

Change Under God: James Schaefer and the WELS' *Weltanschauung*

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December 15, 2008
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The social and political philosopher Edmund Burke once said, “A state without the means of some change is without the means of its conservation.” Apparently Burke had never heard of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod. Though not always eager for change, the Synod has stood by God’s grace for over 150 years. Yet, under God and his holy Word, there have been changes and agents of change even within the beloved fellowship of the WELS. James Schaefer was one such agent in the history of the Synod. He changed perceptions inside and outside of the WELS concerning the Synod and its identity. His work as the first public relations director for the Synod gave him the opportunity to confront and alter the perceptions of those outside the Synod. His work on the *Northwestern Lutheran* allowed him to change the WELS self-image from within. Without a doubt, James P. Schaefer gave the Wisconsin Synod a positive, biblical public image and broadened horizons in the Synod with his evangelical esprit.

I. The Facts of Life

First of all, one must know who the man was and from whence he came. James Palmer Schaefer was born on December 24, 1922 at nine o’clock in the evening to Rev. William John and Pency (nee Palmer) Schaefer. His father W. J. was serving a mission congregation named Zion in Colome, South Dakota. The parsonage was always home to James, so it is not surprising that upon exit from his mother’s womb, he was not greeted by bright lights in a hospital room, but by this pastoral abode. Dad was away leading the Christmas Eve service at church. When he arrived home, he found a son waiting—a son who had six toes on one foot! The doctor promptly excised the extra digit and the story lives on in family lore. His older brother was John, who would for a time serve as a mission pastor. His eldest sibling was Miriam, who would marry Raymond L. Weichmann the future District President of the WELS South Atlantic District. Miriam told the story of the first time she met her new brother. She and John had been staying at

a member's home while James was being born. When the two returned home, "the bundled newborn was lying on the open oven door of the wood-burning stove. He seemed to enjoy the heat."¹ Two other older siblings died in infancy. James was the baby of the family and the one grandchild whom Grandma did not scold when he reached into the cookie jar. He was the pride and joy of his parents, too.

In 1929 his father W. J. accepted a call to start a mission on Milwaukee's north side. That church was organized in January 1930 and named the Lutheran Church of the Atonement. This would be Schaefer's church home for the rest of his life. Atonement also provided James with his elementary education. Confirmation classes were taught by his father. He later recounted, "...I was confirmed by a pastor who, with a will of iron, had us memorize vast sections of the King James – or else."² That will of iron would prove to be hereditary.

In 1936 James entered Northwestern's preparatory department in Watertown, Wisconsin. He graduated in 1940 and entered Northwestern College to continue preparing for the pastoral ministry. At some time during these prep and college years, Schaefer developed an interesting nickname—"Jeb." He told this story,

To put it succinctly: I am a third generation first cousin of James Ewell Brown Stuart, the great Confederate cavalry general, mortally wounded in 1864. My grandfather Palmer, a transplant from Virginia, brought the blood of the Whitehead/Stuart clan along with him to the Midwest. Unable to keep hidden this relationship from the keen and jealous wits in my class, I was promptly dubbed Sir Jeb. Later the "sir" was dropped.³

The *Black and Red*, the student newspaper of Northwestern College, told a slightly different account of this nickname's origin and gave insights into James Schaefer the student,

Jeb deserves tribute for the way he has held down his class and held up the Profs during his presidency. Because of some minor Confederate General on his family tree he has an affectation of signing his name J. E. B. Schaefer. The BLACK & RED benefited from his

¹ Morton A. Schroeder, "Pen Mightier than Sword," *Northwestern Lutheran*, vol. 84, no. 12 (December 1997), 9.

² James P. Schaefer, "From This Corner." NL, vol. 69, no. 18 (1 October 1982), 274.

³ Gary Baumler, "The Editor's Pen." NL, vol. 81, no. 1 (January 1994), 34.

vigorous pen during his two years on the staff. From behind a smoke screen of polysyllabic humor some excellent ideas were brought to light. The band will miss this flutist and the fellow who would wear brown shoes at a concert. Those beetling brows and five syllable words have instilled in the Preps a respect for authority. Jeb has gone through a good deal of history and contemporary literature that wasn't assigned, but he doesn't set himself up as an unimpeachable authority. An adroit logician, he will often argue pro when he knows con is right just for the fun of it. But when he claims that a tie he borrowed from me over a year ago is now his because possession is nine-tenths of the law, I suspect sophistry.⁴

Jeb had been class president for all four years of college, a feat that classmate and former WELS President Carl Mischke put into perspective. According to Mischke there was an "unwritten law" that to be a class president in college one needed to be a graduate of Northwestern Prep. Mischke was not a graduate of Northwestern Prep. Therefore, later in life Schaefer would tell the story, whenever he addressed a group or gave a speech and President Mischke was present, that some people had campaigned for Mischke and others for him. Schaefer's victory made the college election the only election he ever won and the only one Mischke ever lost!⁵

Schaefer graduated from Northwestern College in 1944 and matriculated in the fall at the Lutheran Theological Seminary in Thiensville, Wisconsin (currently Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary in Mequon). Becoming a pastor was somewhat of a foregone conclusion for Schaefer: "I never really thought about it," he said later. "Whether to become a pastor was never a question. My Dad told me that was what I was going to do and I did it..." Even so, a new zeal took hold of him as he studied in Thiensville: "In the seminary everything was theology and a passion for it began to blossom under the impact of it all."⁶ The decision to enter the ministry, however, must have involved some deep thought on Schaefer's part. His older brother John, a mission pastor in Colorado, wrote young Jeb about the ministry:

⁴ *Black and Red*, commencement issue, 1944.

⁵ Carl Mischke, interview by the author, Sun Prairie, WI, 10 December 2008.

⁶ Richard L. Kenyon, "Synod Owes Much to an Unsung Hero," *The Milwaukee Journal*, Saturday, 7 August 1982, p. 4.

James, I'm warning you, if you think you will not like it, and cant [sic] stand to pinch pennies dont [sic] go into it, for you cannot be satisfied. I am only holding on for the folks [sic] sake... Yes, James, the preaching profession is O. K. for a while until the novelty has worn off, but then it is the same old grind all over again. Sunday a sermon. Then sick calls, then canvass calls and so on. But if you like public speaking and can do it easy and make up sermons easy or in a short time, it may be alright, but then on the other hand you have all the sh** to take...⁷

Schaefer pressed on through the end of World War II and graduated on June 5, 1947. This graduation ceremony, however, was different. In *The Northwestern Lutheran* Professor Carl Lawrenz noted that this was the first graduation exercise carried out at its usual time since 1944. The war had resulted in an accelerated program. There were two graduations during 1945 and no graduations during 1946. He urged thankfulness for the gift of peace restored to the United States but also pointed out some added blessings,

...the irregular program under which this graduating class pursued its studies at the Seminary was not without its benefits. Many members of the class were able to spend more than the usual three years at their theological studies. Quite a number of them were also privileged to enrich their study at the Seminary by having it interspersed with some type of practical experience in the field...⁸

In an era before the vicar year became standard practice, this class received practical experience and extra classroom time. (One could say they got “more for their money” but seminary at this time was free!) The graduation of 1947 returned the Seminary campus to its normal routine and produced a class of future synodical leaders. Among Schaefer's classmates were Kurt Eggert (future Project Director of *Christian Worship*), William Zell (future President of Northwestern Prep), Wilbert Gawrisch (future Seminary Professor), Theodore Hartwig (future DMLC/MLC Professor), and Carl Mischke (future Synod President).

Schaefer continued his education after leaving the Seminary. In 1952 he received a Master's degree in history from Marquette University, Milwaukee. He took pride throughout his

⁷ John William Schaefer to James Palmer Schaefer, 15 January 1945, copy in possession of the author.

⁸ Carl Lawrenz, “Seminary Graduation,” *NL*, vol. 34, no. 13, (22 June 1947), 201.

life as being a continuing student of history. Schaefer observed, “There has long been some unscholarly snickering at round-shouldered historians in a cloud of the dusty past. That is to caricature the historical task ... you *are* what you *were*.”⁹ Schaefer also held a second Master’s degree in philosophy from Marquette (1960). He almost went further in his education,

At one time back in the ‘60s I was on track for a PhD in philosophy, but I dropped out after completing the master’s comprehensive exams and language exam. I was even working on my thesis: The subject object antithesis in Kierkegaard. The parish work was too overwhelming. Dad, the senior pastor, as he aged was slowing down, and more and more responsibility was heaped on me.¹⁰

His lifetime of learning culminated in May 1995 when Wisconsin Lutheran College awarded him an honorary doctorate degree as Doctor of Humane Letters (LHD). The only other person up to that time to receive an honorary degree from WLC was Rev. Carl Mischke.

On November 2, 1947 James Schaefer married Ruth Marie Eggert of Watertown, Wisconsin. She was four years his younger and the sister of his classmate and good friend, Kurt. Their first meeting came when Jeb was a 9th grader and Ruth was a 5th grader. She thought he was the most arrogant boy she had ever met. But when Ruth was a high school sophomore she realized, “I’m in love with Jeb Schaefer.”¹¹ A seven-year courtship and 48 years of marriage shortly followed Ruth’s realization. Jeb ended his public ministry with these words: “...behind it all was the captor of my heart, my dear wife, Ruth, and mother of our six offspring. I will not try to write what she has meant to me. Her unflinching love, support, and wisdom has [sic] tided me over dark, dark days. I look forward to our unbroken days together here—please God—and above.”¹² Their six children were Paul David (b. 1949), Ruth Ellen (b. 1951), William John II (b. 1955), Grace Ann (b. 1957), James Palmer Jr. (b. 1962), and Pency Paula (b. 1964). On

⁹ James P. Schaefer, “From This Corner,” NL, vol.70, no.9, (1 May 1983), 130.

¹⁰ James P. Schaefer Autobiography entitled “vitajs” dated 1 April 1995, copy in possession of the author.

¹¹ William J. Schaefer, interview by author, Milwaukee, WI, 30 November 2008.

¹² James P. Schaefer, “From This Corner,” NL, vol. 80, no. 12, (December 1993), 438.

Thursday, November 16, 1995 an aortic heart valve which had been replaced in 1984 failed. Schaefer slipped into a coma from which he never recovered. He passed from death to life on Tuesday, November 21, 1995 at 1:15 p.m. His Christian funeral was held at Atonement Lutheran Church on Friday, November 24, 1995 with a committal the following day at Graceland Cemetery in Milwaukee.

II. The History of Service

Upon graduation from the Lutheran Theological Seminary, Schaefer was assigned to serve with his father at Atonement in Milwaukee. According to one of Jeb's sons W. J. Schaefer II, this unusual assignment occurred because Jeb was perceived as somewhat more progressive in his thinking and his father promised to "keep him in line."¹³ Jeb was, in fact, assigned as principal, teacher, and assistant pastor. He described his feelings on the assignment many years later,

"It wasn't as if I were returning to the parish I had grown up in. It wasn't anything like that," he said. "You see, at the age of 13 I had left home to attend [the synod's] preparatory and college programs in Watertown for eight years, and then went three more years to the seminary. In effect, I had been away from home for 11 years."¹⁴

In 1950 he was "promoted" to be associate pastor with his father. In 1955 W. J. suffered a heart attack and James assumed more of the administrative responsibilities. By the mid 60s most of the preaching rested upon the younger Schaefer as well. He described working with his father "as a team, in tandem, and as friends." He continued saying,

Really, there are things to be said for a father and son pastoral team. In any dual pastorate there is the possibility of problems and conflicts, but for my father and me it was clearly a situation of blood being thicker than water. No one could drive a wedge between us. If we had a problem we could "have it out," as they say, and we would still be friends.¹⁵

¹³ William J. Schaefer II, interview by author.

¹⁴ Kenyon, p. 4.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

Schaefer served as pastor at Atonement until 1967 when he accepted the call to be the Wisconsin Synod's first Stewardship Counselor. He held this position until 1981. Other bare facts regarding his ministry include these: Chairman of the Committee on Constitutional Matters from 1955-1971 and member of the committee from 1971-1995; Director of Wisconsin Lutheran High School, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, from 1957-1963; first Director of Public Relations for the Synod (a part-time position) from 1961-1993; Chairman of the Synod's first Administrative Survey Commission¹⁶ from 1965-1969; Director of the *Missio Dei* Offering¹⁷ from 1965-1966; member of the Synod Coordinating Council¹⁸ from 1967-1982; Chairman of the Division of Administration and Services from 1969-1981; Executive Secretary of the Board for Information and Stewardship from 1971-1982; Editor of the *Northwestern Lutheran* from 1982-1993; the first Editor of the *WELS Historical Institute Journal* from 1983-1990. Outside the Synod Schaefer spent time as a member of the Milwaukee Press Club, a director of the Protestant Legislative Council, a member of the Finance Committee of the Associated Church Press, and an AAL Board Member from 1984-1992.

Throughout his ministry Schaefer received many calls to various places, including a call in 1955 to a Lutheran seminary in Australia. One call deserves specific attention because of its calling body and the time it was issued. In 1960 as the split with Missouri seemed imminent, Concordia Theological Seminary in Springfield, Illinois, called Schaefer as assistant professor of dogmatics. The Missouri Synod publication, *Badger Lutheran*, misspelled his last name as "Schaeffer"¹⁹ and Jeb returned the call. One can relate to the pain felt as the victim of

¹⁶ This was an ad hoc committee to review the structure of the Synod. The second such committee was headed by Pastor David Valleskey and reported to the 1985 Synod Convention.

¹⁷ Schaefer was given a 9 month leave of absence from Atonement to serve as executive director of the Synod's capital fund drive. The drive sought \$4 million; \$5.6 million was raised by God's grace. This was the first lay-led fund raising effort within the WELS.

¹⁸ This was the budgeting agency of the Synod and worked under the Conference of Presidents.

¹⁹ "Springfield Seminary Calls Rev. Schaeffer of Wisconsin Synod," *Badger Lutheran*, 28 April 1960, p. 1.

misspelling, but the false doctrine within Missouri precluded accepting such a call for Schaefer. He saw the false doctrine up close when he participated in a gathering of Lutheran theologians from around the world, known to history as the second Theologians' Conference, held at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary on July 20-30, 1960. For Carl Mischke this was a strong indicator of Schaefer's theology and his integrity. "He never left the Synod and I always pointed that out to people who had questions about him,"²⁰ Mischke said. It was the Synod of Schaefer's birth, education, ministry, and life—and he cherished it.

III. Impact on the Wisconsin Synod

Before embarking on a discussion of Schaefer's work within the Wisconsin Synod one must understand of how he viewed his role in the Synod. Jeb saw himself as an innovative agent of change, under God. Certainly he was not interested in doctrinal change—unless that change was mandated by Scripture—but he was interested in changing what could or should be changed in order to serve the people of this world better with the gospel. This role made Schaefer an easy target for criticism because he was often standing alone out in front of everyone.²¹

One example of his desire for change was seen in his work with the Constitution Committee. As noted earlier, Schaefer served as the chairman of the Constitution Committee beginning in 1955. Upon joining the Committee the chairman at the time, E. Arnold Sitz, handed him the chairmanship and assumed the position of consultant. Schaefer worked with Sitz and combed through over 40 years of synod convention proceedings to find amendments which had been passed by a convention but had never made their way into the constitution. He related the following experience in an unpublished interview: "I personally wrote the synod's constitution and bylaws in their present form—as amended—and adopted in the 1959

²⁰ Mischke, interview by author.

²¹ *Ibid.*

convention. Before that date they were a joke, dating from the 1917 merger and never touched since.”²² This was a feat with no small significance for the administration and ministry of the Wisconsin Synod, even to the present day. Schaefer described the happy day of a new constitution in 1959,

I conveyed to the 1959 convention my warmest thanks to President Sitz...with these words ‘without whose help this revision would have been completed two years sooner.’ I was only kidding, of course, but it brought a chuckle from the solemn assembly, not used to youngsters, such as I, at conventions making such wisecrack remarks.²³

The insight he gleaned from this seemingly mundane task was profound. Early in his ministry Schaefer saw the slow wheels of progress in the Wisconsin Synod. When he saw a weakness or place where something could be updated without violating Scripture, he worked slowly to make meaningful change. Schaefer and the Constitution Committee also presented a memorial proposing a full-time president of the synod. This was necessary because the workload of the presidency ultimately precluded him from serving a congregation. Jeb wrote, “After considerable and acrimonious debate the resolution carried by a huge margin. I am especially proud of this moment which brought the synod screaming and kicking into the 20th century.”²⁴ It was not change for the sake of change but change for the sake of gospel ministry. This would be one hallmark of his ministry and, as Carl Mischke noted, he always worked out in the open and made his views clear to everyone.²⁵ Schaefer once said,

First of all, it must be clear that in the Wisconsin Synod, those muscular Lutherans among Lutherans (as some call us), we generally do not take kindly to change. I think, however, that openness to change is far better than it was when I entered the ministry... (“We’ve never done it that way before,” is a favorite refrain here.) If I must make a choice, I will come down on the side of change...as we meet new challenges and serve

²² James P. Schaefer, “Baumler Interview #2” [no date], copy in possession of the author.

²³ James P. Schaefer, Untitled Paper on Congregational Constitutions [copy in possession of the author has Schaefer’s personal editing on it] delivered at the AZ-CA District Pastoral Conference, 25 October 1995, p. 2.

²⁴ Schaefer, Autobiography.

²⁵ Mischke, interview.

people who are not schooled in remnants of our German ways, where tradition was next to godliness, if not an integral part of it.²⁶

Jeb acknowledged a certain resistance to change from brothers in the ministry and, by his own admission, preferred to choose in favor of change. A good sense of humor and a lively wit would prove to be beneficial tools as he helped those brothers wrestle with godly changes.

Victor Prange, a close friend and brother in the ministry, was asked to speak at the 40th anniversary in the ministry of Schaefer and Kurt Eggert. Prange recalled his words from November 15, 1987, “I described them both as characterized by the Greek term ‘parrasia.’ By that I meant that they had the quality of ‘openness’, a desire to be informed about the wider church and a willingness to learn from people outside the WELS. Neither of them was in any way ‘narrow-minded.’”²⁷ Openness allowed Schaefer to view change in a more objective manner. He was not obsessed with traditionalism or afraid of new avenues for himself or for the Synod at large.

a. The First Public Relations Director

The 1961 WELS Convention resolved “That the Public Relations Committee be responsible for the dissemination of information on, and interpretation of, the Synod’s activities to the general public through mass communication media.”²⁸ One of the closing memorials to this historic 1961 convention then resolved “that all reports and information to the press be given only by the convention’s Press Committee” and “that the official delegates refrain from furnishing the press with any information or reports pertaining to the business of this convention.”²⁹ Following the convention Schaefer was appointed to the position of Director of

²⁶ Schaefer, Untitled Paper, p. 3.

²⁷ Victor Prange, email to author, 10 December 2008.

²⁸ “Report of Floor Committee No. 15” (Committee on Constitutional Matters) in *Proceedings of the Thirty-Sixth Convention of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod 1961*, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, p.253.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 270.

Public Relations by the Praesidium of the Synod. He had led a workshop at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary in the summer of 1960 and had presented the formative memorial to the convention, so he seemed a natural choice. This was his opportunity to change the way *others* viewed Wisconsin.

Before the 1961 convention, the Wisconsin Synod had had no voice in the media.

Schaefer recalled the situation prior to his appointment,

We were being caricatured in the news media because we had no line of communication with the media and did not always speak with one voice. Our presidents at the time were fearful of the media—being misquoted, manipulation by reporters, etc.—and both President Brenner and Naumann more often than not declined to comment. This left reporters to their own devices.³⁰

The first efforts of the public relations department were directed toward the dissemination of general news about the Synod. Good news was news worth sharing with people. Schaefer wrote, “Since at that time we were branded as the synod ‘against everything,’ it was deemed helpful if our publics knew that we had other things to do besides opposing everything.”³¹

But the Synod’s resolutions to suspend fellowship with the Missouri Synod would dominate the agenda for some time. During the months following the convention Schaefer fired off official replies to the major Lutheran church magazines. He responded to one magazine article which woefully misrepresented the Wisconsin position,

I fear that your good readers may gain the impression that the action of the Wisconsin Synod in suspending fellowship with the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod was arbitrary and capricious...I do believe there was more behind our August resolutions to suspend fellowship than a spoiled child picking up his marbles and going home...Through the last decades we have observed a pattern developing which we believe may ultimately threaten the foundation of faith. Without claiming divine infallibility our convention gave its answer to that incipient threat. We only ask that it be measured and tested by the Lord and His Scriptures.³²

³⁰ Schaefer, “Baumler Interview #2.”

³¹ James P. Schaefer, “From This Corner,” NL, vol. 72, no. 18 (15 October 1985), p. 335.

³² James P. Schaefer, “A Reply from Wisconsin,” *American Lutheran*, vol. 45, no. 4 (April 1962), p. 24.

The work of public relations was a “dirty business” in Schaefer’s view, often complicated by emotions and misinformation. Schaefer had opportunities to confront these issues with patience and esprit. Regarding his duties he wrote, “I attended Lutheran church conventions and got to know America’s reporters of religious news. I fielded inquiries from secular sources about our church and with the approval of the synod president appeared before a variety of forums.”³³ By developing acquaintances and even friendships, he brought the Wisconsin Synod into the consciousness of many media outlets. Every synodical press release had his name and phone number on the top of it for over 28 years. The media finally had someone to contact. There are over 600 of these press releases and they fill three three-inch binders in the Wisconsin Synod archives. Most report the commonplace activities of the WELS gospel ministry, but with every press release Schaefer and the Wisconsin Synod were telling the world, “Hello, we do exist!”

No history of Schaefer’s work as public relations director would be complete without noting his comments recorded in *Time* magazine. Shortly after the dissolution of the Synodical Conference, *Time* labeled the Wisconsin Synod as “the most rigidly fundamentalist of all Lutheran groups.” The Synod’s PR director was there to swing into action: “But ‘we aren’t ogres,’ says Pastor James Schaefer of Milwaukee’s Atonement Church. ‘We enjoy a martini once in a while, and some of us even say ‘dammit’ from time to time.’”³⁴ Jeb claimed the comment was spoken off the record, but apparently *Time* did not consider it so. Some thought this catastrophe would sink Schaefer’s career in the Wisconsin Synod. Yet, he recovered and continued to serve faithfully.

Schaefer did not limit his part-time work as public relations director to the written word. Sometimes the truth of God’s Word needed to be proclaimed and defended in person by a

³³ Schaefer, “From This Corner,” NL (15 October 1985), p.335.

³⁴ *Time*, “The Isolated Synod,” Friday, August 23, 1963. Find article at www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,875118,00.html

capable Wisconsin Synod representative. In September 1974, for example, he appeared before the Greater Milwaukee Ministerial Association. Schaefer made it clear, in a lively way of course, that all WELS pastors taught the same things about Creation, the Exodus, and Jesus' miracles. He said, "You wake a Wisconsin Synod pastor in the middle of the night and ask him a theological question and, whether he's in Texas, New York or Milwaukee, he'll give you the same answer."³⁵ Others took notice and applauded Schaefer's work on this instance. The religion writer for the *Milwaukee Sentinel* said, "Schaefer's presentation was forthright, unapologetic, and without the slightest concern about how 'old fashioned' his doctrine might be. He was speaking for what he deemed to be 'the Word of God,' and that was that...Schaefer's talk left many of his liberal Protestant hearers goggling in amazement."³⁶ Through personal interaction and intelligence Schaefer was adjusting and informing perceptions about the Wisconsin Synod. He was working for change.

Whenever a newspaper writer wanted the conservative spin on a subject, it seemed that the Wisconsin Synod and Jeb Schaefer were called upon. After the ten year moratorium on the death penalty was lifted in 1977, religious debate on the subject spilled over into the pages of *The Milwaukee Journal*. Schaefer said, "God has not denied to the government the right of capital punishment in capital cases, just as the Bible does not deny a country the right to take life in defense of itself against an aggressor."³⁷ Schaefer was also found on the pages of Milwaukee newspapers defending the deity of Christ and the inerrancy of Scripture,

He [Schaefer] said that if the Biblical portrayal of Jesus as the Son of God were not literally true, the 'New Testament would be emptied of all truth' and there would be no point in being a Christian. He said the bodily resurrection of Jesus from the dead was

³⁵ "Wisconsin Lutheran Synod: 'Closed Circuit' Schools Guard Faith of Pastors," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, 28 September 1974.

³⁶ James M. Johnston, "Chapter & Verse: Schaefer's Refreshing Candor," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, 28 September 1974.

³⁷ Alicia Armstrong, "Clergy Here Divided on Morality, Efficacy of Death Penalty," *The Milwaukee Journal*, 22 January 1977, p. 4.

essential to the traditional Christian contention that fallen man was redeemed by Jesus, who died for man's sins and then demonstrated His divinity by rising from the dead... The conservative belief of Wisconsin Synod members and others is that God revealed His truth in the Bible, so it must be entirely reliable. Its historical claims and accounts of miracles must be true, because God would not produce a book full of lies, half truths and misleading accounts.³⁸

His goal was to present a positive, biblical public image of the Wisconsin Synod. These were powerful opportunities to testify to the beating heart of the Synod.

In a society so confused about fellowship principles, however, ecumenical issues were bound to surface from time to time. The split with Missouri had brought an end to many joint operations between the two synods and many people never understood what the fuss was all about. Regarding those external ecumenical organizations Schaefer went on record,

To participate would be to engage in "unionism" instead of real unity and would be "sinful in the sight of God," said Schaefer. "We had to withdraw. It is hard to get a group of religionists together without some expression of religion. We are sympathetic to many of their goals and activities," Schaefer added. "Withdrawing didn't make us happy because we don't like to be in isolation and we don't mean to be separatists. But obedience to the Word of God is paramount to us. If St. Paul said 'avoid,' he certainly meant 'avoid.'"³⁹

Again one sees that Schaefer is concerned with the positive presentation of biblical truth. His expressions are candid and seek to woo the listener and even, to win the listener. Unfortunately, his conciliatory tone often drew criticism within his own Wisconsin Synod because many felt there was no need to "sympathize" with errorists. This was a price Schaefer was willing to pay to change the way people outside our fellowship viewed the Wisconsin Synod.

b. The Editor of the *Northwestern Lutheran*

In November 1981 Schaefer was called to replace Rev. Harold Wicke as editor of *The Northwestern Lutheran*. He was, in fact, the third person called to the position. According to a

³⁸ Alicia Armstrong, "Resurrection Debate Goes On," *The Milwaukee Journal*, 23 November 1977, p. 9.

³⁹ James M. Johnston, "Ecumenism at Home: Synod Says Bible Bars Joint Work," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, 2 April 1977.

rare family-wide letter from Schaefer, Richard Lauersdorf and Lynn Schroeder were called before him. Schaefer wrote his six children,

There were a number of people hoping that I would get it. Uncle Ray [Wiechmann] (who is one of the presidents) was a strong supported [sic] from the first call on. President Mischke was a strong supporter too. I guess I was pulling for myself too. One of the problems in the present position is that you begin to wear out. After fourteen years, you feel a little stale. I had not hidden this feeling so friends rallied to my cause. Now that I have the call it is not all that easy to evaluate the situation. The call must still be decided on the same old factors: where can I serve the Lord best.⁴⁰

After discussing some positives and negatives in each position Schaefer closed with these words,

As you can see from what I have written above, I am leaning toward accepting the call. I am not a strong administrator, and have never relished that kind of job. I am too sloppy about details and I get bored with the routine. I am more and more tied up with supervising the work of the office and less and less with producing the stewardship literature. Whether I could endure that kind of routine until retirement, I don't know. I do know that the Northwestern Lutheran is a kind of challenge. It has essentially remained unchanged since Grandpa's time [1950s]: same old articles, same old features, same old look. anyway [sic], if you have some thoughts on this, let me know. At least I know that I have your prayers. Love to all of you! Dad⁴¹

Schaefer accepted the call and left the Synod's stewardship office. He filled the post of editor which his father W. J. had occupied part-time from 1938-1957. And yes, change came within the synod through *The Northwestern Lutheran*.

In his first issue as editor Schaefer echoed words Rev. Wicke had written when he assumed the position: "And I also want to assure you, *nothing will change*, that is, nothing that *really* matters will change."⁴² The same unconditional commitment was pledged to the Scriptures and the same devotion to the Lutheran Confessions was retained, but changes were inevitable in Schaefer's view. The questions raised by WELS members in 1980 were not the

⁴⁰ James P. Schaefer to "The Schaefer Kids, Whenever You Are USA," 19 November 1981, copy in possession of the author.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² James P. Schaefer, "Comments From the Editor," NL, vol. 69, no. 3 (1 February 1982), 34. Emphasis in original.

same questions of the 1950s. The Synod needed to be prepared to meet the challenges with God's Word. Challenges meant changes would be necessary.

Changes began appearing in *The Northwestern Lutheran* one month after Schaefer became editor. Some of these initial changes to the magazine were obvious. The magazine had had much of the same appearance as it did in the early 1950s. Schaefer began to reduce the use of the three column page and sought to make the pages more pleasing to the eye. As always his changes were first brought before the Conference of Presidents, as Mischke related,⁴³ and then spelled out for his readers in the pages the magazine. This was a constant effort on Schaefer's part. He never stopped making *The Northwestern Lutheran* the best magazine he could possibly put out. He pledged it to his readers, "My pledge as editor: In the months ahead I will try to make *The Northwestern Lutheran* as attractive, as readable, as interesting as the money and talent I have at my disposal can make it under God. That's a promise!"⁴⁴ And he continued to work at that promise, "We will continue to improve this magazine. One of the delegates at the convention asked me in a floor committee meeting if I was satisfied with the magazine. 'When I find myself satisfied with *The Northwestern Lutheran*,' I said to the delegate, 'I will resign.' I reiterate that promise."⁴⁵

This unrelenting desire to make the magazine better was fueled by his desire to put the magazine in the hands of every layperson in the Synod. Prior to Schaefer's time it was generally recognized that *The Northwestern Lutheran* was not the magazine of the laity, but of the clergy.⁴⁶ Schaefer saw that his mission as editor was to reach the people of the Synod. "This magazine is the best way we have of letting people know what we stand for and how serious we are about our

⁴³ Mischke, interview by author.

⁴⁴ James P. Schaefer, "From This Corner," NL, vol. 69, no. 8 (15 April 1982), 114.

⁴⁵ James P. Schaefer, "From This Corner," NL, vol. 72, no. 17 (1 October 1985), 315.

⁴⁶ Mischke, interview by author.

standing. This magazine informs, edifies, instructs and inspires as no other medium in use in our circles of churches,”⁴⁷ he wrote. Improving and making changes were intended to get people reading the magazine. In the same vein Schaefer stressed increasing subscriptions to the magazine. Based on the numerical size of the WELS and compared to other Lutheran church magazines, subscriptions could easily have been around 75,000. But they had hovered at 41,000 for many years. Schaefer believed changes in style were one way to accomplish this goal. As he began to hear criticism he wrote,

If life is not to become a torment, we must tolerate differences in taste. And taste, good taste, is what the composition of a family magazine is all about. If we recognize that the Wisconsin Synod is not a cozy fellowship of the like-minded but the fellowship of the Christ-minded, in judging the NL we will separate taste from substance. As we experiment with face-lifts on this 71-year-old magazine, I am reminded of one of those magisterial sayings of John Kenneth Galbraith for which he is justly famous, “The experience of being disastrously wrong,” he said, “is salutary. No editor should be denied it, and not many are.”⁴⁸

Schaefer sought good writers to produce a magazine worth publishing. He continued to make changes to the form and content of the magazine. He wanted to create something worthwhile. His perspective was this: “Poor writing is poorly read.”⁴⁹ The people of the Synod responded and subscriptions rose to 65,000 during Schaefer’s time.

Putting the magazine in the hands of the people, though, was nothing new for *The Northwestern Lutheran*. Schaefer quoted one of the original editors of the magazine, John Jenny, to support his work and stance, “...Jenny writes, ‘The Northwestern Lutheran endeavors to bring to the Lutheran home articles both instructive and edifying, and to keep people in touch with the current events in the religious world.’ And 71 years later our purpose has not changed

⁴⁷ James P. Schaefer, “From This Corner,” (1 October 1985), 315.

⁴⁸ James P. Schaefer, “From This Corner,” NL, vol. 72, no. 9 (1 May 1985), 155.

⁴⁹ James P. Schaefer, “From This Corner,” NL, vol. 71, no. 15 (15 August 1984), 226.

that much.”⁵⁰ Through this medium Schaefer presented a variety of the Synod’s activities to its constituency and also solicited comments from the people.

To assist with this exchange of information, a veritable give and take relationship was established. The editor announced the addition of a “letters” section and a “question and answer” section.⁵¹ These were the two major suggestions Schaefer had received from readers when he asked for their input. (The letters section also ended up to be one of the most criticized portions of the magazine.⁵²) Here readers could respond to whatever had been written in the magazine and often views were expressed that did not always agree with contemporary WELS thought. This was a good thing in Schaefer’s view: “There is a chemistry at work in every community. It must be constantly catalyzed.”⁵³ The magazine simply provided a place for discussion and the dissemination of information. Yet, “rules” were laid out for the letters column and two stick out: “The letter column will not be a vehicle for debating matters which God has decided in his word” and “Letters must be brief (not more than 250 words), to the point, free of malice, conforming to all the requirements of the eighth commandment.”⁵⁴ The same commitment to the Scriptures was maintained while changed entered the public arena. It was okay to talk about change—in fact, it was now encouraged by the editor.

But these changes had two dominant themes in view. First, Schaefer wanted to give his readers a greater sense for the Holy Christian Church on earth. He wanted them to learn about other denominations and to see that there were *Christians* in other denominations. (This author remembers a time at age eleven when James Schaefer said to his son William J. that someone was surprised to hear that people other than Wisconsin Synod Lutherans would be in heaven.

⁵⁰ James P. Schaefer, “From This Corner,” NL, vol. 72, no. 1 (1 January 1985), 2.

⁵¹ James P. Schaefer, “From This Corner,” NL, vol. 69, no. 9 (1 May 1982), 130.

⁵² Cf. Mark Braun, “The ‘new’ Northwestern Lutheran,” *Forward in Christ/NL*, Vol. 88, no. 1, (January 2001), 14.

⁵³ James P. Schaefer, “From This Corner,” NL, vol. 69, no. 11 (1 June 1982), 162.

⁵⁴ James P. Schaefer, “From This Corner,” NL, vol. 69, no. 9 (1 May 1982), 181.

And personally, I was surprised to hear that!) His additions to the *Northwestern Lutheran* reflected this goal. A new feature, “News around the world,” was included with no commentary. The aim was to share information readers may not have heard elsewhere. And yes, Schaefer admitted, “What makes news is a subjective business, so you will be at the mercy of my judgment.”⁵⁵ Victor Prange was later recruited to write a series of 11 articles entitled, “Why so many churches?” The series briefly outlined other denominations and included differences between these denominations and biblical WELS Lutheranism. Prange’s last article had this to say, “Differences in doctrine produced the many churches; only agreement in doctrine will truly unite the churches.”⁵⁶ The same allegiance and loyalty to the Holy Scriptures existed, but the perspective about the American religious scene and the Synod’s place within it were being broadened. Articles came concerning cults, evangelism, music history, stewardship, Lutheran history, prayer in schools, the death penalty, abortion, alcoholism, and other contemporary issues. These were all aimed at wrestling with American problems and testifying to the truth of God’s Word.

One example from his editorials demonstrated in a striking way his desire to help others see the Holy Christian Church. Schaefer shared an unpublished anecdote of Dr. Albert Schweitzer. In the previous editorial Schaefer had described the deplorable, un-Christian methodology of the historical-critical school of thought. Dr. Albert Schweitzer was a chief proponent of this theological school with his book, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*. Edgar Hoeneck and wife happened to hear Schweitzer preach on Good Friday 1960 in Africa. He had read from the Gospels, closed his Bible and said, “Whoever claims that Jesus did not live, die and rise from the dead, either does not understand clear language or willfully denies what I have

⁵⁵ James P. Schaefer, “From This Corner,” NL, vol. 69, no. 5 (1 March 1982), 66.

⁵⁶ Victor H. Prange, “Why so many churches?” NL, vol. 71, no. 4, (15 February 1984), 57.

just read.” Schaefer repeated Hoenecke’s conclusion of the event when he wrote, “If there existed in the prayers and personal meditation of Dr. Schweitzer such a ‘happy inconsistency’ the only one of his chroniclers – so far as I know – who has noted it is Hoenecke. Those who have followed closely the life of Dr. Schweitzer will welcome this precious insight into the spiritual life of that great man.”⁵⁷ So in one issue Schaefer rightly condemned the historical critical method, while in the very next issue he welcomed the happy inconsistency often found in one major proponent of it! Whether one should agree with his conclusion is debatable, but his words speak for themselves. In a calm and intelligent way Schaefer was broadening horizons within the Synod.

A second major issue, in addition to raising sights to see the Holy Christian Church, was the role of women in the writing of the *Northwestern Lutheran*. Throughout the 1970s around one percent of the articles were written by women. Most were written by men, namely, pastors. Schaefer recruited good writers and had articles about motherhood—written by women. He also came under fire for his employment of a woman, Dot Sonntag, as his assistant editor. People asked questions about the roles of men and women. According to one writer, “Privately, some grouched that the magazine should be renamed *The WELS Ladies’ Home Journal*. But the editor refused to yield.”⁵⁸ Schaefer’s decisions to employ female writers and an assistant editor were (like other decisions) brought before the Conference of Presidents for approval, as noted above. For the magazine to be read by all people in the church, for the *Northwestern Lutheran* to be a truly church oriented magazine, meant that women were to be involved in the process. This was a revolutionary idea for the Wisconsin Synod and Schaefer was leading the way. In fact his views on women had been public knowledge for some time. Already in 1974 he had upheld

⁵⁷ James P. Schaefer, “From this corner,” NL, vol. 73, no. 10, (1 May 1986), 179.

⁵⁸ Mark Braun, “The ‘new’ Northwestern Lutheran,” 15.

Scripture's injunctions against women exercising pastoral leadership over men. Schaefer however quipped, "But I am not a male chauvinist pig, and I don't want to see anyone treated without dignity."⁵⁹ Many in the Synod agreed and the participation of women in the magazine's publication increased. Schaefer did not change what God's Word taught about the roles of man and woman, but the application was altered in this instance.

Outside and inside of WELS people noticed Schaefer's work to change perceptions. In 1983 *Lutheran Perspective* listed Schaefer #18 on a list of 1982's most influential Lutherans. The article commented briefly, "18. James Schaefer...whose reshaping of the *Northwestern Lutheran*, while not wavering on the Synod's traditional position, signaled a new up-beat spirit in the Wisconsin Synod."⁶⁰ Another journalist in the Milwaukee area summarized thus, "Within the synod he is widely considered one of its cherished unsung heroes. Outside the synod, among church leaders of other denominations and among journalists, he is respected for his honesty, accessibility and intelligence."⁶¹ The Synod too paid attention. The 1985 WELS Convention applauded the revisions to *The Northwestern Lutheran*. The convention also encouraged "further efforts to broaden the mass appeal and circulation" of the magazine. WLC professor Mark Braun observed many years later, "In his own writing, Schaefer went for the heart, but he made his readers think too. His 'from this corner' editorials consistently revealed concerns ranging far beyond WELS. He seldom advocated predictable or easy solutions for an increasingly complicated world."⁶²

⁵⁹ "Wisconsin Lutheran Synod: 'Closed Circuit' Schools Guard Faith of Pastors."

⁶⁰ "Who Were the Most Influential Lutherans in 1982?" *Lutheran Perspective*, (24 January 1983), 4. [Ellipsis in the original.]

⁶¹ Kenyon.

⁶² Braun, "The 'new' Northwestern Lutheran," 15.

Schaefer's impact on the Wisconsin Synod has yet to be fully evaluated.⁶³ It is clear, however, that he changed perceptions of Wisconsin both inside and out. His voice was a progressive call to God's people not to be afraid of change but to continue moving forward with God's Word. It was his view that the gospel takes hold of a person and a culture and creates its own forms and expressions. Rigid traditionalism would stifle this growth. To stop the conversation and keep silent would stifle this growth. If he had had a personal motto, it would have been the Latin phrase: *tempora mutantur, et nos mutamur in illis*.⁶⁴ Schaefer expressed those same thoughts in a conference paper delivered a month before his death, "WELS has changed in the past. Where it is possible, it will change in the future. And in every case of change in the WELS, it is not because the Word has changed, but our application of that Word."⁶⁵

⁶³ Carl Mischke pointed out to this writer that the area of stewardship was one in which Jeb Schaefer blazed new trails for the WELS.

⁶⁴ "Times change and we change with them," attributed to Emperor Lothar I (795-855). A close second for his personal motto would be the plaque from his desk, now in the possession of the author: "Let Us Crucify the Old Adam...Not Bore Him to Death!"

⁶⁵ Schaefer, Untitled Paper, p. 7.

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