

To God Alone Be The Glory:
The Minnesota Synod from 1860 to 1917

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The Wisconsin Synod as we know it today is really a result of the merger of four separate synods in 1917, the Wisconsin, Minnesota, Michigan, and Nebraska Synods. This paper takes a closer look at one of those, the Minnesota Synod. We will study it from the beginning up to the time that it became part of the Joint Synod of Wisconsin and Other States, or the WELS. The various men who played key roles in Minnesota's formation, growth, moves toward confessionalism, and fellowship with the other synods will be given attention. We will also note the Synod's theological training school/teachers college, DMLC, as well as other institutions which were or are a part of the Minnesota Synod and ultimately a feature of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod.

The men and events of the years leading up to and immediately following the founding of the Minnesota Synod(1860) are as colorful and varied as the landscape of the state they worked in. Some of these people were confessional, orthodox Lutherans who sought to preserve the truths of God's Word, others were interested in bringing as many people as possible into some contact with Lutheran religion in whatever form they could. One thing must be said for all of them, they were very diligent and zealous in their work.

The first of these men we will look at is Rev. F.W.Wier, a missionary from the east who was the first to conduct a German Lutheran service in Minnesota, July 22, 1855. Pastor Wier lead in the organization of Trinity congregation in St.Paul later that same month. He was to be the main man in Minnesota Lutheranism for the first few years. Unfortunately, as zealous as he was for the spread of the gospel, he also had some unionistic tendencies which

would be a source of trouble for the young synod in the years ahead. More details concerning that topic will be dealt with later.

The man with whom we will spend most of our time and to whom must go the majority of the credit for bringing the Minnesota Synod into existence, the Holy Spirit notwithstanding, is the Rev. Johann Christian Friedrich Heyer. Rev. Heyer was sent to Minnesota by the ^{Pittsburg Synod?} Pennsylvania Synod and more specifically by the Rev. Dr. William Passavant, a leader of said synod. Passavant had spent some time in the Minnesota territory in 1856 and determined that the time was right and the need great for work to be done there. He confided to Heyer, "The German Lutherans unfortunately are altogether neglected and it is pitiful, in traveling from place to place, to find that our energies are weakened and our forces are scattered by internal feuds, and that, too, among brethren"(Bachmann, p239).

On Nov.16, 1857 Heyer arrived in St. Paul to begin his great undertaking. What Pastor Heyer found was that other Protestant denominations were doing quite well in the area, particularly New England type Protestants, while the Lutherans were scattered and lacking guidance. Trinity congregation, which Rev. Wier had begun only two years earlier, was no longer in existence, a victim of the economic panic of 1857. Heyer began work among whatever Lutherans he could find, both English and German speaking. By Christmas Day, 1857 100 were in attendance for the German service. Soon after this the new congregation was incorporated as Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church. It bought land in February near the new state capital. Heyer not only preached every Sunday in English and

German, he also taught some 50 children in his parochial school, also in both English and German. Beside this of course, he was always busy doing evangelism work for the young congregation.

Heyer, however, seems to have had a spirit of wanderlust as he was not content to stay in St. Paul. In March of 1859 he made a journey into Scott County, sixty miles south and west of St. Paul following the request of a group of pioneers in the area who hadn't had contact with a Lutheran pastor for three years. This was no simple trip down the highway, as Bachmann points out. "Negotiating the last twenty-five miles on an ox-drawn sled, he would gladly have got out and walked instead of doing two miles an hour behind the oxen. But the snow and mud made walking next to impossible" (p248). After a brief visit with the settlers Heyer returned to the capital city.

In 1860 the financial situation at Trinity was not good. Money was needed to complete the church building. Heyer went back east to secure funds. He returned in the fall of that year with \$1200 to go toward this project.

Again the desire to do mission work took hold of Heyer and he announced his resignation from Trinity in 1861. He formally resigned in May, 1862, succeeded by George Fachtmann of LaCrosse, WI. who was installed on July 13.

Heyer meanwhile made his way south to the city of Red Wing, also located along the Mississippi. This town was to be the base of operations for the rest of the work he did in Minnesota. In Red Wing Heyer spent time at young St. John's Church. When he left the city in September of 1862 he left St. John's under the care of Eric

Norelius a young Swedish Lutheran pastor with whom Heyer had developed a close personal and professional bond.

Rev. Heyer set out again in a covered wagon. For many weeks he journeyed among the small prairie settlements in southeastern and central Minnesota. In the town of Marion, south of Rochester, he came to the home of "Father" Plank, a native of Pennsylvania. Plank spoke of the religious situation in the area. "For some time I've been urging them to get a Lutheran church started here. But it has been like moving mountains; the people are so busy getting settled, they don't figure they can spare enough time for their religion to become organized"(Bachmann, p255-6). And yet there was some work being done in the area. A young pastor named Mallinson had been active in the area just north of Marion and along with a Rev. Thomson was able to begin the first Lutheran church in Olmstead County. In late October, 1862 Heyer returned to Red Wing for what must have seemed to him like a vacation. But that would soon change.

In December Missionary Heyer began his second tour of out-state Minnesota, this time going north and west of St. Paul and Minneapolis to the area around Stillwater and then on to the Crow River Valley. In February of 1863 Heyer found himself in a new and very different part of the state, some 40 miles west of downtown Minneapolis. The area immediately to the east and stretching far to the west of the Crow River was known at the time as the "Big Woods", as dense pine, oak, and elm forests reached for miles. Here there were a few brave folks who battled the weather, the woods, and the Sioux Indians to farm small patches of land.

At this point allow me to digress slightly. While making his way through this area Heyer came upon a small community of Lutherans just to the east of the river. Sunday worship was held in the home of a family named Hohenstein. Family records are not certain if this was the home of Adam Hohenstein who owned half of a quarter section of land in what came to be Greenwood Township, or that of George Hohenstein, who owned the other half. According to information obtained by Rev. Lloyd Hohenstein, Institutional Minister in the Twin Cities, and family historian, George and Adam Hohenstein were the first two to sign the original papers establishing Salem Ev. Luth. Church, now in Loretto, MN.

Adam's grandson Otto was a missionary among the Apaches in Arizona. He also married a daughter of Prof. Koehler of WLS. Adam Hohenstein also had a grandson named Albert. One of Albert's children, a daughter Joyce, attended DMLC. Another daughter, Arlene, married a baker from Minneapolis by the name of Rudolf Wassermann. Her youngest son is the writer of this paper and the great-great-grandson of Adam Hohenstein, in whose home Rev. Heyer may have conducted the first German Lutheran service in the area.

Very often it is said that the WELS is a small synod. Somehow we always run across someone we know somehow. In 1863 this was also true. After the service Heyer conducted in the Hohenstein house a man came up to him and introduced himself. Their conversation went as follows:

"My name is Seip. I came from Pennsylvania. More than thirty years ago we had a pastor in Somerset County who was called Heyer."

"Well," countered the pastor, "I am that same preacher!"

As much as the two might have liked to spend time catching up, Pastor Heyer knew that he must move on. Heyer worked at a feverish pace for anyone, and especially for a man of nearly seventy! He found there were scattered Lutherans who needed to hear the gospel and this he provided. He preached in homes wherever he could, regardless of the number of people who heard him. They were always thankful for his efforts and he for their hospitality. However, after nearly drowning in a lake in mid-March, 1863, Rev. Heyer returned to Red Wing for a rest.

During the next couple of years Heyer spent most of his time at his cottage in Pennsylvania. However, since he was a missionary and also the president of the fledgling Minnesota Synod, he was not able to remain there. In the summer of 1865 he returned to the north, and corresponding with Dr. William Passavant, worked to organize the young synod more than it was. "Among the men involved in the formation of the Minnesota Synod, Dr. William A. Passavant stands foremost"(Bachmann). That this is the case may be true depending on one's point of view. It is certain, however, that because Passavant was unionistic his beliefs greatly affected the synod. Again, more details concerning unionism will be given later.

Rev. J.C.F. Heyer served as president from 1860 until 1868, at which time Rev. F. W. Hoffmann took over. Very little is known about him, and, although he was the president, J. H. Sieker seems to have been jockeying for the theological leadership of the synod with Pastor Fachtmann, whose brand of Lutheranism was more unionistic.

Before we leave this portion on Heyer, we should note that while he was not the staunch, confessional Lutheran we would have liked him to be (Bachmann feels that he became more so as he got older), it was due to his tireless efforts and personal commitment, both as a preacher and financially, that Lutheranism among the Germans in Minnesota was so well established. I would qualify Bachmann's praise of Passavant's accomplishments, for although he provided supplies and money to men like Heyer, his brand of Lutheranism seems to have been far different from what the Minnesota Synod eventually came to stand for, a Lutheranism to which Heyer was closer than Passavant.

Johann Heinrich Sieker was installed in 1867 at Trinity, St. Paul on Reformation. He served as the synod's third president from 1869-76. Sieker had been trained at Gettysburg Seminary for work in the Wisconsin Synod and came to Minnesota from Granville, WI. Because of his ties with Wisconsin Rev. Sieker was from the outset inclined toward closer relations between Minnesota and Wisconsin. It should be noted that as early as 1864 permission had been given to Minnesota to share in the use of Northwestern College and Seminary with the stipulation that there be some financial support directed toward Wisconsin. To further relations between the synods Wisconsin sent a representative, Dr. Mohldehnke, to Minnesota's Synod convention in 1866. That same year it must be remembered Minnesota withdrew from the General Synod over fellowship practices. This was a big step toward practical confessionalism. Minnesota then joined the General Council, of which Wisconsin too was a member. This friendly overture by Wisconsin was met with

Minnesota sending Sieker to the former's convention in 1868.

With these two events having been a tremendous success, President Bading and Prof. Hoenecke of Wisconsin came to Minnesota with a proposal for a federation of the two synods. It read as follows:

1. That the two synods join to constitute a body which shall bear the name: Ev. Luth. Synod of Wisconsin, Minnesota and Other States.
 2. That each synod retain its separate identity, its own property, and Church government.
 3. That the two synods conduct joint meetings at intervals to be determined later, and that such conventions select their own chairmen.
 4. That pastors transferring from the synodical territory of the Wisconsin Synod to the geographical sphere of the Minnesota Synod be held to join the latter synod, and vice versa.
 5. That, since such an act of federation as herein proposed can be established only if full doctrinal unity exists, each synod be held to appoint representatives who will meet for thorough doctrinal discussions, in order that the fact of confessional unity may thus be ascertained and established.
- (pp104-5)

So we see that by the time Sieker took over as president efforts were already underway toward closer relations with Wisconsin. When in 1869 the two synods met in LaCrosse to discuss doctrinal matters the only obstacle that seemed to be in the way was Minnesota's continuing membership in the General Council, which by this time had established itself as not a whole lot better than the General Synod. (Wisconsin had left the General Council earlier that year.) Because of this obstacle the synods were happy just to re-express the friendly association which existed between them. That last obstacle was eliminated in 1871 when Minnesota terminated its membership in the General Council. Wisconsin-Minnesota relations

were further strengthened when the two became charter members of the Synodical Conference in 1872. The remaining years of Pres. Sieker's term seem to have been relatively quiet ones. He left Minnesota in 1876 and went to New York.

Rev. Albert Kuhn succeeded Sieker and almost immediately faced a serious challenge. It was in the form of the state-synod proposal made by the LC-MS, another member of the Syndical Conference. Under this plan Minnesota and Wisconsin both saw themselves eventually being swallowed up by the much larger Missouri Synod. Minnesota was divided on the issue. Pres. Kuhn, apparently eager for some ratification, took matters into his own hands and met with leaders of Wisconsin. He reported his work to the 1879 Minnesota Convention with a proposal for a whole new plan-federation with Wisconsin. The following are the particulars of that proposal:

I. Each synod is to remain an independent unit and will retain full control of its own affairs.

II. The two synods shall unite as a federation for the following purposes:

1. Mutual strengthening in faith and confession.
2. Mutual service with the gifts that God has bestowed.
3. Joint work in the department of inner missions.
4. In particular, cooperation in the task of training pastors and teachers; provided that
 - a. Each synod retains its property rights in all its institutions, existing or hereafter to be erected.
 - b. Each synod shall be granted an active part in the supervision and maintenance of the institutions of the sister synod.
 - c. Students of both synods shall enjoy all advantages offered by these institutions.
 - d. Since the institutions are to serve both synods, the congregations of both synods shall contribute toward their support according to ability.
 - e. Profits from the publication of the GEMEINDEBLATT, as organ of both synods, shall flow into the treasury supporting the institutions.

- III. For the purpose of promoting the success of such federated work,
1. Each synod shall send a representative to the annual conventions of the other.
 2. Joint conventions shall be held at stated intervals, for the purpose of considering mutual affairs.
- (pp107-8)

These proposals were met with overwhelming approval and help to re-establish the bonds between Wisconsin and Minnesota. It also helped them to think and work as one when it came to conducting mission work in the Lord's Kingdom.

In 1883 Rev. Christian Johann Albrecht became president and served in that capacity for 11 years. There were two very notable events which occurred during his tenure. The first was the planning and building of Dr. Martin Luther College. The second was the formation of the Joint Synod with Wisconsin, Michigan and Nebraska in 1892.

Early in its history Minnesota recognized the need to train its own pastors and teachers. President Albrecht himself was very much in favor of this and in 1883 brought the proposal to build such an institution in New Ulm, where he also happened to serve as pastor. Through what seems to have been something less than admirable processes, (a building committee was to consider all offers of a location which might come from around the synod and then report back to the synod as to which it felt was the best overall; meanwhile money to the sum of \$14,000 was to be pledged, half of which had to be available cash, then work could begin) Albrecht and others got construction underway in New Ulm in the spring of 1884, the cornerstone was laid on June 25, 354th anniversary of the reading of the Augsburg Confession, and the

Dedication service took place on Nov.9, 1884. More of the details concerning DMLC will follow.

While such a huge event is hard to overshadow, another event of the Albrecht presidency comes close. In the 1880's there was again a spirit of fellowship and association being stirred up both in the Wisconsin and Minnesota Synods. With the anticipated addition of Michigan to the Synodical Conference some began to feel that these three should begin to work toward closer relations with one another inside of the Synodical Conference, yet apart from it.

The result was the 1892 formation of the Joint Synod of Wisconsin, Minnesota, Michigan and Other States. The terms for this merger stated that each synod would retain its own identity but that all three would share closely in the training of church workers and in setting up home missions. As a result of the merger, DMLC was now the Joint Synod's teacher training school and no longer had a theology department for the preparing of pastoral candidates. This merger has been greatly blessed by the Lord of the Church and continued on until 1917 when the separate synods formed the Wisconsin Synod and the Minnesota Synod passed from the pages of history, its last convention held in Mankato, June 14-20, 1917. By the time of its next gathering, it was the convention of the Minnesota District.

During the final 23 years of its existence the Minnesota Synod was led by some capable men. Pastors like Carl Gausewitz, August Zich, and Justus Naumann to name a few. There are not many records of the events of the synod during these years so one is led to

conclude that either nothing terribly earth-shaking happened, or that things happened which were so bad people were embarrassed to put them on paper. I tend to think that the former is the case, though with a qualification. Between 1892 and 1917 the Minnesota Synod enjoyed some tremendous growth and doctrinal peace. To say that nothing earth-shaking happened is an understatement. The Holy Spirit was at work during that time, preserving the souls that had been won for Christ and reaching out through the Church to many who up to that time hadn't been won.

At this time we want to look at the confessional position of the Minnesota Synod in those crucial early years. We have already hinted that things didn't start out as well as we might have liked. The reasons for this are many. The majority of pastors in Minnesota in the early years came from the mission house of St. Crischona, in Basel, Switzerland. These men were capable and diligent workers, but they were not necessarily well-rooted in confessional Lutheranism. Men like Fachtmann, who was glad Minnesota was a part of the General Synod and hated the thought of leaving it, were unionistic in their outlook. But things began to change fairly soon. Men like Sieker, Albrecht and others helped to turn Minnesota down the road toward confessionalism and keep it going that way. Links with Wisconsin were of utmost importance to this end. "It is noteworthy and praiseworthy that a young and feeble synod already in 1866 and 1867 should for conscience sake shun the unionistically inclined church body and misnamed congregation and masonic pastor and endeavor to make confessionally meaningful membership associations"(Fredrich, p18). Prof.

Fredrich's remark concerning a masonic pastor refers to an incident in Red Wing, that early home of Lutheranism in the state, in which a Rev. Bleeker, a Free Mason, was removed from fellowship after he attacked the part of the synod's constitution dealing with Lodges.

Certainly one of the causes for unionism in Minnesota was the harsh living conditions. We have already briefly seen how Pastor Heyer made his way around. Roads were few, far between, and of poor quality. Winters were cold and long and there were no thinsulate gloves or electric blankets to help the people stay warm. Yet another problem was the Indian attacks, particularly the Sioux massacre of 1862, in which countless settlers were killed or captured. These massacres happened in large parts of the state, some taking place as close as thirty or forty miles from Minneapolis. All of these factors led people from different Lutheran backgrounds to simply unite for the sake of some sort of fellowship and feeling of security. These, however, are no excuse for ^{lack of} purity in doctrine and practice. Fortunately, the Lord worked to purify this small portion of his Church and cleanse it from error. Because he did, it has provided the Church at large with a number of blessings.

The first of those blessings has already been mentioned, Dr. Martin Luther College. The college opened with two departments: 1) a preparatory dept. = for those who wanted to enter the college department, that would be opened as soon as necessary; 2) an academic dept. = for those who wanted to qualify themselves for a thorough business life or for higher studies. A list of the various subjects taught in each department can be seen on page 176

of Continuing In His Word. In the 1885-86 school year a theological department was added. The first class had 12 students. In 1886-87 a teachers training department was added at the request of the students. By 1892 total enrollment stood at 88 and in the eight years since it had opened DMLC had provided the synod with thirty pastors and eight teachers. Of course with the growth of the student body came changes in the faculty and expansion of the facilities to house, train, and provide recreation for the students. By 1918 the enrollment at the college and prep levels was 77. It should be noted that when Minnesota joined Wisconsin and Michigan in the 1892 merger, DMLC was designated as a three year prep. school and two year teacher training college, the pre-theological and theological courses having been moved to Watertown and Mequon respectively. Under the Lord's guidance DMLC has successfully served two synods in two different capacities for over 100 years. It is hoped that it will continue to serve his Church in some way well into the next 100.

One other institution of the Minnesota Synod which we want to give our attention to is the Lutheran Home for the Aged in Belle Plain, commonly called The Lutheran Home. This home came into being when in 1898 Mrs. Sophie Boessling saw the need to provide a haven for the less fortunate of the synod. She put her money, and land, where her mouth was and donated land and money for the construction of such a facility. On Nov. 6, 1898 it was dedicated as the Home for the Aged of the Joint Synod. After the turn of the century it became an exclusive haven for the aged (originally it was a retirement home and an orphanage) and has served hundreds ever

since. It has also undergone a number of building additions and modifications since it first went up nearly a century ago. From an early time members of the Minnesota Synod recognized the need to serve those who could not get to church or take care of themselves. The Lord has greatly blessed this work and those who have contributed to it.

As was stated earlier, the Minnesota Synod is no more. The same geographical area is a district of the Wisconsin Ev. Luth. Synod. However, the same type of people still live there, people who are sinners and need to hear of God's forgiveness, people who share in the work which the Lord has given us all to do as members of his Church. What lies ahead for this district? Will there be controversy? Certainly, there already is. Will there be times of testing? The Bible says there will be. Will God use these to strengthen his elect in this part of the Church? Yes, just as he has since Lutheranism and Christianity first came to this area. Only God knows what lies ahead for his Church. But by his grace the Minnesota District will be a blessing to his Church militant and join in with the many others in the Church triumphant.

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