

THE PROTES' TANT CONFERENCE TODAY

If you have heard of Wisconsin Synod people surprised by receiving issues of FAITH-LIFE without having ordered them, the reason may well be found in this message contained in a box in the JANUARY/FEBRUARY 1982 issue of that magazine. The message is this: "The numbers of FAITH-LIFE offering The Green Bay Story (and, beginning next time, Floyd Brand's story) are being sent to the teachers and pastors who served as voting delegates at the 1981 Prairie du Chien convention of the Wisconsin Synod, to people named in the accounts, and to certain others selected by Teachers C. Lincoln, M. Hanke, and M. Koss and by Pastor F. Brand."<sup>1</sup> The people responsible for distributing these free issues to our people are the Protes'tants. Whether this little development was in part responsible for the assignment of this mini-paper your essayist does not know. It should, nevertheless, generate some interest in the subject of this paper.

Who are the Protes'tants? What are the Protes'tants? Let us begin with a statistical profile gleaned from the LUTHERAN CHURCH DIRECTORY FOR THE UNITED STATES 1982 published by Lutheran Council in the USA.

THE PROTESTANT CONFERENCE

Post Office Box 86  
Shiocton, WI 54170  
Recording Secretary: Gerald Hinz

Ordained Ministers -13  
Ministers Serving Congregations - 8  
Congregations -7

Baptized Membes:- 1,325  
Confirmed Members - 1,050  
Number of Sunday Schools - 7  
Sunday School Teachers - 31  
Sunday School Pupils - 230

Property Evaluation - \$850,000  
Indebtedness - 0  
Local Expenditures - \$150,000  
Work at large - \$16,000  
Total Expenditures - \$166,000 <sup>2</sup>

WISCONSIN LUTHERAN SEMINARY  
7200  
6533 W. WAKEBURG CIRCLE  
MEQUON, WISCONSIN 53092

The congregations listed in the '82 directory are as follows:

- Melrose Lutheran, Melrose, WI 54642
- Burr Oak Lutheran, Mindoro, WI 54644
- Protestant Congregation, 1023 Colan Blvd., Rice Lake, WI 54868
- First Lutheran, Box 86, Shiocton, WI 54170
- Protestant Congregation, R. 3, Box 201A, Sturgeon Bay, WI 54235
- Grace Lutheran, Valdars, WI 54245
- Protestant Congregation, 827 S. 113th St., West Allis, WI 53214 <sup>3</sup>

The identity of some of the leaders and active members may be gleaned from recent issues of FAITH-LIFE. FAITH-LIFE's publishing address is FAITH-LIFE c/o Curtis Printing Co., 615 St. Cloud St., LaCrosse, WI 54601.

Editor is Marcus Albrecht, Mindoro, WI 54644

Assistant Editor: Philemon Hensel, 728 N. Ninth St., Manitowoc, WI 54220

LI 1047

Exchange Editor: John Springer, Box 91, Wabasso, MN 56293

All monies for the Protes'tant Conference are to be sent to Mr. Michael Meier, 1023 Colan Blvd., Rice Lake, WI 54868.

In addition to these identified staff members of FAITH-LIFE we may also list recent contributors to this paper: Albert Meier, Melvin Gaeth, Leigh Jordahl, Robert Christman, Marcus Koch, 1014 Hawthore, Two Rivers, WI 54241, Alex Hillmer, R. 6, Sturgeon Bay, WI 54235, and Gerald Hinz, Box 86, Shiocton, WI 54170.<sup>4</sup>

I approached giving bodily & material identity to the Protes'tant Conference in the above way because I am aware of no directory published by this church body.

In this mini-paper your essayist shall not attempt to identify the body from a historical perspective except to call attention to a paper recently prepared by a brother while a student at our seminary. This paper does an excellent job of presenting the formation and history of the Protes'tant Conference. It is entitled, "A HALF CENTURY OF FAITH-LIFE - An Analysis of the Circumstances Surrounding the Formation of the Protes'tant Conference," and is authored by Mark A. Jeske, April 22, 1978.<sup>5</sup> I have his permission to issue this invitation. I do recommend the reading of this paper by all interested.

Without providing the background and going into the history of all that led up to the birth of this splinter church body and its periodical, FAITH-LIFE, one should, perhaps, put a finger on the moment of birth. This will help explain the reason for its being born and its continued existence. Suspensions of certain Protes'tants by the Western Wisconsin District had taken place. In July of '27 two more Protes'tants were suspended - Beitz and Bodamer. A memorial appeal to Synod was referred back to the District. In November of '27 a special convention of the Western Wisconsin District was held in Watertown. This would prove to be the last general meeting attended by both parties. Beitz read his disputed paper for the fourth time and again stood by every jot and tittle of this paper. The Convention formally rejected it as a document of "doctrina publica" and resolved that anyone who subscribed to it would be regarded as one who had broken fellowship, i.e., the suspensions were only recognizing breaks of fellowship which already existed. These paragraphs from Jeske's paper well describe what happened next:

The Protes'tants were understandably put out (no pun intended), since they felt that they had been denied the floor and an opportunity to present their views. Three weeks later they met at Elroy, Wis., on Dec. 13-14, and drew up a brief position paper of four points, the "Elroy Declaration." (see Appendix D). The upshot was that they refused to attend further meetings or dealings until the Beaver Dam and Watertown resolutions were rescinded and the Synod displayed a "new attitude." The Third Party was now committed unequivocally in writing, and there could and would be no retreat from that position. At this meeting Beitz and Paul Hensel were directed to write a fuller exposition of their position.

On January 18 the Protestants met again, this time at Wilton. One of the resolutions was to begin a periodical to be called FAITH-LIFE, named, no doubt, after the theme of the Beitz paper. The periodical's purpose, in the words of John Ableman:

"We must publish our story to the world and let it judge what a pope-ridden and therefore decadent, church can no longer judge." 6

The spirit reflected in John Ableman's remark could well be identified as the driving spirit of the Protestant Conference and FAITH-LIFE. The stated "Policy" and "Purpose" which up until very recently was a continuing part of the FAITH/LIFE masthead expands on this driving spirit. A reading of this "Policy" and "Purpose" will help us gain an understanding of the character of this body:

#### Policy

OUR PROCEDURE arouses much hostile attention and is condemned by friend and foe as uncharitable, because it conflicts with pet but mistaken dogmas current in the church. Our periodical was born of controversy, and our publication of the wrongs in the church and of the sins of individuals is thought to be prompted by self-righteousness and by personal resentment, embitterment, and vindictiveness. It is sufficient to say, we class ourselves with our opponents under the common denominator of sinners.

Controversy, as a study of life and psychology, is enlightening to the outsider too, and thus our paper challenges the attention of every keen reader to whose ken it comes. The New Testament largely was born of controversy, and the alert Christian will in our controversy also be able to recognize the fundamental factors of Law and Gospel at issue and in operation.

We hold that our policy of not mincing our words and speaking in unvarnished terms is in character with the Word of God. We do not make any assertions which we have not carefully verified. We do not betray confidences. Charity often prompts us to withhold information which would help to prove our case, because we know, too, that no proof of fact will convert hearts, but the Gospel alone. We have a larger purpose than the venting of personal grievances and the winning of our case. See the statement on the opposite side.

#### Purpose

OUR PURPOSE, as it grows from our history, is to break down the influence of the misleaders of the church and free their followers from their thralldom, to break down within our Lutheran church, and wherever else it may flourish, the spirit of self-righteousness and self-sufficiency which breeds uncharitableness and unwarranted judgment of others, and thus leads to controversy.

Our larger purpose is to call men from a comfortable gospel, that acts as a soporific and permits unrighteousness to run riot in the church, to the Gospel that is in truth comforting to stricken sinners, and to seek with them an evermore increasing knowledge of our Lord, that we might win Christ and be found in Him, not having our own righteousness but that which is through the faith of Christ, to apprehend that for which, too, we are apprehended of Christ Jesus; forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forth unto those things which are before, pressing toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.

Our message is that of the Gospel of Forgiveness of Sins through Our Blessed Saviour, coupled with the warning of the hardening of hearts and of the judgment upon those who reject this message and its implications. That is

the full message of the Word of God as it is sounded in the New Testament from the first book to the last, and no less in the Old Testament from the first book to the last.

If one senses from the words that one of the Protes'tants main reasons for existence is to be a "Thorn in the flesh" of the Wisconsin Synod and especially its officials, this feeling is correct. It wishes to be that thorn and it has been that thorn. Our problem has been in finding a way to deal with or live with this thorn. We have tried a period of not talking about it, ignoring it, hoping it will go away, which began with a 1929 Synod resolution "that in the future no more articles shall be published concerning the Controversy - - - ." <sup>8</sup> However, the thorn did not disappear. We tried putting a little salve on it but this has not worked either. This effort is capsuled by Jeske in these words:

Shortly before Wisconsin's break with Missouri there was an attempt at reconciliation on Wisconsin's part; after some exploratory correspondence conducted in part through Pastor E. Arnold Sitz, Koehler's son-in-law, and after a thorough review of the documents, the Synod's Union Committee (now the Commission on Inter-Church Relations) in 1961 recommended that the Synod reaffirm its 1933 resolution urging the Western Wisconsin District to reconsider its suspensions. Although the suspensions were thereupon rescinded by the District "of its own free will," correspondence bogged down and was at length abandoned. The chasm in 1978 is as deep and as wide as ever. <sup>9</sup>

Interesting also is Mark Jeske's evaluation of prospects for reconciliation:

Is there any hope for reconciliation? In this writer's opinion, the possibilities are almost nil, short of a major change in Protes'tant thinking, which does not seem likely. For one thing, the Protes'tants have a 50-year-old Cause - the inertia would be hard to break. These men believe strongly that Conservative Lutheranism needs to hear their voice, and FAITH-LIFE will be published as long as there is still one loyal disciple of the "Wauwatosa Theology." There has been no noticeable slackening of invective; to judge from their articles in FAITH-LIFE, Marcus Albrecht and Gerald Hinz have not mellowed much. Perhaps the major obstacle to reconciliation is the Protes'tant insistence that Wisconsin acknowledge all her sins of the past and make public repentance for them; there are, however, not too many pastors left in WELS who have a clear idea of what happened, and still fewer who care to dig into the documents to try to untangle the individual cases. A canon of Protes'tant hermeneutics is that all such cases must be unrolled and reviewed - - but not only is such a task unlikely to be agreed to, it is nearly impossible because of the passage of time and the death of the principals. The two groups will continue to go their separate ways, each quite sure that it is the bearer of the pure Gospel.<sup>10</sup>

This evaluation and characterization will also fill us with a great measure of sympathy for any Synod officer, who, according to the duties of his office, is called upon to deal with anyone in our midst who may sympathize with or fellowship with Protes'tants. District President Carl Voss and the officers of the Northern Wisconsin District had to step into this charged arena recently as they dealt with the East Bloomfield-Floyd Brand and Green Bay-Robert Christman cases. Battle with the Protes'tant octopus is finally reduced to a demand that a pastor stand up and be counted as to whether he wishes to continue fellowshiping with the Protes'tants

or with the Wisconsin Synod. Our Synod, following Scripture, simply cannot tolerate the idea of selective fellowship. What all Wisconsin Synod pastors should expect happened to the above pastors when they refused to sever their ties with the Protestant Conference. District Officials declared them out of fellowship with the Wisconsin Synod as the officials carried out their responsibilities of dealing in matters of discipline in doctrine and practice as they are authorized to do by our constitution.

The background and details of the above cases were many faceted and much more complicated than the above capsulization would lead one to believe. If you wish to learn more about the background of this flare-up you are invited to read a paper prepared by another brother while he was at our seminary. It is, "GREEN BAY AND THE PROTESTANT CONTROVERSY TODAY" by Daniel Kelm - April 13, 1981.<sup>11</sup> Pastor Daniel Kelm has also given your essayist his permission to invite you to use his paper. To his knowledge it has not yet come into the hands of any of the Protestants but he is willing to take that risk if it should be more widely circulated.

It is interesting to note that in its final stages the controversy in the East Bloomfield and Green Bay cases boiled around the issue of fellowship. A weakness in the understanding and application of Scriptural principles in their fellowshiping with Protestants seems to be evident and also akin to a weakness among the Protestants generally. This is apparent in statements that are found in Christman's "THE GREEN BAY STORY" in the January/February 1982 issue of FAITH-LIFE. He charges,

What follows is the story of how I came to be put out, a story untold at last summer's Synod Convention in Prairie du Chien, where I was denied my right of appeal, and untold in the Synod's official magazine, "The Northwestern Lutheran," which to date has not printed so much as a notice of my change in status. 12

Christman begins a later paragraph with these words:

If God still works among us of the Wisconsin Synod (recognized and unrecognized members), it is because He has given us His Word and has not, in spite of our obstinacy totally withdrawn it. 13

Differing viewpoints as to the way things really are in regard to fellowship and appeal rights are evident from the above statements. Members of the Wisconsin Synod have the right of appeal in the matters of discipline. However, if someone is of another fellowship and chooses to remain in that body which is not in fellowship with the Wisconsin Synod he does not have a right of appeal within our Synod. As far as lack of notice in "The Northwestern Lutheran" is concerned, it has been deemed wise in recent years no longer to publish such "suspended for cause" announcements in our church paper.

To what extent the effort of FAITH-LIFE to bring to the attention of our people the East Bloomfield-Floyd Brand and Green Bay-Robert Christman discipline cases will upset or disturb the members of our Synod God alone knows. To be forewarned is to be forearmed. The papers by Jeske and Kelm referred to above are pieces that may well be included in our arsenal of preparation. We should also recognize and expect to find incidents, yea, many of them, of words and actions by Synod bodies and officers that seem less than wise using our 20/20 hind-sight vision. We are all men with feet of clay, including our officials and governing bodies. We must be conscious of the difficult role we ask an officer to fill when we call him to that position. Let us pray for him and have sympathy for him as he is again and again asked to walk into situations and make decisions in places where angels fear to tread. A reminder to ourselves and also to the Protes'tants is that we remember the Fourth Commandment as well as the Eighth Commandment.

The Eighth Commandment! If any commandment has been repeatedly abused throughout the controversy, this one has. It is my prayer that I not abuse it further as I conclude this paper with some summarizing and generalizing statements. This will take the form of a list of traits that have characterized the Protes'tants in the past and still hold true today. Some traits are admirable, some deplorable, some simply historical. We recognize and understand the deplorable traits very well because to a smaller or greater degree they are found in the sinful flesh of us all. These traits certainly do not hold true of each individual member of this body but they are observable and generally characteristic.

- strong anti-establishment tendencies
- almost knee-jerk animosity toward those in authority
- failure to consider the humanness of others, especially of officials
- a preference for provoking crisis rather than seeking a peaceful solution
- a stubborn unwillingness to back down from a position taken or statement made
- regular use of caustic, strident, abusive language in FAITH-LIFE
- distortion of situations for propaganda value
- maximizing the image of being a martyr
- a disdain for organization
- a disdain for organized and formal teaching helps, including the catechism
- ongoing criticism of dead formalism within the church
- insistent call to repentance
- a constant seeking after more spirituality in the body
- a practice of selective fellowship with like-minded people
- adherence to the idea of the superiority of the local congregation
- a cherishing of J. P. Koehler and the "Wauwatosa Gospel"

- articulate, intelligent and even charismatic leadership
- a willingness to give up all for the cause
- regular in-depth study of Scripture and the fathers at their conferences
- open, loving and receiving arms for anyone disenchanted with something in the Wisconsin Synod
- replenishing of their manpower through disaffections from WELS
- small and becoming smaller
- an eery fascination for and strange relation to the Wisconsin Synod
- the view that they are called to be thorn in the flesh for the humbling and betterment of the Wisconsin Synod

The Protes'tant Conference - a thorn it is! We have tried ignoring it for a long time. We have put a dab of salve on at one time. But it still hurts. We perhaps could have dealt more wisely with the developments in the past. Suggestions born of hindsight abound. Will we deal wisely at this time having before us the lessons of history? Pray God that we do. Pray God that someday the place where that thorn has been festering in our side may be a scar, an interesting scar, of interest to church historians - but no longer hurting.

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ENDNOTES

1. FAITH-LIFE, Vol LV, No. 1, p.3
2. Benjamin A. Bankson, "Lutheran Church Directory for the United States 1982" LCUSA, pp.viii & ix
3. Ibid.
4. FAITH-LIFE, sundry issues
5. Mark Jeske, "A Half Century of FAITH-LIFE,"
6. Ibid, p. 25
7. FAITH-LIFE, Vol. LIV. No. 2, p.1
8. 1929 Wisconsin "Proceedings" p.22
9. Jeske, op. cit., p. 29
10. Ibid.
11. Daniel Kelm, "Green Bay and the Protes'tant Controversy Today" April 13, 1981
12. Robert Christman, "The Green Bay Story: My Loss and My Gain," FAITH-LIFE, Vol. LV, No. 1, p.12
13. Ibid. p. 13

Metro-North Pastoral Conference  
St. Marcus Ev. Lutheran Church  
2215 N. Palmer St.  
Milwaukee, Wisconsin  
May 10, 1982  
Cleone H. Weigand