

THROUGH DIFFERENT EYES: A RETROSPECTIVE EXAMINATION OF THE
BREAKDOWN OF THE SYNODICAL CONFERENCE

BY
B.T. ZAMZOW

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DR. MARK BRAUN, ADVISOR
WISCONSIN LUTHERAN SEMINARY
MEQUON, WISCONSIN
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ABSTRACT

The break in fellowship between the LCMS and the WELS was a messy affair. In many ways it resembles a divorce. Many churches, families and friendships were divided in the break up. As with a divorce, each child had their own theory or conclusions on why the parents separated. While some are closer to the actual truth than others, the reality remains that the family needs to find a new normal. The aim of this paper is to examine the testimony of those who do not understand what happened in those days, both those who lived through it and a half a century later. To that end, we examine the new normal that exists between our church bodies and assess the path ahead of us.

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INTRODUCTION

Since the breakdown of the Synodical Conference America has undergone a significant cultural shift. Our culture is civically reinventing itself as it did one hundred years ago at the last turn of the century. This is the idea behind Robert Putnam's book *Bowling alone*. The example, implied in the title, is that there are currently fewer people joining bowling leagues across America. Yet, there are more people bowling than ever.¹ According to Putnam's study of over 500,000 interviews, the last twenty-five years alone have seen a 58% drop in the attendance of "club" meetings. This includes everything from car clubs to book clubs, from lodges to scouts. It is not to say that people are not interested in those types of things. Recent generations just do not see a need to join a group to do them. It would be logical to assume that churches are affected as well.

This is what makes a modern discussion on the "Split"² difficult. The culture in which our church bodies exist has undergone a paradigmatic shift. The generation a half a century after the split does not have that same "card carrying" mentality anymore. It is difficult to identify with people who lived through historical events like the breakdown of the Synodical Conference in 1961. It is neither right nor fair to judge their words and actions without first trying to empathize with them. There is a context to everything. It is that context and the reason for the decisions made in 1961 that were never fully understood by many laity and clergy.

1. Putnam, Robert D. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. Simon & Schuster, 2007.

2. I'll regularly refer to the breakdown of the Synodical Conference as such.

Yet, it is left to our current pastors and lay leaders to explain the break in fellowship between the WELS and LCMS³ to confused members. At least as far as the WELS is concerned, virtually every congregation must deal with the fallout from the Split.⁴ Concerned parishioners wonder about their divided families. They question why an LCMS friend cannot commune at our altars. They are confused by what seems to be a contentious attitude that avoids unity.

Trying to explain a difficult situation like a divorce to young children is hard enough in the moment. What about trying to explain why a divorce happened to curious great-grandchildren a half a century on? We like to be able to categorize things and easily determine problem and solution, cause and reaction. As much as we would like easy answers and explanations that fit in 140-character tweets, this is not the case when examining the 1961 Split. Nor is it the case when determining how to move forward as church bodies that no longer walk together but must inevitably live side by side.

3. These acronyms appear frequently, respectively they stand for – Lutheran Church Missouri Synod and Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod.

4. LCMS is considerably larger, and the Split hardly affected some areas. This will become clearer later on.

CHAPTER 1

The decision to break fellowship did not happen overnight, nor was it the result of a single controversy or issue. Only a few authors have tried to chart a course through the years leading up to the 1961 Split.⁵ Doing so is akin to examining court documents from 50-year-old divorce proceedings and speaking to the grandchildren about their grandparents. In a way, Professor E.C. Fredrich explains why this is so:

For those who were Wisconsin Synod members in the middle years of the twentieth century and lived through the long struggle to maintain the Synodical Conference on its historical confessional foundations, the loss of the battles and of the war will always remain the most significant and traumatic episode in their own personal version of their church body's history. The struggle was long, stretching over a quarter century. The losses in cherished fellowships were large, touching personally most pastors, teachers and lay families of the synod.⁶

While what Professor Fredrich says in this paragraph is most certainly true, one needs to keep in mind that he was on the front lines, and in the thick of it. I am not discrediting or down playing the historical accounts that certain historians have provided us with. However, in many cases they were deeply affected by it themselves or they gave firsthand accounts of those who were.

A prime example of this is *A Tale of Two Synods* by Dr. Mark Braun. In 1997 he sent out a set of eight survey questions to over one hundred Wisconsin Synod pastors who graduated from the seminary in between the years of 1926 and 1962. As he himself says, “Many served on key district or synodical committees, or were present at emotionally charged Wisconsin Synod or Synodical Conference conventions.” Naturally then, the responses of these men who were

5. Mark Braun, Armin Scheutze, E.C. Fredrich, John Brug – just to name a few. Yours truly is standing on the shoulders of giants.

6. Edward C. Fredrich, *The Wisconsin Synod Lutherans: A History of the Single Synod, Federation, and Merger* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1992), 198.

surveyed is extremely helpful to understanding why the LCMS and the WELS are no longer in fellowship.

Still, it is hard to get a grasp on how that split was perceived by those who were not on the front line - that is, the lay members or pastors who were not directly involved yet were affected by the decisions of the Synodical Conference. The way in which the breakdown of the Synodical conference affected them, is important when trying to understand where our church bodies are today.

Research Methods

In order to hear their side, the research for this study approached the topic in a similar fashion to that of Dr. Mark Braun when writing *A Tale of Two Synods*. Three surveys were sent out to different demographics: laity, clergy and synodical leadership. There were thirty-four responses recorded. From the three general demographics two other divisions can be made: age and synod affiliation. The wording of the questions was altered to fit the demographic to which it was sent. The questions that were issued to the laity, regardless of age or church affiliation were these:

1. In what way (if any) was your family impacted by the 1961 synodical split?
2. Is the split still a cause of contention in your family? Example: family members not praying together, general animosity etc.?
3. If you were around in 1961 what do you most vividly remember from that time in the church?
4. Even if you were not around, from your own perspective, what caused the split between LCMS and WELS?
5. What major questions about the WELS and LCMS not being in fellowship do you have?
6. In your opinion, has the time for division ended?

The other survey which was issued to clergy differed in questions 2, 4 and 5. They are shown below in that order

2. In what way has the split impacted your personal ministry? How would you characterize your relations with any neighboring LCMS/WELS churches in your area?
4. What districts have you served in? Do you perceive the split to have affected certain areas differently?
5. What is currently the most divisive issue between LCMS and WELS? Do you think you will see us come back into fellowship?

This paper presents the trends and patterns that emerged from these questions. The responses of the younger generations are noted later in an evaluation of where the synods currently stand. Finally, we examine responses from leaders in both the LMCS and WELS.

To set the stage, it is enlightening to see the survey responses of some of those who were around at the time, but not on the front line. I will summarize the survey responses of the older laity who lived through those years surrounding the breakdown of the synodical conference. I will also bring in the perspective of a few pastors who were serving at the time. There were ten survey responses from this generation. All of them have their roots in the midwestern states.

A Different Time

The loud cannon fire that Professor E.C. Fredrich heard in those hard-fought battles was nothing more than an echo by the time it came to many WELS or LCMS members. Naturally, some wondered what all the fighting was about. In a time with no cellphones or social media information traveled slowly. Regarding the synodical issues in the 50s and 60s, one woman

remarked, “Nothing was ever really talked about. Most small-town church members didn’t even know about it.”⁷ News traveled by word of mouth or various printed publications.

Those who lived through the Split that participated in this survey are now in their late seventies or eighties. All of them were very active members in their churches and some still are. They could hardly be considered casual observers, or out of the loop. In reading their responses to the survey some definite patterns emerge. First of all, the year 1961 does not seem to resonate much for these people. They cannot pin point certain events and remember them vividly as opposed to laity and clergy who were deeply involved in the conflict. The 1961 synodical convention was not a watershed moment in their lives; they speak of this time as an era. They do not just see one year, but rather more than thirty years of confusion and difficulties. Typically, WELS members remember negative feelings toward the LCMS. Those feelings were no doubt passed on from pastors to parents and thus to children. One WELS respondent, who was a teenager at the time, remembered such a scenario.⁸ On the other hand LCMS members remember being just plain confused.

That really comes as no surprise when you consider some of the major issues leading up to the breakdown of the synodical conference. One such example was the *Common Confession*, which was the culmination of fourteen years of negotiations between the American Lutheran Church (ALC) and the LCMS.⁹ This confession was rejected outright by the ELS and WELS in 1949. They were not just being killjoys.¹⁰ The confession was not rejected because it said

7. Survey response #24

8. Survey response #23

9. Wendland, Paul. Church History Essay: Doctrinal Committee of 55. April 25th, 1979. P.2

10. Wendland Doctrinal Committee of 55 p. 3

anything wrong, but rather because it contained in it deliberately confusing language that could be understood in a number of ways. As Paul Wendland remarks in his paper on the topic a person almost has to admire the ingenuity of the negotiators in coming up with such formula... More on the *Common Confession* later. The confusing language, differing opinions, and whispers of false doctrine were trickling back through the ranks of both church bodies. After a while it must have seemed common place to the average lay member or perhaps even pastors.

Chevys and Fords

Suffice to say most of the laity in this generation were confused by what was perceived to be theological bickering. Thus, they latched on to what was tangible. One lifelong LCMS member, now in his late 80s, remembered that in those years, “There was a lot of talk and most of it didn’t make sense. Much of it could be compared to: you like Fords and I like Chevys.” For the uninitiated, this was brand loyalty and each company had a unique car culture. Folks would staunchly stand by their brand defending engine models, construction techniques etc. People who bought Fords would never buy a Chevrolet, and vice versa.

What this man was observing was the cultural difference between the LCMS and the WELS. The LCMS was, and is, far bigger than the WELS. In the forty years from 1847 when the Synod was formally organized, to the death of its first President C.F.W. Walther in 1887; the LMCS already had 1500 congregations. By contrast, Wisconsin peaked at about 1200 congregations in the 1980s.

Missouri operated comfortably both in rural and in urban environments. It also had a rich appreciation for the historic worship style of the church. From the outset it followed the liturgy and President C.F.W. Walther insisted that the hymns be of sound doctrine. They wore white

albs, clerical collars and generally their worship was “high church.” As one old Missouri grandmother once commented – *Dieser Missorian, Sie hatten schliff*. (These Missourians, they have style.)¹¹ The LCMS was established. For much of their history they were blessed with many theologically sound clergy and professors. Culturally, it was everything the Wisconsin Synod was not.

Wisconsin was “blue collar.” While Wisconsin and Missouri were still in fellowship, Wisconsin fell solidly in the shadow of its big brother Missouri. Perhaps it could be said that Wisconsin had somewhat of an “ugly duckling” complex. Wisconsin saw itself as tasked with outreach to the rural communities, albeit unofficially. One might think of that classic image of a Wisconsin Synod pastor, wearing his black Geneva robe with muddy shoes. Early on, there were few, if any, high church congregations in the Wisconsin Synod. That sort of thing was considered Romanizing. Even into the 1930s this was the prevailing attitude in Wisconsin. August Pieper as president at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary said, “*Wir sind die Wisconsin Synode. Wir machen kein Show.*” (We are the Wisconsin synod, we don’t put on a show.)

A Wisconsin Synod Pastor serving in the Nebraska district during the 40s and 50s said that at convention there was a great deal of disdain for Missouri’s “high church” worship style. He recalled the term “chancel prancers” being thrown around by men in his district at convention.¹² That same pastor also recalled long car rides home with one of his brothers in the ministry, questioning whether they were doing the right thing in attacking Missouri’s high church style. That said, the disdain that he witnessed was the attitude in the Wisconsin Synod among both laity and clergy.

11. Brief interview with Pres. Wendland

12. Personal Interview at St. Matthew’s Evangelical Lutheran Church 09/03/17

Dr. Mark Braun, in his essay *Black Geneva Piety*, records many similar remarks made by the leaders in the Wisconsin Synod during the decades leading up to 1961. Of these the most telling is from Pastor E. Arnold Sitz writing in the *Quartalschrift* in 1953. Sitz cautioned that the high church movement (of the LCMS) stood alongside the Ecumenical Movement as “one of the most powerful agents in preparing our people for a return to Roman Catholicism and for the temporary triumph of the Anti-Christ before the return of our Lord Jesus Christ.”¹³

Even though a particular style of worship might be perceived by people in 2017 as adiaphora or superfluous, it became a marker of where you stood. It was tangible, or a litmus test so to speak. Clearly, some like Chevy and some liked Ford. If you were a Ford man, there was no way you were going to buy a Chevrolet.

The LCMS along with other church bodies in America, the Methodist, Catholics, Episcopalians, American Lutheran church (now part of the ELCA) etc. generally had the same high church style of worship. As the 20th century progressed, those church bodies tended towards more liberal theology. They adopted a “historical critical” method of Scriptural interpretation. Wisconsin was different. There are stories from the 40s and 50s, in WELS circles, where pastors and members became irritated when trumpets were played in church on Easter or Christmas. There was a certain pride taken by Wisconsin’s pastors, that “We don’t do this for the frills.”¹⁴

Fragmented Memories

The point is, right or wrong, many of the laity in the Wisconsin Synod perceived some direct connection between high church worship and a turn toward liberal theology. One 82-year-old

13. Braun, Mark. *The Black Geneva Piety of the Wisconsin Synod*. Convention Paper. p. 18

14. Braun, *Black Geneva Piety* p. 19

lay respondent wrote, “I remember talk about LCMS having talks with more liberal Lutheran bodies such as the ALC, which itself was having discussions with other Lutheran bodies. The WELS was very concerned about those activities and didn’t want to go along with those LCMS activities.”¹⁵

Those activities and the WELS aversion to them were mentioned by other respondents. Beyond worship style they mentioned the military chaplaincy program, scouting or women’s suffrage¹⁶ in the church. They realized that the LCMS had made overtures to the ALC. They even knew that there was something not wholly right with the ecumenical movement in America. Still, even some WELS respondents who were around at the time thought Wisconsin’s pastors were typically “stuffy, stubborn and too old.”¹⁷ They followed the decision of the Synod and that was final.

It is not that these are insignificant issues, but they are just pieces of the puzzle. Respondents were aware that they only had one perspective, or a very limited perspective. Remarks from both LCMS and WELS laity show that the break in fellowship was not explained or understood. They did not have the benefit of historical perspective. However, there was a situation that comes close to identifying what was happening on a broader scale.

15. This particular respondent, along with one other, come out of an odd situation. Back in the 50s their pastor retired for medical reasons. The church council, as well as the congregation at the time, was split. They had folks with LCMS, ALC and WELS backgrounds and sympathies. When their council went through the difficult process of deciding which synod to join officially, they were helped along by neighboring WELS pastors. When the vote was taken it was unanimous 100% WELS. Yet, when they called a new pastor they called a man who had been trained by LCMS in Springfield IL, which eventually became Ft. Wayne. This pastor had gone through the colloquy process and became WELS. He graduated from Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary in 1961. I tried to contact him directly, but his failing health has taken his memory from him. He served this congregation for 32 years and was a profound influence on me personally.

16. That is allowing women to vote in congregational meetings.

17. Survey response #16

One man who was in the ALC¹⁸ during the 1950s was keen to note the shifting theology in Sunday School materials. He said that his first-year teaching, his classroom materials were good. As the years went on they slowly became worse and worse. The teacher's manuals began to become vague in their instructions. There was a notable lack of emphasis on a six-day creation. Also, there were subtle political messages, anti-capitalism/pro-Marxism, being snuck in to the lessons on all education levels.¹⁹ At any rate, this respondent, now in his 80s, remembers having to switch his Sunday School materials multiple times. After abandoning the material that his own ALC was giving him, he went to Concordia Publishing House. According to him, the first year he had those teaching materials they were Scripturally sound. Again, within a year or two the same thing happened to those materials coming out of Concordia. In desperation, he began picking and choosing materials from various church organizations. Eventually, he came upon Northwestern Publishing House and fully expected the same thing to happen, but it did not.

He knew that during the 50s LCMS and ALC had been making strides toward uniting in fellowship. He thought these talks were underhanded but did not fully understand why. It was only some years later, about 1963, that he really made the connection between the ecumenism of the ALC and LCMS and his failing Sunday School materials.²⁰ This ordeal was one of the reasons he became a founding member of a WELS church in Ohio circ. 1967. He would admit that he didn't have the whole picture, but his is a very important piece of the puzzle. He highlights the main trend or "spirit" that led to the official decision in 1961 to break fellowship.

18. American Lutheran Church (Now ELCA)

19. Rings interview. The letter from Gerard Healy circ. 1960.

20. Rings interview

CHAPTER II

That Which Was Lost

Lutherans living in 2017 have the benefit of perspective and the benefit of historians who have written extensively on this topic. Those histories record that the vote in 1961 of 124 to 49 in favor of breaking fellowship with LCMS was not a decision that was arrived at lightly or coldly. There was no way to make a clean easy break. There were multiple constituencies highly opposed to such action. In the Southeastern district of the WELS, both synods had mutual interests. Namely, Milwaukee Lutheran and Racine Lutheran high schools, the Lutheran Children's Friend Society, the Home for Aged Lutherans, the Lutheran Institutional Ministry, and a joint radio broadcast on Milwaukee radio station WTMJ-AM.²¹ There were more than mutual interests or joint ventures at stake. The entire Michigan District of WELS and LCMS was one tightly wound Lutheran stronghold. Even one LCMS clergy respondent said:

As I was growing up (near Frankenmuth and Saginaw, MI, which are strongholds for both LCMS and WELS membership, and where the WELS' Michigan Lutheran Seminary is located), many of the Missouri congregations did not adopt women's suffrage until well into the 1980s, so they would have remained closer to the WELS in practice than many parts of the LCMS world in the post-split years.²²

Dr. Mark Braun, referring to the “Lutheran Utopia” which existed in Michigan at the time of the Split remarked:

There was even a persistent if unfounded rumor that, should the Wisconsin Synod sever its relations with the Missouri Synod, Wisconsin's entire Michigan District would defect to the LCMS. By the late 1950s, however, relations had grown more strained between the synods throughout the state; in Saginaw voices grew especially insistent that the Wisconsin Synod make the break. But in southwest

21. Braun, Mark. *Those were the trying years! Recollections of the Split*. WELS Historical Institute Journal. Vol 18. #1. April 2000. p. 17

22. Survey Response #10

Michigan "Wisconsin and Missouri men also in these years were still much of one mind and spirit" concerning inter synodical issues.²³

Perhaps this is a bit of an aside, but it's helpful at this point to pause and consider what was at stake and what was lost. Joint ventures, and two synods walking peaceably and patiently together - it's enough to make a seminarian in the graduating class of 2018 long for a time he has never known. There are similar feelings among some of the younger pastors in the LCMS. As one wrote, "I think about what might have been. When I look at things like *Christian Worship* and its supplement, the Wartburg/EHV project and what seems to be a healthier assessment of 'contemporary worship,' I realize that the Wisconsin Synod is a voice of Confessional Lutheranism that is not heard in the LCMS and I wish it were."²⁴ The question, "What could have been?" Is certainly thought provoking, but one cannot play "what ifs" with history. What is done is done. What we might ask is, "What was so divisive that led those men in 1961 to vote to break fellowship?"

Divorce

An unfortunate messy divorce is possibly the clearest way of understanding the Split a half a century later. One LCMS pastor put it this way, "I think the 60s and 70s were horrific, and even within the LCMS many are still extremely suspicious of Concordia Seminary in St. Louis, because of those times. I think in a generation or two we might be able to look at things with clearer eyes."²⁵ An older Professor here at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary made similar

23. Braun 2000 p. 37

24. Survey response #7

25. Survey response #7

comments in class. He said multiple times that people in Wisconsin watched in horror through the 50s, 60s and 70s as they saw a “different spirit” manifest itself in the LCMS.

When marriages fall apart usually it is because one partner or the other desired something or someone forbidden. In the case of the 1961 split that something was ecumenism, driven primarily by, as one LCMS pastor in the 60s said, a desire to have, “something more plausible (than the historical grammatical interpretation of the Bible) to keep the heavy hitter professionals in the congregation.”²⁶ Naturally, when such sentiments are present they are met with opposition. Another survey respondent, a LCMS pastor, remembered the trouble this caused his father.

My father was involved on the Board of the Indiana, Ohio and Michigan Districts of the LCMS. As the LCMS was, indeed, dealing with false doctrine begin taught at Valpo (Valparaiso) at the time. Dad was part of the group that had to go investigate, and ultimately fire an unrepentant professor. This was a difficult task he never forgot. Without the Wisconsin Synod taking the stand they did who knows how long this would have gone on. He was further involved in Synodical controversies in the 70s.²⁷

The same respondent goes on later to say that he believes the split was a necessary evil as it forced the LCMS to deal with some its own demons.

To take the other side, it is plausible to see why some clergy and synod leaders in the LCMS like Theodore Graebner²⁸ saw ecumenism as necessary and thus led their Church bodies in this direction. Consider what was happening in the secular world throughout the 50s and 60s. There was a cultural revolution happening, one that challenged the traditional. The civil rights

26. Survey response #29

27. Survey response #13

28. A paradigm of the fall of the LCMS. He was a professor at Concordia St. Louis and editor of various LCMS publications. His influence was undeniable as he was reaching thousands of people every week. This man started his career as a staunch confessional Lutheran, he said that unionism (ecumenicalism) could be compared to a cancer in a church body. Yet, in the years leading up to his death in 1950 he had completely turned on this confession. In reading some of Graebner’s writings it’s easy to see that he always saw himself on the “cutting edge.” He was one of the major proponents of the shift from German to English. Long story short, it would seem that he perceived a growing dogmatism and rigidity growing in both LCMS and Wisconsin. He felt that he was being proactive in reaching out to other church bodies in order to stem the secular tidal wave that threatened to crash on all of Christendom in America.

movement was in full swing. There were peace activists and intellectuals protesting the Vietnam war and a sexual revolution going on. It certainly must have been unnerving to be a pastor during those days. It comes as no surprise that some pastors sought strength in numbers regardless of a common confession.

With those things in mind, one can see why there were some leaders in the LCMS who wanted to join forces with the ALC. A church body that advocated for interpreting Scripture using “higher critical methods.” The ALC produced a three-volume encyclopedia entitled *The Encyclopedia of the Lutheran Church*. Those books contain the theological views of the Lutheran World Federation, of which the ALC was a part. They attacked, not Lutheran traditions, but rather fundamental Christian doctrines. Concerning the Bible as the Word of God it says, “Luther, the Lutheran Confessions, and Lutheranism generally have recognized and affirmed the inspiration of the Bible. But this fact has no theological relevance for the authority of the bible as the Word of God. What matters is not that Scripture was inspired, but that it is still inspiring.”²⁹ Concerning the origin of Scripture, it said:

Undoubtedly the Old Testament contains materials derived from oriental myths. Such elements may be found in the creation account, the story of paradise, the myths of the marriage of the sons of the gods with the daughters of men, and in the stories of the flood and the tower of Babel, but also in the prophetic books, e.g., in the descriptions of the end of time or visions of the heavenly world.³⁰

To that end, it goes on to imply that there is no afterlife, mentioned in the Old Testament. The concept of an eternal soul in the New Testament is borrowed from ancient Greek concepts or philosophy. In effect, it is denying the very existence of a soul, and saying that the human spirit

29. “The Bible.” *The Encyclopedia of the Lutheran Church*, vol. 1, Lutheran World Federation, 1965, p. 235.

30. E.L.C. p. 1694

dies with the body.³¹ If this was the body of knowledge upon which certain Sunday school materials were based, it is no wonder certain teachers reacted in the way they did.

The *Encyclopedia of the Lutheran Church*, which was widely used and circulated in the ALC, and no doubt in some LCMS circles, went beyond vague statements of faith. Yet, it is with such a church body that the LCMS worked with for fourteen years to produce the *Common Confession*. A confession that the Wisconsin Synod deemed as an inadequate statement of faith, thus it was inadequate to establish fellowship between two church bodies. Yet, throughout the 1950s LCMS president John Behnken defended his synod's position and Wisconsin defended theirs.

Paper War

What ensued was a mini pamphlet war. These battles on paper demand some attention since they were done in large part to stop or stem the confusion of the pastors and laity who were not on the front line. In briefly looking at them, however, it is possible to see how they could be interpreted as theological bickering.

In direct response to the *Common Confession*. Professor Edmund Reim wrote a series of articles in the *Northwestern Lutheran* called *Where Do We Stand?* In these articles Reim outlines Wisconsin's position on LCMS advances toward unionism with the ALC. The purpose of these articles was as Reim writes:

These articles were published for the purpose of informing our readers concerning certain issues which were then under discussion and were a subject of

31. E.L.C pgs. 668, 808,2048, 2236

Oddly enough, these things were brought to my attention in the form of a letter that was written by a very concerned ALC pastor in the early 60s. He wrote a letter attacking the heresy that he found in *The Encyclopedia of the Lutheran Church*. He then used the synodical directory to mail it to congregational leaders throughout his synod. One of the recipients happened to be one of the survey respondents.

considerable controversy in the inter-synodical field. An additional purpose, even more important than that of informing our members, was to examine our own position with the greatest of care, particularly with reference to the Scriptural-ness of our position.³²

A full treatment or examination of *Where Do We Stand* and the eleven tracts that accompany it would be a research paper in and of itself. Suffice it to say, its focus much of its energy on the dangers of unionism, namely the concerns raised by members of the Wisconsin Synod. This was a noble endeavor. Apparently, there was some indecision concerning whether to release this argument with LCMS into the public arena or not. Previously, objections and concerns were printed only in the *Theological Quarterly (Quartalschrift)*. Wisconsin wanted to deal privately with these issues if possible. As that was becoming increasingly untenable, these articles were published in the *Northwestern Lutheran*. Professor Reim writes,

This is by no means a complete listing of our efforts. But it does show that we have not been sitting idly by, helplessly watching the rising flood. On the contrary, we have been doing our utmost to stem the tide, to strengthen the dikes, to repair the break-throughs – even as large groups of our Missouri brethren are working vigorously and systematically to cope with this same movement as it confronts them in their own synod. This listing will further show that we are not merely facing a few isolated problems, as for instance that of Scouting, which has been standing rather unduly in the foreground, but that there is a definite relation between these various incidents. They are a part of a larger problem, just a few of the many different phases of the great modern trend toward unification.³³

The LCMS response was a short article entitled *A Fraternal Word*. Again, a fully study of this document would be worth a research paper in and of itself. For our purposes, we will only address the immediate topic, that of the negotiations between LCMS and the ALC. Although it could be said that this article is paradigmatic of the entire document. Under this heading “II. Negotiations with the American Lutheran Church,” the *Fraternal Word* says:

32. Reim, Edmund. *Where Do We Stand: An Outline of the Wisconsin Position*. Published by the authority of the Committee on Tracts of the Wisconsin Synod. 1950. P. 5

33. *Where do we stand?* P.6

Missouri and Wisconsin differ in this that

- a) Wisconsin says: You must suspend negotiations with the ALC until ALC has first settled the matter of “allowable and wholesome latitude of theological opinion, etc.” Wis. Syn. Proceedings, 1951. Pp 147-148.
- b) Missouri says: How can a settlement be brought about when we refuse to study the Word of God with the ALC in this matter? We are convinced we must continue to “negotiate” and seek to settle any difference in this area also by joint study of God’s Word as long as ALC is ready to study God’s Word.³⁴

It goes on to say that LCMS cannot have its conscience bound regarding “method and manner of dealing” so long as it uses God’s Word and is faithful. Finally, it asks, “Can Wisconsin on the basis of this situation declare that God demands of it a severing of fellowship relations with Missouri?”³⁵

On the surface this is a fair response to Wisconsin’s concerns, but it is a misrepresentation of Wisconsin’s argument. Wisconsin was not saying that said matter needed to be settled before discussion, but that the stated matter be the *first* one settled in discussion.³⁶ (c.f. underlined portion of section a.) This was a subtle device used by the *Fraternal Word* to undermine Wisconsin’s position. All Wisconsin was saying is that the matter of “wholesome and allowable latitude of theological opinion” must be the *first* matter placed on the negotiation table.

Conflicted

The purpose of mentioning this pamphlet war is not to refight the old battles. The purpose of bringing them up is twofold. First, it is inevitably the reason for the breakdown of the Synodical

34. Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. A Fraternal word on the questions in controversy between the Wisconsin Synod and the Missouri Synod. St. Louis MO. 1953. P. 11

35. Fraternal Word p. 12

36. Reim, Edmund. *Fraternal Word Examined*, WELS standing committee on Church union. 1953. p. 12

Conference. Other church historians bear this out more fully. For our purposes, by briefly examining the pamphlet war, it is easy to see why pastors and lay members were conflicted. From the one side the LCMS is excited about the prospects of joining forces with the ALC. The language of the publications coming from Concordia Publishing House subtly begins to change and it raises a few eye brows. On the other hand, the WELS constantly sounds like a killjoy. President Behnken says one thing, and President Brenner says another. *Where Do We Stand* publishes an article and then the *Fraternal Word* responds. Pastors, teachers, lay leaders and anyone else who was on the front lines of this war, all had their own opinions as to what was *really* going on. Official synod decisions and opinion all seem to be on the same playing field. With all this transpiring over the course of decades it is easy to see today how men and women, who were around, can say things like “Stubborn, stuffy old pastors caused the split.”³⁷ The statement, “There was a lot of talk and much of it didn’t make sense”³⁸ now makes some more sense. It is also possible to see why some tuned out after a while as one respondent said, “Nothing was ever really talked about, most small-town churches didn’t even know about it.”³⁹ A half a century later one LCMS respondent legitimately wonders what caused the split in the first place.⁴⁰

The split made people legitimately wonder if these were in fact insurmountable issues that divided WELS and LCMS, or if this was all a bunch of hot air being blown around. It is no wonder then that they attached themselves to tangible things like the scouting issue, or worship

37. Survey response # 23

38. Survey response # 17

39. Survey response # 24

40. Survey response # 22

styles. These folks who appear to not remember much, actually remember quite well. The perceptions of these people a half a century ago are critical in understanding the new normal.

CHAPTER III

A New Normal

Not only was the confusion of the average lay person passed on to the next generation, but much of that history was forgotten. People were for the most part happy to be done with it. The definitive statement had been made at the 1961 Convention. Just as a family must adapt after a divorce, after thirty years of strife, each synod set about creating a new normalcy. The original motion to Split even carried with it statements that encouraged smoothly expediting any joint ventures.

On its own Missouri continued to advance toward fellowship with the ALC. In the following years there was growing acceptance of the historical critical method of biblical interpretation. This eventually culminated in the dramatic walk out in St. Louis in 1974 which resulted in *Seminex*. Most of the student body and faculty left and Missouri had a crisis on its hands. Those who walked out termed themselves “moderates” and they favored the historical critical method of biblical interpretation. In the end, many of these men joined the ELCA, formerly the ALC.⁴¹ While much of the Synod has reclaimed its theologically conservative roots, divisions still remain. One man who left LCMS to become a WELS pastor said that from his perspective, LCMS contains within it four smaller synods.⁴²

On the other hand, Wisconsin experienced rapid growth in the post-Split years. Once out from the shadow of Missouri, it could shake the ugly duckling complex. The saying in those days was, “In every State by 78!” Wisconsin enjoyed record enrollment at all its synodical

⁴¹ An intermediate was the formation of the AELC “The Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches.” The AELC, ALC and LCA merged in 1988 to form the ELCA.

⁴² Respondent #26, personal interview 11/03/17

schools, and it began to print much more of its own material. Quite the opposite of those who thought the break in fellowship marked the death knell for the little synod. A full examination of the benefits and blessing that came of that difficult situation are beyond the scope of this paper. It is enough to recognize that each synod continued down its own paths, and a new normal was established.

Current Cultural Climate

Examining the mindset of many WELS and LCMS parishioners and pastors requires compounding the new normal with the issues mentioned in the introduction of this paper. The culture in which our synods, exist is undergoing a massive change. The ecumenical pendulum has swung so far one direction, it is hard to say if it is even in the clock any more. For example, a recent online article reported:

More than 2,400 religious leaders representing many different faiths sent a letter stating their opposition to the GOP tax bill to Senate Majority Leader Republican Mitch McConnell and Democrat Minority Leader Charles Schumer. The religious leaders — representing the Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist and other faiths as part of the Interfaith Healthcare Coalition — said in the letter that the “bill violates our moral principles of equality, justice, and fairness.”⁴³

When posted on social media, this type of article goes viral, garnering thousands of “likes.” In secular public opinion, this is what the church and faith leaders are supposed to be doing — uniting and doing practical things. The divisions that exist between the LCMS and the WELS over some archaic doctrinal issues from a half a century ago seem insignificant by comparison. It is naïve to think that Confessional Lutheran Christians are not affected by the culture in which they live. These are the challenges when addressing the Split a half a century later. The aim of

43. S. Nicholson. Revere Press. November 29th, 2017.

what follows is to provide insight for navigating the opinions concerning the 1961 Split held by many in our church bodies.

If or When?

The chief question of our time is whether WELS and LCMS will come back into fellowship or not. Note how the opinions and trends are not sharply divided along Synodical boundaries. One LCMS pastor wrote:

I agree with President Harrison who has stated that, given what was going on in Missouri at that time the Wisconsin Synod didn't have much choice (To break fellowship). It was a bit more than a decade later (1973) that Missouri was divided, and most of the faculty at our primary seminary were ejected and eventually became part of the ELCA. So, if that was in the mix in 1961, the division with Wisconsin was probably unavoidable. From my perspective the need for Missouri and Wisconsin to be divided has long since passed, however.⁴⁴

The question is not, "Are there divisions in LCMS?" Rather, these survey respondents seem to be asking, "What is the severity of those divisions?" One outside observer (from the WELS) wrote that, "there appears to be two factions within the LCMS, liberal and conservative."⁴⁵ How to resolve those factions remains a mystery, he admits. Yet, he would say resuming fellowship benefits both synods because of current pastor shortages and other economic problems. This argument for resuming fellowship rests on a perception of the LCMS that might not be accurate. Basically, if these divisions are not fellowship ending within the LCMS and they can deal with them internally, then why can the WELS not join?

It is prudent then to examine the major points of division. Of those that participated in this survey, WELS and LCMS clergy point to three major causes of division that currently exist.

44. Survey response #2

45. Survey response #23

Those being, a woman's role in the church,⁴⁶ church fellowship⁴⁷, and the nature of the pastoral office.⁴⁸ The degree to which these things are divisive really depends on who you ask, regardless of synod affiliation.⁴⁹

In this semester at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, there are two men who have left the LCMS because of doctrinal issues and divisions. They both expressed frustration in dealing with liberal theology or the lingering effects of the Seminex walkout in the 70s. There was a time when because of pastor shortages, certain District Presidents in the LCMS ordained Seminex men. President Paul Wendland (WLS) offers this caution:

Consider this as a cautionary tale: for years pastors from Seminex were being dusted off and certified for ministry in their church. Most of them clung to their liberal positions and had no real strong doctrinal foundation. Those men have now moved through middle-age into positions of leadership in some of the districts. Let's say you are a young man who has just graduated from a confessional seminary and you go in to a district where there are either a lot of former Seminex pastors or leaders. How long do you think--under the pressure of men who tell you to lighten up--do you think you will be able to hold fast to a doctrinally steadfast position? Unless you are an extraordinary person, the answer is not long.⁵⁰

46. Women's role: some LCMS congregations allow women to serve as congregation president. Whereas in WELS congregations they are not permitted to vote

47. Church fellowship: this is not the same issue as the one back in the "trying years." The LCMS is not in fellowship with the ELCA. However, this is directly tied to issues concerning prayer fellowship. For example, a certain LCMS pastor felt he was within his right to join in the joint prayer service with Imams and Rabbis at Yankee Stadium after 9/11. That caused quite a stir in the LCMS as a whole. Interestingly enough, the loudest outcry came from Concordia St. Louis. Some in the WELS interpret this as "circles" or "levels" of fellowship, which is not entirely accurate. Another example: officially, LCMS practices "closed communion," but open communion seems to be tolerated in certain areas.

48. The office of pastoral ministry is seen by some in the LCMS as having an almost "apostolic succession" feel behind it. However, this seems to be more an issue of language rather than practice. Where this becomes an issue is in the matter of church discipline. To some in the LCMS the pastor of the individual congregation has the final authority, not the Synod. Naturally, this would make enacting church discipline on a Synodical level rather difficult. On the other hand, WELS is, by all appearances, united in saying that the Synod is the church. Enacting church discipline within the WELS, while painful, is not impossible. This is also due, in part, because LCMS is far larger than WELS.

49. C.f. All pastor surveys

50. Wendland Leadership Survey

There are LCMS and WELS pastors who see that the Seminex influence is wearing off. One was quoted earlier when he said, “perhaps in a generation or two, we might see things with clearer eyes.” Dr. Mark Braun wonders if the events that President Wendland mentioned happened as clearly as he states. He wonders just how influential the Seminex men really as they entered the prime leadership years of their lives. At any rate, one must wonder if the liberalism that exists within LCMS is a product of the 60s and 70s or if it is driven by something new.

Some of the laity that participated in this study seem to be disillusioned by the thousands of different Christian sects that have popped up in America, and they long for some Christian unity. One LCMS woman who responded to the survey wrote:

When there is so much bickering over small details within the whole Christian church on Earth, it is understandable that a non-believer might be turned off. I’m not sure if it would ever be possible to mend the divisions, because people do hold very strongly to their synodical/denominational affiliations. But in an ideal world, it would be nice to see some Christian unity.⁵¹

This sentiment is even shared by some who lived through the split. One respondent wrote, “With the trend away from organized religion in general, the churches have a bigger enemy in secularism and atheism than other Christian bodies. How do we fight that?”⁵² Among the survey responses there are some disconcerting situations that flow from this mentality. An LCMS pastor recalls how he had some members who moved from his church and joined a WELS congregation in another town. These members would return periodically to visit friends and attend their old congregation. They continued to commune at their old church despite the

51. Survey response #21

52. Survey response #29

LCMS pastor's warning. He said he cautioned them as to the response they may receive from their WELS pastor and they replied, "We'll take care of that."⁵³

The "resume fellowship" trend is certainly the majority opinion, although there are degrees of reservation about it. Some are extremely optimistic and think this could happen tomorrow if we really put our minds to it, some apparently ignore it all together, while others realistically say that, "there would need to be a lot of grace extended on both sides."⁵⁴ One WELS pastor who attended a church building seminar put on by the LCMS recalled, "It was made known that I was WELS, but everyone was super friendly. I was made to feel very welcome. I remember thinking, 'what a shame we aren't walking together!' It was obvious that we do have a lot in common with the LCMS."⁵⁵

Slow and Sober

No one is completely against resuming fellowship at some point. There are just those who have a greater amount of skepticism or reservation about it. One man simply asks, "What is there to be gained?"⁵⁶ He is not trying to be contentious, but rather offering some serious food for thought. This same sentiment of caution is echoed by another WELS respondent, "We can continue to dialogue with the LCMS. Once we join in fellowship with LCMS do we place conditions on the fellowship? What if down the road LCMS or part of the LCMS moves in a direction that is not

53. Survey response #15

54. Survey response #5

55. Survey response #19 - I am not saying that this WELS pastor is ready to jump into fellowship with the LCMS. I merely am expressing his sentiment.

56. Survey Response #25

in agreement with the WELS? Do we split again and create even more divisions with families and community churches?”⁵⁷

These WELS members are not alone in their concern. An LCMS pastor responding to the last question about current divisions and resuming fellowship says, “I think it comes down to the question of what to do about heterodoxy and where to draw the line. I think if we can show the same commitment to orthodoxy we can begin to dialog meaningfully about other issues, like office of pastor, prayer fellowship etc.”⁵⁸ Another LCMS clergy respondent writes, “I think the WELS is a bit leery about restoring fellowship therefore. In some ways, I don’t blame them. Then again, every Synod that has sinners in it (ah, that would be all of them) has its difficulties, problems, unfaithfulness, etc., of practice and confession. Perhaps there’s too much heterodoxy in the LCMS for a return to fellowship in the near term.”⁵⁹ These respondents would advocate for an approach that does not cause more confusion or offence than already exists.

These thoughtful responses are far more helpful to the discussion than what many have heard in the past. There was a time not too long ago when both Synods reacted to caricatures rather than actually examining the practice of the other, or even their own positions. Those attitudes drove a wedge deeper into the split. These survey responses show one thing is certain – not all, but many of the wounds from the 60s and 70s have scarred over.

That said, a slow, cautious and sober approach to resuming fellowship is preferred. It would be harmful to many consciences to rejoin fellowship just for the sake of doing so. It is no different than suggesting that an old marriage could or should be put back together just for the sake of doing so. Many who lived through it realize that is virtually impossible. Those who

57. Survey response #30

58. Survey response #7

59. Survey response #11

inherit the situation are naive to think that it could easily be restored. Consider the comments of the next survey respondent. An LCMS pastor in the Missouri's Northwest District wrote:

I think the issues that I still hear about are theological ones of fellowship, OPM, and women's suffrage. The only one I feel is really an issue is over the OPM. I don't see us going into fellowship anytime soon though, especially as long as people keep bringing up the past issues which I feel have mostly been dealt with or corrected (in my opinion, which could be completely wrong).

Frankly, I'm always a little befuddled as to why this even gets brought up much anymore. It was 66 [56] years ago now. Let's get over the hurt feelings and work on fellowship already. I recently had a member who moved over from the CLC who is 90 years old and she was extremely confused as to why her old church brought this up so much. She hasn't seen or witnessed any of the issues that her old pastor kept harping on concerning the LCMS. She lived through it, and doesn't understand why some dwell on it rather than working today to promote fellowship for the future.⁶⁰

This attitude is troubling because a desire for unity and leaping before looking is essentially why we broke fellowship in the first place. This discussion is not about hurt feelings or dredging up the past simply for the sake of pointing fingers. We bring it up because it was a time of extreme confusion. As we have already seen, and as this statement illustrates, many active church members in both Synods were mightily perplexed by the whole event. It is irresponsible to simply ignore the past, while it may not repeat itself directly, one can certainly learn lessons from it. How can we relegate the 1961 Split to a historical footnote? Perhaps that is possible in some areas of the Missouri Synod where it's hardly known that the WELS exists. However, that is not the case in the Wisconsin Synod.

This is our history, one of the most hard-fought conflicts in the existence of our church body. Whether or not families were directly affected by it, our people have questions now. Whether or not people in the LCMS are aware that WELS exists, all of WELS knows LCMS

60. Survey response #9

exists. They see “Lutheran” on the sign out front and wonder, “What is the difference?” They have family members and wonder if it is ok to pray with them, or to go to communion with them. In a recent poll, over 75% of the student body at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary said that they have already been asked about the division between LCMS and WELS. These men are not even out in the field yet and they are confronted by confused members. Yet to the same poll, over 70% of WLS seminarians have not read one of the comprehensive histories written on the topic. The Split is sometimes discussed informally in classes or among friends. Formally, it is examined for about 3 days Senior year during Church history class. If this is enough remains to be seen, but at least it’s something.

Dr. John Brenner after returning from the last round of informal WELS/ELS/LCMS talks, remarked that the St. Louis Seminary faculty elected to discontinue its course on Missouri Synod History. It is difficult to find a rationale behind this move. It does not bode well for the future of our two church bodies. At WLS there are caricatures enough, and we briefly study the Split. Burying or ignoring the past does a disservice to future generations in both Synods.

Given the unionistic current culture in America, and the confusion and complexity surrounding the Split a slow and sober approach is preferred. One that takes into account the consciences of the weakest brother or sister, is not contentious and divisive. Thankfully a sober approach to fellowship has been adopted by both WELS and LCMS.

CHAPTER IV

Current Talks

Recently, the leaders of our two synods have begun talking again. These talks began when both President Mark Schroeder (WELS) and President Matthew Harrison (LCMS) were elected. At a Lutheran Free conference held in 2010 at Martin Luther College, I heard one elderly LCMS attendee remark, “I have not set foot on WELS property in 50 years!” 2010 was President Harrison’s first year in office. These talks have been perceived by some to be a sure sign that renewed fellowship is imminent. For the majority of this chapter the men who regularly attend these meetings will speak for themselves.

It’s an important observation that the current leadership of both synods have opted for the slow and steady approach. In fact, at the time of writing this paper, the synodical leadership met yet again for informal talks. This would be the fifth year in a row. The formal press release that usually comes out of these meetings had not yet been published at the time of writing. These talks take place in line with what was laid down at the 1961 convention more than half a century ago. The press release from the 2015 meeting states, “The WELS convention in 1961 resolved “that under conditions which do not imply a denial of our previous testimony we stand ready to resume discussions with the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod with the aim of reestablishing unity of doctrine and practice and of restoring fellowship relations, these discussions to be conducted outside the framework of fellowship.”⁶¹

61. A Report on the Meetings of ELS, LCMS, and WELS Leaders 2012–201. Approved in Jacksonville Florida 12/02.2015 p. 1

Pastor John Vieker, the assistant to President Matthew Harrison of the LCMS, who has been a part of these meetings from the beginning said:

Our annual informal discussions have been rewarding in that we have been able to frankly discuss our differences, but more importantly, to rejoice in where we agree—which is on most of Christian doctrine. To continue to hear each other out based on God’s Word and the Lutheran Confessions, to which we all subscribe, is what we need to continue doing.⁶²

Pastor Vieker goes on to say that he has developed a warm and cordial relationship with his counterparts in the WELS. However, he is realistic, “We are closer only because for the last 50+ years we have not really talked to each other. So now we are talking. That is a start, and a good start at that. Whether we see fellowship declared in my lifetime, I am doubtful. However, I do know that we need to continue to talk.”⁶³

These sentiments are shared by Professor Earl Treptow (WELS). In response to a survey question, “Are we any closer to fellowship than we were 50+ years ago? Why/why not?” He writes:

I’m going to ride the fence a bit. I’ll say yes in that there are confessional leaders guiding the LCMS and I believe that the Lord will bless their labors. There’s far more reason for optimism with a man like Matt Harrison serving as president than there was with Gerald Kieschnick. We clearly have disagreements on fellowship and church and ministry (though not some that I had previously thought) and a different hermeneutical approach, but that’s different than having a difference in the doctrine of justification. There is reason for optimism based on God’s promises. At the same time, we have a long history now of seeing where Missouri has wandered from faithful Lutheran doctrine and practice. It will be that much more difficult to see fellowship restored. I think of the role history has played in the discussions with the CLC and believe that we have even more heated history with Missouri. That will take some time to work through. Since I don’t see Missouri swimming upstream on fellowship, though there has been some indication of their willingness to do so, I find it difficult to imagine that we would be back in fellowship with them in my lifetime. But I think small and we have a big God who does great things by his Word.⁶⁴

62. Vieker Leadership interview

63. Vieker Leadership interview

64. Treptow Leadership interview

Many of Professor Treptow's concerns are the same ones that were echoed in this paper. These statements are helpful in that they give pastors and clergy a realistic picture of an ever-evolving situation. Having just returned from the 2017 meeting, Treptow remarked to me that the latest meeting was the most productive meeting to date. Clearly there is reason for optimism, yet that needs to be tempered. As he says, there is a long history of LCMS departing from confessional Lutheran doctrine and practice. A reader ought to find this Professor Treptow quote equally insightful, "The leaders (LCMS) would say that Wisconsin was right to do what it did at the time of the split, though I'm not sure they would recognize the reason why. They would be thinking of the liberalism that was beginning at that time and would show up at the time of Seminex, not the doctrine of fellowship or church and ministry matters."⁶⁵

What Treptow is getting at is something the paper mentioned earlier. The recognizable reason why we broke was fellowship practices brought on by an influx of liberal theology. The real reason was that LCMS was trying to hide it from the WELS. What if they had been honest and open about it then? What if they had just talked as they are doing now, instead of having a pamphlet war? Things may have been different.

This is the difference today. WELS and LCMS may have their differences in doctrine and in practice, but everyone knows it. It's openly discussed. President Wendland (WLS) who was also in attendance had some comments in reference to the refreshing clarity in the discussions:

I am heartened by the leaderships' renewed commitment to doctrinal clarity and discipline. I applaud and support their efforts and admire them a great deal. Matt Harrison and those around him are fine, godly people. But they have a huge job in front of them and they know it. Whether or not the Lord God in his love and mercy will grant the current leaders a long period of service for their church is anybody's guess. We pray so.

65 Treptow Leadership interview

Whether or not the next batch of leaders embrace the same commitments is again anybody's guess. Pres. Harrison and those around him are doing the right things. They are going about restoring godly unity in an appropriate way. They deserve our prayers and support. But this does not mean that we are going to be joining with the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod in fellowship anytime soon. I wish it were otherwise, but we must be realistic.⁶⁶

If there were just words between these men, then one might be rightly skeptical. Their words do seem to be backed up by action. There appears to be a genuine desire to set the house aright in Missouri. In 2015, a 52-year-old LCMS pastor flagrantly denied the inerrancy of Scripture. The St. Louis Post-Dispatch paper did a write up on what they called a “modern day heresy trial.” The paper was clearly sympathetic to the ousted outspoken liberal pastor. It even brought in the Seminex history from the 70s and praised those men like heroes. In the face of obvious criticism for what he believes to be the right course of action, President Harrison said, “I am saying that if my synod does not change its inability to call such a person to repentance and remove such a teacher where there is no repentance, then we are liars and our confession is meaningless.”⁶⁷

While such an article shows action being taken by LCMS leadership, it shows the other side as well. LCMS is currently a pluralistic church body. This outspoken pastor who was ousted, is not the only one. Yet, LCMS leadership must realize that they cannot have a modern “heretic hunt.” They must deal patiently and err on the side of the Gospel where they can. As Wendland says, they know the size of the challenge that lies before them.

What the clergy and laity can learn from the leaders who attend these meetings is patience and sober mindedness. The men who are on the front lines of this new battle would

66. Wendland Leadership interview

67. Fowler Lily. “Outspoken pastor ousted from the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod.” St. Louis Post Dispatch. July 20th 2015.

have people understand this to be the purpose of these talks. We can rejoice and be glad that we are two confessional Lutheran church bodies who do not want to compromise either Scripture or consciences. Many of our pastors fight the same battles from the pulpit, to the hospital bed, to the grave side against Satan, death and sinful natures. While that remains true, the LCMS is a pluralistic church body with a war going on inside itself, and its current leaders know this. They all would urge Lutherans both WELS and LCMS to have a mind for the ministry at large.

CONCLUSION

Herein lies the takeaway from all of this: as St. Paul says in Colossians 3:12, *Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.* When it comes to the division between LCMS and WELS it is about more than official documents lying forgotten in the basement of Seminaries. It goes beyond cultural trends and desires. It's about people's consciences.

Within this line of thinking lies a strategy for dealing with those seemingly divisive and contentious situations. For example, if someone should say, "I'm a Lutheran, I believe in the real-presence, I believe in the blessings Christ gives me in communion but I'm LCMS and you won't commune me?" There ought not be a discussion over whether they are worthy to commune or not. They are, just not at an altar of a synod they do not belong to. Both synod presidents would say that they should not commune at a foreign altar because they lack a common confession of faith with that church body. They lack *κοινωνία* (Koinonia) fellowship. Communing them would affect both their conscience and those of the believers next to them at the altar. Ignoring confession and conscience for the sake of convenience says that one really values neither. It is not the pastor who refuses communion who is being contentious, it is the person who insists on taking it.

Perhaps this all means very little to a person who places no emphasis on belonging to a particular church or being a "card carrying member." It is for this very reason that confessional Lutherans place such great emphasis on it. As we prepare more men for the ministry, and laity for leadership in the churches; it is my prayer that we continue to make them all cognizant of their place in church history. That they might better understand their place in ministry of the gospel at large. Understanding care and patience are needed when dealing with other church

bodies and other members. Thus, fellowship is not to be rushed out of fear that America is running out of Christians or out of some perceived financial or organizational desperation. It's been said that if a WELS member and an LCMS member met out in the desert of Africa far away from America, they might be in fellowship together. We are not in Africa, we are in America and there is a history here that cannot be ignored or forgotten. It deserves to be viewed again and again, each time with clearer eyes so that we do not lose perspective. Nothing happens in a vacuum, there is a context to everything. This is the reality of the situation between the WELS and the LCMS as two church bodies that no longer walk together but must exist together.

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