synod that were at variance with the Scriptures. These areas included the chaplaincy system, the Boy Scout question, joint prayer, and cooperation in externals. Perhaps the best example of the problem area was the Missouri Synod's fellowship talks with the American Lutheran Church. The resultant agreement, known as the Common Confession, brought about much distress among WELS' theologians who knew what doctrinal intricacies were involved. The following quotes shed light on this situation regarding LC - MS actions and their newly formed agreement, the Common Confession: "The strain of our cordial relations with the Missouri Synod has been growing steadily more severe since 1935 when the Missouri Synod again opened negotiations with the ALC with a view to establishing pulpit and altar fellowship. The history of the Common Confession (see next quotation) shows how a break in relations has gradually been widening ... The LC - MS

has consistently declined to retract from its position on the Common Confession, has persisted in carrying forward its negotiations with the ALC in spite of our pleas, ... The issue that has opened this serious breach between our synod and Missouri Synod and threatened the continuance of the Synodical Conference is Unionism."<sup>1</sup> Regarding the Common Confession, our synod said, "After careful consideration and mutual discussion, we find ourselves constrained to report, that in our judgment this agreement (Com. Conf.) involves an actual denial of the truth, since it claims to be a settlement of doctrinal differences which are not settled in fact."<sup>2</sup>

In that atmosphere of controversy regarding the Common Confession, the LC - MS traveled a rough road in early 1950's. Special doctrinal committees were formed on both sides to try to overcome the seeming disagreement. Both synods struggled with the problems, but progress was hard in coming. The controversy was taken up by committees of the Synodical Conference, with little more success. With charges of Unionism and accusations being leveled against the Missouri Synod, it took little time before there were calls for suspension of fellowship between the Wisconsin Synod and Missouri Synod. The following letter excerpt shows what a growing number of people within our synod (WELS) were feeling:"... it is our firm conviction that your body for a number of years has been deviating to an ever increasing extent from the position we have so long held and defended together, and thereby most seriously disturbed our God created relation and has placed our two synods on opposite sides on a number of important issues, making it impossible for us to join in the new course you have taken."<sup>3</sup>

In 1955, when our synod was to meet in convention in Saginaw, Michigan, it should have come as no surprise that a resolution to suspend fellowship

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<sup>1</sup>WELS Convention Proceedings, 1953, p. 102.

<sup>2</sup>WELS Convention Proceedings, 1951, p.143.

with the LC-MS was brought to the floor. The supporters of such a motion pointed to Romans 16:17, "I urge you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them." To keep away from them, to avoid them, seemed the only choice in the matter. Others of our synod pointed to statements of II Thessalonians 3:15, "Yet do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother." Also, the statements of Romans 14 regarding a weak brother were put forward. These two positions were to become the polarization points for many in our synod. On the one hand, many felt compelled to break with the Missouri Synod, while others felt more time was needed for further admonishment and instruction. That the Saginaw Convention of 1955 did pass a resolution to suspend fellowship with the Missouri Synod, should not have surprised anyone. That this resolution was held in abeyance was to be the controversial matter immediately afterward. The resolution was to be held in abeyance until 1956 by which time the LC-MS in its convention could have time to react to our charges of Unionism on their part. This delay was the cause of some pastors and whole congregations to leave our synod. And because of this continued delay, several pastors resigned and some congregations split before our synod suspended fellowship with the LC-MS in 1961.

Having given this small sketch of those turbulent times, we will turn our attention to Pastor George Barthels and the storm that was already brewing in Red Wing, Minnesota, in 1954.

In 1954, Pastor Barthels was Minnesota District President of our Wisconsin Synod. Before the 1956 Minnesota District Convention however,

Pastor Barthels had resigned as president, for conscience reasons. His actions in this case would prove to be prophetic for July, 1958. The exact details of the case are not known to this writer, but the following facts can be given: from an interview with a man from the Church Council of 1958: A certain pastor in the Minnesota District desired to transfer to the Missouri Synod. As District President, Pastor Barthels was to transfer the man to the LC-MS. When Pastor Barthels refused to okay such a transfer, he was overruled by the sainted President of our Synod, O.J. Naumann. When this transfer was granted, Pastor Barthels resigned from his presidential office for conscience reasons. Just how much this particular episode played in subsequent events is impossible to say. Undoubtedly it was one of the influencing factors in his decision to leave the Wisconsin Synod.

The following pages will really be the heart of this topic. We will try to give details that will show that the resulting resignation by ~~the~~ Pastor was only the logical conclusion to a series of events that lasted nearly two years. Many of the following things, if taken separately, might not appear very relevant to the situation, but viewed in the long-run and from an ex post facto position, they all fit into the puzzle quite nicely.

According to congregational records, a ~~minor~~ matter occurred at the Quarterly Voters' Meeting of Oct., 1956. Two families desired to transfer to Concordia Lutheran Church, a Missouri Synod congregation in Red Wing. The motion to deny the transfers was made, and Pastor Barthels seconded. The motion to deny the transfers was carried. At that date, a certain mind-set can already be seen in Pastor Bartels.

In the minutes of the congregational and council meetings for 1957, many things can be seen. On the one hand, there is a strong desire on the part

of the pastor to discuss the inter-synodical debates. On the other hand, the 1957 pages are interspersed with reports on the congregation's upcoming centennial celebration, to be held in 1958. Naturally in the hearts of the congregation members, the latter subject was taking precedence. In fact, that celebration seems to have overshadowed the pressing issue at hand.

During this time period, in reading the secretary's minutes, nearly every meeting was closed with remarks by the pastor, urging that we must take a stand in the synodical crisis. One can almost sense the uphill battle the pastor seemed to face, but his remarks often come off as forced and out of place. One is reminded of the great Roman orator who postscripted every speech with, "Carthage must be destroyed." In his own way, he was trying to keep St. John's informed in regard to the Missouri Synod.

In the Annual Meeting of Jan., 1957, the pastor's report ended with the customary mention of the Missouri Synod actions, and the question of our synod continuing its fellowship with her. He voiced the question, "Is the LC-MS showing any clear signs of returning to its former conservative position?" The answer to him was clearly, no, and yet the Missouri Synod had in 1956 rethought its position on the Common Confession and had withdrawn its acceptance of it. That action by the LC\*MS was also accompanied by a plea to the Wisconsin Synod for further discussions. Our synod's reply in its special convention of 1956 was to undertake active doctrinal discussions with the Missouri Synod until agreement <sup>was</sup> found, or an impasse has been reached.<sup>4</sup>

In the summer of 1957, a few facts are interesting to note in this discussion. Pastor Barthels received 2 different calls and declined both of them. Each time the congregation had voted strongly in support of his staying. One wonders whether he took these votes as expressing support for his long stressed

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<sup>4</sup> WELS Convention Proceedings, Recessed Convention, 1956.

position, which by now was clearly anti-Wisconsin Synod. The other event of that summer was his trip to Grover, South Dakota, to preach for Pastor Crist Albrecht, who later left our synod. One wonders who may have influenced whom in their discussions at that Mission Festival.

In the Oct. 14th Church council meeting of 1957, Pastor Barthels reiterated his promptings regarding the synodical crisis. He hinted at some kind of informational meetings for the congregation to study synod action actions~~/~~because, "we must take a stand sooner or later."<sup>5</sup>

Finally 1958 arrived and with it the plans for the long-awaited centennial celebration. A special centennial booklet was being printed, complete with pictures of all church organizations, and everyone was talking about the memorable day with its special celebrations. However, Pastor Barthels had other plans in mind for his congregation for the upcoming months.

At the Jan. Annual Meeting of 1958, the Pastor made his position clear in his report to the congregation. In that report he accused the synod of holding to a position contrary to the Word of God in Rom. 16:17. He said that the synod holds to this position despite numerous pleas and protests. These actions had led to to numerous resignations of pastors, teachers, missionaries, the Head of our Seminary, Edmund Reim, and the loss of some congregations. A former pastor and teacher of St. John's were among that group. The final portion of his remarks state his present stand: "Since your pastor and 3 teachers for reasons of conscience cannot share the present position of the Wisconsin Synod, which is disobeying the Word of God in this matter, they feel it necessary to make known this fact, and ask the congregation to review with them in a series of study meetings the pertinent events that led up to this situation."

After this report, which was accepted as read, the group made a motion to

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<sup>5</sup> St. John's Church Secretarial Minutes, Oct. 14, 1957.  
<sup>6</sup> Opus Cit. , Jan. 23, 1958.



hold Tract meetings on the first Monday of each month. The purpose of the meetings was to be informative, plus to discuss the situation in the Wisconsin Synod in regard to its dealings with the Missouri Synod. The first meeting in this series was held on February 3, 1958.

In order to inform the Synod of the on-going controversy between us and the LC - MS, these tract meetings or pamphlet meetings, were being held throughout our synod's congregations. In these meetings, different topics were discussed, such as unionism, to inform the grassroots section of the synod on just exactly what was going on. Eleven pamphlets were published during this period, which gives evidence of the number of topics that needed to be discussed. In addition to the local pastor leading these meetings, sometimes our synod's official representatives were asked to be present to state our synod's position to the congregation. This was also true in regard to St. John's in Red Wing.

Later on in the spring of 1958, our synod's representatives were asked to attend one of St. John's meetings. Three members of our synod's Church Doctrinal Committee attended that meeting: the late president of our synod, Pastor O.J. Naumann; one of our Seminary professors, Prof. Carl Lawrenz; and also Pastor Oscar Siegler. According to reports on that meeting, the officials were given opportunity to speak and to present the position of the synod. Some said that they were treated very shabbily, though, by Pastor Barthels. If we recall the last dealings Pastor Barthels had with President Naumann (confer Barthels' District Presidency resignation) and that Pastor Barthels, by his own admission, was at variance with the Wisconsin Synod position, we can understand his actions - though not agree with them.

The tract meetings were held through the spring and into early summer. By this time the topics had been covered, the synod position was known, and Pastor Barthels thought the time for action had come. He wanted his congregation to express itself one way or another. Remember, Pastor Barthels had already stated his position in January of that same year (1958).

In preparing for that final meeting, (There is some question as to whether this meeting was a Quarterly Voters' meeting, or the final tract meeting. One observer thought it to be the latter, but the Pastor's remark in the Reporter article calls it a voter's meeting) which was held July 24, Pastor Barthels had prepared a Statement with the approval of the Church Council. The statement (resolution really) was then printed in the July Monthly-Reporter (the congregation's newsletter which every home received). This resolution was to be discussed and acted upon at the July 28 meeting. The resolution appeared as follows with the Pastor's introductory comments:

#### Regarding Synodical Matters

The pastor feels that he dare not evade his duty as God-appointed leader and shepherd of this congregation correctly on the basis of God's infallible Word also in regard to the present painful situation within the Wisconsin Synod in regard to its continued fellowshiping with the Missouri Synod under prevailing conditions.

This congregation is a member of the Wisconsin Synod. As long as this congregation does not register any disapproval or protest against the Wisconsin Synod's present position of continued fellowshiping with the Missouri Synod, which is no longer in agreement with us, it may rightly be assumed by everyone that this congregation approves of this present position of the Wisconsin Synod. If our congregation is not in agreement with this present position of the Wisconsin Synod, then the correct and brotherly thing to do is to register our dissent or disapproval as a testimony whereby we make an earnest attempt to bring about the necessary correction in this matter.

The congregation has now studied this weighty matter in open meetings for several months, also with official representation from the Wisconsin Synod being present. Thus, ample opportunity

has been given our members to ask questions and to come to a clear decision in their own hearts on this matter.

For the above reasons the pastor, with the knowledge of the Church Council, feels in duty bound to present the following resolution for consideration at the Quarterly Meeting to be held on July 24:

Resolved: that for the reasons listed below we register our protest against the present position of our Wisconsin Synod in its continued fellowshiping with the Missouri Synod under the prevailing conditions of serious disagreement between the two Synods:

1. The Wisconsin Synod in 1955 unanimously declared:
  - a. The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod has by its official resolutions, policies, and practices created divisions and offenses both in her own body and in the entire Synodical Conference. Such divisions and offenses are of longstanding
  - b. ... that the Missouri Synod...by its persistent adherence to its unionistic practices ... has brought about a break in relations, and that our Synod, bound by the Word of God, should now declare itself on the matter.
2. The Wisconsin Synod also in 1955 unanimously declared:
 

A church body which creates divisions and offenses by its official resolutions, policies, and practices not in accord with Scripture also becomes subject to the indictment of Romans 16:17-18.
3. Nevertheless, the Wisconsin Synod has in 1955, and repeatedly since that time, for reasons not in harmony with Scripture, by majority vote, decided not to terminate fellowship with the Missouri Synod and is thus disobeying the "avoid them" of Romans 16:17, and refusing to heed the warning against the "good words and fair speeches" of Romans 16:18, and the warning against the "leaven that leaveneth the whole lump" of I Cor. 5:6 and Gal. 5:9.

This resolution was put forward by the pastor and it was seconded. The floor was then opened for discussion. One man rose and presented a substitute resolution to the assembly. That resolution said, "I move first that we of the St. John's Lutheran Church of Red Wing at this time remain

in the Wisconsin Synod and uphold her by prayer and act in her present effort to reach a common doctrinal agreement, based solely on the Holy Scriptures and with the other Synodical Conference synods, and, second, that we desist so long as these efforts continue, to protest her actions or the actions of her duly elected representatives and officials."<sup>7</sup> This motion was ruled out of order by the chairman, because it deviated from the subject matter of the resolution. That same man then moved to amend Pastor Barthels' resolution by striking out the words, "that for the reasons stated below we register our protest against the present position of our Wisconsin Synod," and add these words, "that for the reasons listed below we break relations with the Wisconsin Synod because of ..." (See the underlined words in the pastor's resolution.) This motion to amend the resolution was seconded. A motion also passed to vote on both the resolution and the amendment by ballot. The results were thus: there were 80 ballots cast on the amendment, 48 yes; 32 no. The amendment was declared to be carried. The original resolution was now to be voted on as amended. Note, the amendment changed the resolution from a protest, to a break-off of relations with the Wisconsin Synod. Again, 80 ballots were cast, 23 voted yes, and 57 voted no. The original motion as amended lost. The majority clearly did not desire to leave the Wisconsin Synod.

Pastor Barthels then moved his original motion and it was seconded. This was the protest resolution. Again, 80 ballots were cast, 34 voted yes, 46 voted no. The pastor's resolution was declared lost. When the results of this ballot were known, these memorable but regrettable events took place: Pastor Barthels removed a previously prepared resignation from his

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<sup>7</sup> St. John's Secretarial Minutes, July 24, 1958.

Bible, submitted it to the chairman, and left the meeting, stating that he could no longer in good conscience pray with that group. However, he also expressed willingness to continue to serve those who were in agreement with his confessionl position. No action was taken on the resignation, and the Voters' Meeting adjurned at 11:15.

The chairman of the congregation called a special board meeting immediately following the Voters' Meeting. Steps were taken to contact the visiting elder of the Red Wing Conference, (at that time Pastor Herbert Muenkel of neighboring Zumbrota) to arrange for a speaker on Sunday, July 27. It was also moved to invite Pastor Barthels to stay in his home until the congregation had need of it as a church body.

Perhaps because of the short notice given the visiting elder, or due to reasons unknown to this writer, services were not held at St. John's on July 27. However, at the following Sundays were covered by a vacancy pastor, Rev. Nathan Luetke of Goodhue, Minnesota. During the vacancy period, one substitute pastor was Prof. Gerhard Horn, the Dean of Men at Northwestern College, whom we shall hear more of directly.

At subsequent meetings the Church Council, with the help of the visiting elder and vacancy pastor, began to take steps to put the congregation on its feet again. The resignation of the pastor was accepted with regret, as were the resignations of the teachers, Mr. W. Voigt and Mr. A. Sieg. Other business of those initial meetings was the postponement of the Centennial celebration until a new pastor had accepted St. John's call. That statement takes up precious little space in the congregational records, but imagine what a blow that must have been to the congregation, coupled with the

resignation of their pastor and teachers.

On August 17 at a congregational call meeting, Prof. Gerhard Horn was selected as the candidate to be called. After prayerful consideration, the Dean of Men at Northwestern College accepted St. John's call to be their new pastor. The early acceptance of that call, humanly speaking, may well have saved St. John's Lutheran Church from completely disintegrating. Certainly, the hand of a gracious Lord was evident in keeping the congregation together during this crisis period.

In other matters, the congregation determined to open their school that Fall despite the lack of teachers. Substitutes and emergency teachers filled in ably until full-time workers were once again on the scene. By Christmas of 1958, Mr. Howard Wessel had accepted the call as principal and teacher at St. John's, and Miss Lynn Hass, though emergency teaching, was granted permission to stay at Red Wing for some years.

At the first Church Council meeting held after Pastor Horn's installation, the long-delayed Centennial celebration was taken off hold, and rescheduled for November 23. The celebration was held during St. John's Centennial year. In regard to church memberships, the pastor and elders were to deal with each case individually. Some people were attending Pastor Barthels' services at his newly-formed church, Our Redeemer, while still listed as St. John's members. This situation was finally settled by decision of those involved. Approximately 90 communicant members left St. John's Church and joined Our Redeemer Church.

With the help of a gracious Lord, things soon turned back to normal, and life went on for St. John's. With the firm hand of Pastor Horn leading the way, both church and school have prospered. When asked what he did to put the

congregation back together, the simple answer given is that he preached the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ and let the Holy Spirit do the rest.

The following years in Red Wing saw the establishment of Our Redeemer Lutheran Church, where Pastor Barthels served for 8 years after leaving St. John's. Our Redeemer Church is a member of the Church of the Lutheran Confession, an organization made up mainly of those people who disagreed with the Wisconsin Synod's practice and doctrine in the 1950's. Today Pastor Barthels serves Grace Lutheran Church of Sleepy Eye, Minnesota.

St. John's Church has seen growth through these past years, and now numbers around 900 souls. Pastor Horn is still serving the church, and St. John's staff now includes a vicar and three teachers. The Lord has blessed this congregation and led her through strife. Only with His continued love and Mercy will St. John's prosperity continue. Only by His grace will this congregation celebrate its 125th anniversary in 1983. All glory be given to God for this!

B I B L I O G R A P H Y

Monthly Reporter. St. John's Church, July 1958 edition.

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WELS' Minnesota District Convention Proceedings, 1950-1958.

Wisconsin Synod Convention Proceedings, 1951, 1953, 1956.

Personal Interviews

Mr. Herman Meyer, Member of St. John's, Red Wing, MN

Pastor Gerhard Horn, Pastor of St. John's, Red Wing, MN