

# ***'Those were trying years!' - Recollections of the "Split"***

[WELS Historical Institute Meeting, Mequon, WI, October 3, 1999]

*Prof. Mark Braun, WLC*

Edward Fredrich in *The Wisconsin Synod Lutherans* recalled painful memories of what many referred to simply as "the split" - the events leading to Wisconsin's decision to break fellowship with the Missouri Synod:

For those who were Wisconsin Synod members in the middle years of the twentieth century and lived through the long struggle to maintain the Synodical Conference on its historical confessional foundations, the loss of the battles and of the war will always remain the most significant and traumatic episode in their own personal version of their church body's history. The struggle was long, stretching over a quarter century. The losses in cherished fellowships were large, touching personally most pastors, teachers and lay families of the synod.<sup>1</sup>

Fredrich's seventeen page article in the 1977 *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, entitled "The Great Debate with Missouri,"<sup>2</sup> and chapter eighteen of his synod history, which runs a little more than ten pages, are the only official telling of that momentous event, at least from Wisconsin's side.<sup>3</sup> Perusing volumes of Wisconsin's *Books of Reports and Memorials*, its *Reports to the Districts* and its convention *Proceedings*, as well as issues of *The Northwestern Lutheran* and the Seminary's *Quartalschrift* from 1938 to 1963, provide valuable background information.

Fredrich wrote with the authority of one who'd been there. The official statements and convention resolutions Fredrich cited provide a clear, consistent basis for the action the Wisconsin Synod took. But how well was this protracted debate understood and conducted "in the trenches" - by those pastors, professors, teachers, and laymen who lived through the events? Did they defend the doctrinal positions their church leaders championed? Were there local disagreements? What caused some Wisconsin members to leave for the Missouri Synod, and still more to form the Church of the Lutheran Confession?

Many pastors who served during those years have files bulging with information-yellowing copies of conference papers, personal and professional correspondence, and homemade presentations devised to interpret the intersynodical strife to their congregations. Pastors from that time also share rich memories of the issues, personalities, and events involved.

In April 1997, as part of my research to complete a Doctor of Theology degree from Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, I sent a short questionnaire to 108 Wisconsin Synod pastors. They graduated from the seminary as early as 1926, as recently as 1961; most were retired; many served on key district or synodical committees, or were present at emotionally charged Wisconsin Synod or Synodical Conference conventions. The questionnaire contained eight questions:

*1. During your ministry, how would you describe your relations with neighboring Missouri pastors, professors, or congregations?*

---

<sup>1</sup> Edward C. Fredrich, *The Wisconsin Synod Lutherans: A History of the Single Synod, Federation, and Merger* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1992), 198.

<sup>2</sup> *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 74:2 (April 1977), 157-173.

<sup>3</sup> Missouri treatments of the breakup of the Synodical Conference include: George J. Gude, "A Description and Evaluation of the Pressures and Difficulties within the Synodical Conference Which Led to its Destruction," S. T. M. Thesis, Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, MI, May 1986; Myron C. Maltz, "The Developmental Background and Analysis of the Termination of Fellowship with the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod by the Wisconsin Synod," S. T. M. Thesis, Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, MO., 1979; James R. Russow, "An Examination of the Issues Which Led to the Suspension of Fellowship Between the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod and the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod in 1961," M.A. Thesis, Concordia Theological Seminary, Springfield, Illinois, 1973.

2. *Some observers have commented on a "triumphalist" or tcocksure" attitude in the Missouri Synod in previous generations, and a corresponding feeling of "small Synoditis "on the part of Wisconsin. Based on your experience, would you agree or disagree with that observation?*
3. *How would you characterize the attitude of your pastoral conference, district, or geographical area?*
4. *How many pastors and congregations from your area left the Wisconsin Synod, either to join the Missouri Synod, form the CLC, or become independent?*
5. *When did you detect changes in the Missouri Synod? In your view, what were the contributing causes of those changes?*
6. *Do you have any recollections of specific noteworthy incidents of any of the Wisconsin or Synodical Conference conventions during the years of the dispute (1939-1961)? Did you serve on convention floor committees, or in an advisory role for any of those conventions?*
7. *Do you recall any significant opposition among Wisconsin Synod members or pastors to the Synod's position on Scouting, prayer fellowship, or the chaplaincy?*
8. *What effect(s) do you think the break of fellowship with Missouri has had on the Wisconsin Synod since 1961 ?*

Eighty-two of the 105 pastors surveyed responded - 78%, an extraordinary response - many within days of receiving the survey.<sup>4</sup> The typed transcript of their comments runs to 97 single-spaced pages. Few pastors in that age bracket use personal computers and word processing software; most typed their responses, and many replied in longhand. Respondents were especially generous in opening their personal files to me, forwarding conference essays, newspaper and magazine clippings, letters, study papers, and other artifacts, all of which help transport the reader back to those trying years.

The survey format offered respondents the opportunity to maintain the anonymity of their comments, but more than 90% chose the option, "You may use my name in connection with all of the comments on this survey." The surveys prompted telephone calls, additional correspondence, and personal interviews. There was a sense throughout that this "great debate with Missouri" constituted the weightiest battle of their lives, though many were relatively young, inexperienced pastors in the 1940s and '50s. These men wanted to tell their story. They remember many of the same stories, and when encouraged will talk further about them. As one pastor remarked in a follow-up letter:

Thank you for your interest in something which to many has become ancient history, but which played a very important role in the lives of some of us oldsters who are still around. I haven't read some of these papers in years. They bring back memories.

For this article, the identity of all respondents has been kept confidential.

---

<sup>4</sup> According to E. R. Babbie, *The Practice of Social Research*, 5th ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1983), 242, and D. R. Monette, T. J. Sullivan, and C. R. De Jong, *Applied Social Research: Tools for the Human Services* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1986), 49, return rates are generally less than fifty percent, especially for surveys that contain no enclosed compensation or follow-up mailings. A return rate of fifty percent is often considered adequate, and rates exceeding seventy per cent are regarded as unusually good. Besides such practical suggestions as enclosing a self-addressed, stamped envelope and attaching a cover letter, W. S. Martin, W. J. Duncan, T. L. Powers, and J. C. Sawyer, "Costs and Benefits of Selected Response Inducement Techniques in Mail Survey Research," *Journal of Business Research* 19 (1989), 6779, reported that respondents were more likely to answer surveys when "the importance and relevance of the survey [were] clear to the prospective respondent." [All of the above data was contained in Lee Ellis, *Research Methods in the Social Sciences* (Madison, WI: Brown and Benchmark, 1994), 183-185].

Some apologized for "slipping memories," yet their recollections contain numerous specific details fixed in their remembrance decades ago. Some of their individual recollections contradict those of other respondents, and occasional comments challenge official synodical positions. Some differences may be attributed to regional variations as the intersynodical debates unfolded. What is significant is that their memories reflect their perceptions of what happened, and it was on the basis of those perceptions that they served their congregations and their synod, and helped shape one of the most defining actions in the Wisconsin Synod's history.<sup>5</sup>

I will summarize responses to this survey, question by question. Additional information will be added only for clarification or elaboration.

## 1.

### *During your ministry, how would you describe your relations with neighboring Missouri pastors, professors, or congregations?*

Pastors who graduated from seminary during the past three decades and who acquired assorted negative images of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod may be surprised to hear the many recollections of warm relationships between Missouri and Wisconsin pastors. The survey offered Wisconsin pastors five choices to describe their relations with Missouri pastors, professors, and congregations: 15 (18%) said strained; 17 (21%) said indifferent; 42 (51%) said cordial; 43 (52%) said cooperative; only 2 chose any other response.

Because relations with Missouri were changing, some listed more than one answer, based on the passage of time or on geographical variations. "Indifferent with some, cordial with others," one remembered. "Indifferent after the break, cordial prior to the break" said another. Recollections of joint ministries were common. Before World War II, "with the blessings of my congregation, I met with Missouri pastors in fellowship and Bible study, visited their sick in the hospital, conducted both funeral and wedding services in the absence of their pastors." Others looked back fondly on mixed pastoral conferences, Lenten pulpit exchanges, and social gatherings including pastors and their wives of both synods.

Several longer responses illustrated that stereotypical "handles" characterizing either synod were inaccurate. Respondents expressed a sense of loss at a once vibrant relationship, now gone forever.

In the Saginaw area, where I grew up, there was a very close relationship between the two synods. A good number of our classmates at Michigan Lutheran Seminary came from Missouri Synod congregations .... I came and went in [the home of a nearby Missouri pastor] almost as though it were my own. The joint Sunday afternoon Lenten services held in the city auditorium regularly drew all the way from 2,500 to 4,000 worshipers. The farthest thing from anyone's mind was that this could all one day come to an end.

---

<sup>5</sup> Robert Preus, in a review of John Tietjen's *Memoirs in Exile: Confessional Hope and Institutional Conflict* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), in *Logia 1:1* (October 1992), 65, admitted "there is a risk in writing memoirs" because "memory is often fragile and not always accurate, even in the most scrupulous of men." Preus quoted Jeremy Campbell, who observed in his book *Grammatical Man* that "we construct meanings and remember our constructions." Campbell added:

"There is evidence . . . to suggest that we reconstruct information when retrieving it from memory. Only the gist of the information is stored. The details are added at the time of the recollection, on the basis of what we expect to have been true. Reconstruction may seriously distort that original information, but the rememberer may be quite unaware of the distortion. If the material given to us is consistent with our knowledge or expectations, it is more likely to be recalled correctly, but if it is inconsistent, then there are likely to be systematic distortions." Jeremy Campbell, *Grammatical Mary: Information, Entropy, Language, and Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, Inc., 1982), 226.

Up until approximately the early 50s, the Missouri Synod's Michigan District was very conservative .... In the Detroit area I had a warm and cooperative relationship with many of the Missouri Synod pastors. Most were middle-aged or older and can be best described as "old Missouri." . . . They respected the Wisconsin Synod but had some reservations about what they considered its voyages into legalism .... The situation in the Saginaw Valley with but few exceptions was even more cordial than in the Detroit area. The Missouri Synod pastors for the most part were very, very conservative as were their congregations which had in almost every instance strong German-Bavarian backgrounds.

Even for those who felt a sense of closeness in Synodical Conference relations, however, it became apparent that a different spirit was developing among some younger Missouri pastors.

In the late 1940s and early 1950s these old Missouri stalwarts began to retire or were called to their eternal home. The younger men succeeding them were mostly a different breed, particularly those trained at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. They were very public relations conscious and carried the idea of being "all things to all people" to extremes ....

Many of these Missouri pastors simply couldn't envision their Synod getting seriously caught up in more liberal biblical interpretation and practice . . . . There were exceptions .... By the time it became clearly apparent what was really occurring, many of these conservative pastors had retired or been called home .... They were gradually replaced by younger men who in their training had been exposed [to] and affected in varying degrees by the new approaches and understandings.

As this change in Missouri's outlook became more evident, relations with Wisconsin pastors grew "increasingly chilly." One respondent remarked on Missouri pastors' "unwillingness to discuss [issues] on the basis of Scripture." Another recalled paying a courtesy call on the neighboring Missouri pastor, who compared the WELS to a "toy poodle yapping at the LCMS, the hound dog of orthodoxy!" He mentioned a comment in *Dialog* magazine that labeled Wisconsin "a drag on Missouri's move toward ecumenical participation."<sup>6</sup>

Another remembered a free conference in North Dakota in the late 50s, where "the Missouri men could not and would not say that the papacy is the Antichrist." To this pastor it became clear at that conference that "the break with Missouri involved much more than a difference in doctrine concerning fellowship; it involved a difference in doctrine concerning Scripture itself." After accepting a call to a new location, another pastor wrote:

I was informed that I had a number of Masons in the congregation and Scouts. The Missouri Synod started a mission in the public school only a block from my parsonage and only a half mile from our church. When the congregation faced the problem of the Scouts quite a number of members solved the problem of Scouts by going to the Missouri mission. I asked the pastor of the mission to sit down with me and show me where I was wrong on this matter. His response was to bring the slim booklet on Lutheran Scouting and tell me, "Some of the best minds in our Synod worked out this deal. Who am I to disagree?"

Some respondents acknowledged that Wisconsin pastors themselves sometimes aggravated tensions with Missouri by their strong reactions. Some felt "there was little use of continuing doctrinal discussions since Missouri's concern for sound doctrine was in their opinion waning dismally." Others began to adopt a "no holds barred interpretation of Romans 16," insisting "there was little or no time interval to be permitted between

---

<sup>6</sup> "Autopsy," *Dialog* 1:1 (Winter 1962), 70, likened Missouri's regret over the dissolution of fellowship with Wisconsin to the sadness one might feel when a long ill patient finally died. Insisting that doctrinal unity in the Synodical Conference had been only "a pious fiction" for some time, the *Dialog* editorialist added, "It was no secret that, among other things, the Wisconsin Synod had been a drag on Missouri's moves toward ecumenical participation."

'marking' (King James) and 'avoiding' (King James)." A growing number of Wisconsin pastors were "suspicious of anything a Missourian said." One longer comment provided revealing insights on *both* synods:

We had a mixed conference in the area [in the early 1950s] which met twice each year. In addition there were several of us, about half from each synod, that occasionally got together socially. One of the LCMS pastors became a pretty good friend. He regularly attended meetings of the so-called Chicago Study Club, a group of conservative pastors which met frequently to consider the ills of Missouri. He, in fact, was the one who told me everything that was wrong in Missouri as early as 1950. If things were really as bad as he said they were, it seemed to me that he would have to get out of the synod almost immediately. The fact is that he died in the LCMS about two years ago. Now that I better understand Missouri's Doctrine of Church and Ministry, I can see how it was possible for him to do that. At the same time one of my neighbors was a Wisconsin Synod pastor whose wife had come from a prominent Missouri family. He also regularly filled me in on all the ills of Missouri. He was the kind of man who could start with any text and end up with Romans 16:17. His wife was very nice, but my wife hated to go there to visit, because after exchanging a few pleasantries he would get me into the study .... If I had stayed in that environment my own life might not have taken the direction that it did .... [Sometimes] more theology is determined by one's neighbors than by Scripture.

## 2.

*Some observers have commented on a "triumphalist" "or "'cocksure' attitude in the Missouri Synod in previous generations, and a corresponding feeling of "small Synoditis "on the part of Wisconsin. Based on your experience, would you agree or disagree with that observation?*

The expressions used in question # 2 were not invented specifically for this survey. Each appeared in previous descriptions of the two church bodies, individually as well as in relation to one another.

In a review of Carl S. Meyer's *Moving Frontiers: Readings in the History of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod*, Leigh Jordahl suggested that a "sharp motif of 'triumphalism'" pervaded Missouri Synod history.<sup>7</sup> Jack Treon Robinson, a Missouri pastor who completed his doctoral dissertation at Vanderbilt University, initially dismissed Jordahl's comment as "sour grapes, so often found as a Lutheran of one synod reviews the book of a Lutheran of a different synod." But in examining the immense Theodore Graebner Manuscripts Collection at Concordia Historical Institute, Robinson concluded, "The spirit which pervaded the life and work of the Missouri Synod *was* the spirit of triumphalism."<sup>8</sup> In an article highly critical of Missouri's past (but withheld for publication until after his death). Graebner wrote:

That there is in [the Missouri] Synod a tendency to give undue weight to the opinions of the fathers is evident .... No discussion of any doctrinal subject has taken place within the past thirty years which has not operated with quotations from Luther, Walther, Pieper, and the first thirty volumes of *Lehre and Wehre*. I challenge anyone to look into the literature of any church but our own to find anything parallel to this situation .... We are hardly aware of the fact that in all the wide world no one proceeds in such a manner to make good a claim of soundness or correctness. The method is absolutely unique. *It is not found in the Wisconsin Synod . . . .* Yet it is in common use in our discussions of doctrine and churchly practice . . . .

---

<sup>7</sup> *Una Sancta XXII* (Pentecost 1965), 51-56.

<sup>8</sup> Jack Treon Robinson, "The Spirit of Triumphalism in the Lutheran Church-- Missouri Synod: The Role of 'A Statement' of 1945 in the Missouri Synod," Ph. D. Dissertation, Vanderbilt University, Nashville, TN, May 1972, iii-iv.

Why does an organization which like no other stresses the absolute authority of the inspired Word stand not only in awe but in abject fear of its own pronouncements of the past?<sup>9</sup>

"The term *spirit of triumphalism*," Robinson explained, referred to a "deep and abiding motivating force" that colored the life of the LCMS for more than a century. Robinson called it "a spirit which looked for the final conquest of all its opponents" and that "required perfect harmony among those who would conquer" - a kind of spiritual "Manifest Destiny."<sup>10</sup>

Survey respondents were not necessarily expected to recognize this definition of the term "triumphalism." (One remarked, perhaps a bit tongue in cheek: "'Triumphalism,' like beauty, may be in the eye of the beholder.") Wisconsin Synod pastors were familiar with J. P. Koehler's warnings in "Gesetzlich Wesen Unter Uns" and his *History of the Wisconsin Synod* against cocksureness in doctrine and traditionalism in doctrinal forms. Koehler and August Pieper left little doubt they saw such attitudes in Missouri before 1930.<sup>11</sup>

"Small synoditis" was the title of an editorial by Carleton Toppe in *The Northwestern Lutheran*. Written only months before Wisconsin's vote to sever fellowship with Missouri, Toppe commented:

Small synods can easily develop inferiority complexes. They see the grand scale on which larger church bodies carry out their projects, the impressive totals they run up, the variety and scope of their activities - and they feel like apologizing for their own efforts and achievements .... Synod members that make constantly unfavorable comparisons between the modest progress of their synod and the impressive accomplishments of a larger body, risk contracting the malaise of defeatism. They are in danger of making only half-hearted efforts at furthering new undertakings; they may even lapse into a do-nothing attitude .... Our Wisconsin Synod is not a large church body, but it is large enough to move forward. It is large enough to do more and greater things in the kingdom of God than it has done in the past. And, under God, it will be more likely to accomplish them if it values the talent God as supplied to it than if it sighs for the ten talents it supposes God has given to another.<sup>12</sup>

These perceptions, then, had been voiced by others; survey respondents were asked to what extent they agreed or disagreed. Five (6%) strongly agreed, 38 (46%) agreed, 8 (10%) were neutral, 10 (12%) disagreed, and 2 (2%) strongly disagreed.

Of the 52% who agreed or strongly agreed, more considered it an accurate characterization of Missouri than Wisconsin. "It might be," observed one pastor, "that some in Missouri did bask in their synodical heritage as if that put them a step above others, but that never bothered me." Another thought the remarks true for

---

<sup>9</sup> Theodore Graebner, "The Burden of Infallibility: a Study in the History of Dogma," *Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly* XXXVIII:2 (July 1965), 88-89; emphasis added.

<sup>10</sup> Robinson, "The Spirit of Triumphalism," 18.

<sup>11</sup> In his "Anniversary Reflections," written in 1923, Pieper remarked on "the Missouri Spirit" that resulted from "the extreme narrowness" of its almost exclusive use of "dogmatic practical education" learned from Walther. "It was psychologically inevitable that a bad attitude became entrenched in many in the synod. The boast is made that Missourians are the only ones who are completely orthodox and competent. Everything that does not come from Missouri is *eo ipso* more or less false or worthless." Missouri demonstrated that attitude, according to Pieper, not only toward Lutheran bodies outside its fellowship "but also toward those which in the course of time were recognized as sufficiently Lutheran"-undoubtedly a reference to the Wisconsin Synod. August Pieper. "Anniversary Reflections," in Curtis A. Jahn, comp. ed., *The Wauwatosa Theology* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1997), III:266-267.

Koehler, recounting Walter's "infatuation" with the idea of a uniform Lutheran church organization, seminary, and university, wrote that "his Missourians" were "devoted disciples" and behaved typically as members of "a well-disciplined, single-minded, large successful body." This stood in contrast to the early Wisconsin Synod's "inferiority complex" and "continued insecurity." John Philipp Koehler, *The History of the Wisconsin Synod* (St. Cloud, MN: FaithLife, 1970), 166. In "Gesetzlich Wesen," Koehler wrote that legalism infiltrated "in the form of *bragging about orthodoxy*," which he defined as "adhering to orthodoxy where the stress is shifted from *faith* to *correct faith*," and which fed on "the *factional spirit* which opposes the *ecumenical spirit*." While Koehler typically meant such criticism to result in a self-examination within the Wisconsin Synod, he undoubtedly also had Missouri in mind. J. P. Koehler, "Legalism Among Us," in *The Wauwatosa Theology*, 239; emphases in the original.

<sup>12</sup> Carleton Toppe, "Small Synoditis," *The Northwestern Lutheran* 47:23 (November 6, 1960), 355.

perhaps "a minority" in Missouri; others granted that while such attitudes could have been present, "I did not personally encounter any of them to any significant degree."

For some, Missouri as "big sister" was a positive, not a negative perception. "Sure, Missouri was about ten times larger than Wisconsin, but that was the way it was." Institutional viewpoints were tempered by personal friendships: "I grew up close to the LCMS. My dad's golfing buddies were Missouri. My best friend at MLS was the son of a Missouri pastor. I spent many happy days in that parsonage."

Others expressed "strong agreement" with this characterization of Missouri. "There was a 'cocksure' opinion that emphasized THE Missouri Synod," came one answer, and another recalled, "When at Mequon and we had correspondence from St. Louis, they would address us with lower case letters." Several pastors remarked on "an agreement" between the two synods, assumed if not formalized, that each synod would refrain from carrying out its ministry in the other's area. By the 1950s, however, the Missouri Synod "was starting missions in cities like Appleton and New Ulm with the excuse that their members were not at home in our churches." As this writer remembered it, the attitude of the Missouri pastors was, "I am big and you are small; we will eat you up." This respondent further recalled:

At conventions [in the 1950s] when our synod was tearing its guts apart over the fellowship issue, Missouri would send two representatives to our conventions who were not able to really assure us of anything. At the same time they sent 18 representatives to the ALC convention. One had the impression that our fellowship with Missouri was small potatoes compared with what other synods could offer. The Missouri Synod did not seem at all concerned about our distress.

Because the surveys focused predominantly on the critical years of the 1940s and 50s, most respondents addressed that time frame. The remarks of Missouri men such as Graebner, Robinson, and others, however, suggest that an attitude of superiority may have existed farther back in Missouri's history. One Wisconsin respondent reflected on that larger history:

When the Saxons emigrated to America they were convinced that they, under Stephan's leadership, were the last true Lutherans left. I have heard others tell of instances in more recent times in which Missouri officials and pastors spoke of Missouri as the only true or orthodox Lutheran Church, not even bothering to include other Synodical Conference synods.<sup>13</sup>

Another respondent remembered:

When I attended NWC [in the late 1920s and early 1930s] a book circulated [called] *Little Journeys of Dr. Martin Luther in America*. The gist of the book was that there was a statue of Luther in Washington D. C. that came to life, and Luther tried to gain membership in the various synods. He was not accepted. Various doctrines were discussed, [such] as election. But here is the point: when going to the colloquy the Missouri pastors kept in step by saying, "Ich bins, ich bins, ich bins." So already by the turn of the

---

<sup>13</sup> Fred W. Meuser, "Business as Usual-Almost, 1900-1917," in E. Clifford Nelson, ed., *The Lutherans in North America* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 378, cited Friederich Bente's editorial marking the 50th anniversary of Missouri's *Lehre und Wehre* in 1904, in which Bente insisted that *Lehre and Wehre* had been kept untarnished by false teaching and had therefore no cause to repent or seek forgiveness for what it taught because "that would be to accuse God Himself, indeed, to mock God, who has commanded that these very doctrines be taught." F[riederich] B[ente], "Vorwort," *Lehre and Wehre* 50:1 (January 1904), 1-20]. Meuser also mentioned, in "The Twenties-Continued Change, at a Slower Pace," 433, that the new Concordia Seminary dwarfed all other Lutheran seminaries in beauty, excellence and cost, calling it "a monument to the Missouri Synod's reaffirmation of its heritage and confidence for its future." Its 1926 dedication, widely covered by the press and attended by 75,000 members, was preserved on film for posterity to mark "a new stage in Missouri's sense of permanence and mission." Having built the best, Missouri "was determined to remain the best as far as strict Lutheranism was concerned."

century they were triumphalists. The author, whose name I can't recall, was from the East. Luther had to return to the statue. The Wisconsin Synod was not mentioned.<sup>14</sup>

"Small synoditis," of course, is a somewhat pejorative term. More than a mere admission that Wisconsin was the far littler sister to Missouri, the phrase suggests a sense of inferiority. But such a designation could also be worn as a badge of distinction. For decades it seems generally to have been conceded that "Missouri did the towns and we did the country."<sup>15</sup> Typical, perhaps, of Wisconsin's self-understanding as the less sophisticated, more rustic synod, the author recalls several conversations early in his ministry with older pastors and their wives who would say, with a mixture of pride and resignation, "Missouri always had the ministry to the big cities. Our churches were usually out of the way, off the main highways."

In an oft-quoted remark, Adolf Hoenecke remarked to Koehler in 1878 that there was "something sectarian" about the Missouri Synod.<sup>16</sup> Though appreciating their doctrinal accord, Hoenecke's comment suggested the awareness of cultural and personality differences between the church bodies. One pastor recalled his grandmother's remark, "*Dieser Missourianer, sie hatten schliff?*" Pieper's assessment of his synod is also relevant: "*Wir Bind in der Wisconsin Synode; wir machen kein 'show.'*"

Few respondents commented directly on Wisconsin's purported "small Synoditis." Although one man wrote that comparative synodical size "was not an issue in my circle," another countered that Missourians he knew took the attitude, "I am big and you are small. I will eat you up." Responses to this and other questions betray occasional feelings of resentment regarding Wisconsin's treatment as the smaller synod. One respondent remembered the remark of a Nebraska pastor that "our synod was like a little rowboat tied to an ocean liner that was getting into dangerous waters." Another recalled Missouri "smugness" that seemed to say, "Whatever we do must be OK." Yet another remembered "a reluctance," almost disdain, for "what little WELS [had] to say." Reflecting on the escalating disturbances of the 1950s, another concluded, "We couldn't help but think that we were being jilted by a former very dear friend. We seemed to be too small for them to bother with." Such comments indicate that an "inferiority complex," or perhaps a sense of betrayal, runs deeper among some Wisconsin pastors than they might readily acknowledge.<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> The full title of the book, *Little Journeys With Martin Luther: A Real Book wherein are printed diverse Sayings and Doings of Dr. Martin Luther in these latter days when he applied for Synodical Membership in the United States. Carefully set down in writing at that time By Brother John of the Order of Poor Brethren, commonly known as Lutheran Pastors*, was written by William Nicholas Harley and published in Columbus, Ohio, in 1916. The respondent recalled the premise of the book: on a Sunday evening in 1898 a bronze likeness of the Great Reformer in front of Luther Memorial Church in Washington came to life and sought membership in various Lutheran synods in America. The respondent was correct that Wisconsin was never mentioned, but the book's estimation of Missouri was not as complimentary as the respondent recalled. In the preface of his book, Harley wrote that the goal of his writing was to contribute his "mite" to the cause of Lutheran union by exhibiting "in a novel and striking manner the folly, shame, and sin of schism, discord, and contention." While admiring Missouri's devotion to the Lutheran Confessions, Harley directed more criticism than praise to the synod of C. F. W. Walther.

<sup>15</sup> Herbert Birner, "The Saga of a Mission District: Dakota-Montana, the First Eighty Years, 1880-1970," paper presented at the Dakota-Montana District Convention, June 14-16, 1974, 16.

<sup>16</sup> Koehler, *History of the Wisconsin Synod*, 251. Jordahl, in his introduction to Koehler's *History*, commented: "Neither Hoenecke in making the remark nor Koehler reflecting upon it intended to fault the doctrinal position of the Missourians but both rather had reference to a certain mind set" (xxiv).

<sup>17</sup> Gude, "A Description of the Pressures and Difficulties within the Synodical Conference which Led to its Destruction," 177-79, discusses the "deep sense on the part of the Wisconsin and Norwegian Synods that they had been hurt by the Missouri Synod." Among the examples he cites: E. E. Kowalke's statement at the 1954 Synodical Conference Convention that the Wisconsin Synod's objections and warnings to Missouri were regarded as "a heedless rush into separation"; the understanding that Missouri would correct misquotations and misrepresentations of their objections to the *Common Confession*, only to find that Missouri had made only minor corrections and placed them at the end of the book; W. J. Schaefer's editorial, "Boy Scouts and the Missouri Synod," *The Northwestern Lutheran* 32:12 (June 10, 1945), 122, citing a *Lutheran Witness* news item announcing that the Missouri Synod had the third highest number of boy scout troops and cub packs among Lutheran bodies. Upon reading the item, Schaefer said, "We were shocked beyond measure," and later wrote, "This action of the *Lutheran Witness* hurts beyond the ability of expressing it," and, "We are sick at heart."

A couple respondents noted haughtiness on the Wisconsin side. One recalled that, as seminary students, his classmates were not unanimous regarding the split. He remembered his own and other students' shallow thinking, an attitude of "my synod, right or wrong." Another recalled that "those closely related to members of the LCMS were not arrogant or smug," but "those who did not have intimate ties tended to be somewhat haughty."

One respondent offered a different, thought-provoking response:

It depends on what you mean by "previous generations." If you mean prebreak, my answer would be disagreement. I didn't detect any "small Synoditis" while at the Seminary from men like [President Edmund] Reim and [Prof. Carl] Lawrenz. My feeling is that the disease of "small Synoditis" is of later origin. Some time ago an article appeared in the *Northwestern Lutheran* comparing evangelism during the "sword in one hand" era and now. The myth that there were few if any adult confirmations during those days was mentioned ....

That is poor memory, not fact. The fact is that if you compare adult confirmations per pastor in the 1956-61 era with the time the article was written, you have to go to the second place after the decimal point to note a difference .... It seems to me that the disease of "small Synoditis" is a disease of today more than a disease of the fifties.

### 3.

#### *How would you characterize the attitude of your pastoral conference, district, or geographical area?*

The answer depended on where you lived. While 78% of those surveyed characterized their immediate geographical area as being "mildly in favor" or "strongly in favor" of breaking with Missouri, there were varying responses in different locations of the synod - "often," said one, "at the same time."

One pastor remembered serving in several districts and conferences "where relations between Missouri and Wisconsin differed greatly." Another pastor, whose ministry stretched well beyond the split and whose service afforded continued contacts with Missouri pastors and officials into the 1980s, described Wisconsin relations with Missouri as "*strained* on the East Coast, *indifferent* on the West Coast, *cordial* in Michigan, and *cooperative* with LCMS mission administrators."

In the southwest, where Missouri and Wisconsin had agreed early on that Missouri would take California and Wisconsin would serve Arizona, tensions arose in Globe and Tucson, Arizona, in the 1950s when the LCMS "invaded our agreed-upon territory." Right up to 1961, Wisconsin's Arizona-California District was "sharply divided on the issue," attributable to the actions of its district president, who "waffled sometimes" on Scouting, the chaplaincy, and prayer fellowship.

In the Pacific Northwest District, the last joint conference of Missouri and Wisconsin pastors was held in 1953. At that conference, most Missourians expressed a preference for open Communion "but they wanted to check with St. Louis first. The West Coast was as *avant garde* as the East Coast in Missouri."

According to one of its district officers in the 1950s, the Dakota-Montana District had a "distinct doctrinal atmosphere," considering itself "ahead of the eastern districts of the synod, the seminary; and synod administration. The district's "officially fostered view" early on was to break fellowship with Missouri. Seminary professors and Wisconsin's larger districts to the east treated discussions with Missouri as a work "still in progress" requiring more time, but in Dakota-Montana "the prevailing view was that the question was already settled." Union questions "dominated the discussions of the conferences," often providing "excellent application for any paper given," or "woven into every report."

It would be incorrect to say that the District did not endeavor to meet with Missourians on a grass roots level, and endeavor to solve the union problems. We had the Bismarck Study Club. During these discussions, it was soon noticed by everyone that the Missourians were being kept completely in the dark over the union questions so that the Wisconsin men were first obliged to inform them and then a discussion could be held. So well did our Church Union Committee keep our constituents informed that often the issues could be discussed with statements by the Missouri Synod written by conservative theologians. Then, of course, they too could see what a big "switch" was going on in St. Louis. It must be said that these Missourians also complained to their leadership about this. For all of which they were dubbed by their liberal wing "the cry babies of the Missouri [River] slope."<sup>18</sup>

By the late 1950s, amid stormy meetings - both official and unannounced - and the rumored takeover of Northwestern Lutheran Academy at Mobridge by disgruntled pastors, the district "was in effect asked by its president whether it wanted to continue with the Wisconsin Synod or form a new church body. It wasn't as cut and dried as that, but that's what it amounted to."<sup>19</sup> The president failed to sustain the support of his district, resulting in his departure from the synod. One of its pastors remarked that the president's "fall from grace" was "not entirely a disagreement with his theological position, but also, in part, a reaction to his dictatorial relationship with the candidates moving into his district."

Nebraska also strongly favored breaking with Missouri by the mid 1950s. Im. P. Frey was thought to have lost his office as district president to Hugo Fritze in 1958 because Fritze "was considered to be a hard-liner." A pastor who served in Nebraska's Southern Conference from 1949 to 1954 recalled the professional and personal agony of the time:

As it became evident that the Missouri Synod was traveling a different path, the more the pressure to split with Missouri became more pronounced . . . Both Hilbert and Winfried Schaller pastored congregations in the conference. On the basis of Romans 16:17 they argued that we should break with Missouri, and then talk about our differences ....

As time went on the matter of the split with Missouri became the major topic of discussion at every one of our get-togethers. [Hilbert] Schaller believed that the only way to deal with the matter was to split with Missouri, and then to meet with them. He was very persuasive in his arguments ....

I believe the matter came to a head in our Southern Conference, when our congregation hosted the Conference. The exact year escapes me (1953?), but I do recall the incident very vividly. Before we even began the meeting with a devotion and prayer, the Schallers asked for the floor. They immediately aired their views concerning severing our ties with synod, if synod would not break with Missouri at its next convention. The matter was discussed the rest of the morning, sometimes very heatedly. When the noon recess arrived, those who followed the Schaller view would not pray with us.

Following the meal, it became evident that there were three decided groups: Those favoring an immediate split, those going along with synod, and those who had just graduated from the seminary, not knowing which group to follow. It was a pathetic sight to see such division among our called workers. As a result the conference did not have an evening service with the celebration of Holy Communion.

After that, those who were not in favor of the Wisconsin Synod position absented themselves from the devotions and prayers, and from the communion service. Fortunately, we never did have to face holding a conference at one of the churches, whose pastor was against synod's position.

---

<sup>18</sup> Reginald E. Pope, "The C. L. C. in South Dakota: `The Turbulent Years,'" Eastern Pastor Conference, Dakota-Montana District, October 26-27, 1987, 3-5.

<sup>19</sup> Pope, "The C. L. C. in South Dakota," 4-5. Bimer, "The Saga of a Mission District," 54.

Those were trying years - distrust was present - friendships strained .... At times those who were not of synod's persuasion would not recognize transfers of memberships from those still standing with synod .... The ridicule and rudeness, which came your way, all because you would not follow their way, at times was rather difficult to take. You were soon labeled a "liberal," one that needed to be "straightened out."

New Ulm, Minnesota, home to Dr. Martin Luther College and Dr. Martin Luther High School, was in one respondent's recollection "a hotbed of future C. L. C. pastors in our area, and those few monopolized conference time." A core of pastors at Sleepy Eye, New Ulm, Nicollet, Mankato, and Sanborn strongly supported breaking with Missouri, "and because it didn't come soon enough for them, they all left to form the C. L. C." Much of the rest of the Minnesota District had similar sentiments, except the St. Croix Conference, which just as strongly opposed the break.

The Western Wisconsin District was also home to two synodical training schools, Northwestern College and Northwestern Preparatory School in Watertown. Popular professors who were teaching or had taught in Watertown - Martin Franzmann, Richard Jungkuntz, Ralph Gehrke, and Hilton Oswald - all eventually left Wisconsin, but for Missouri, not the C. L. C. Western Wisconsin's district president was described as having "close Missouri ties," hoping never to see a break. One pastor who accepted a call into Western Wisconsin at the height of the dispute remembered that some synodical issues received much less emphasis there than in Dakota-Montana, Nebraska, or Minnesota.

In the Northern Wisconsin District, the Winnebago and Rhinelander conferences strongly favored breaking with Missouri, but 65 pastors from the Fox-Wolf River Conference, with about equal representation of Wisconsin and Missouri Synod pastors, adopted a resolution, with only two dissenting votes, that their conference "ask [their] respective Synods to continue intersynodical discussions to prevent dissolution of the Synodical Conference."<sup>20</sup>

The Southeast Wisconsin District, containing many large Milwaukee congregations and the seminary, was less inclined to break because Missouri pastors in the area tended to be more conservative.<sup>21</sup> None of the Southeast Wisconsin conferences went on record in support of a conference-wide resolution for splitting with Missouri, or even submitted a memorial to the synod. In the Dodge-Washington Conference opinions varied; the majority generally "accepted and supported the judgments and recommendations of the Standing Committee on Matters of Church Union." A mixed Wisconsin-Missouri pastoral conference met in Dodge county until 1956, suggesting good local relations remained between the synods. "At least some of [Missouri's] pastors were opposed to Scouts (but they remained loyal Missourians)."<sup>22</sup>

---

<sup>20</sup> Letter, the Fox-Wolf River Conference, Wm. G. Zell, secretary for the Wisconsin Synod, J. R. Westphal, secretary for the Missouri Synod, to The Honorable Ev. Lutheran Synod of Wisconsin And Other States, Assembled in Convention, May 14, 1956; Oscar Siegler files from the Commission on Inter-Church Relations of the Wisconsin Ev. Lutheran Synod, file # 2, October 1955-August 1959, Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Mequon, WI, archives.

<sup>21</sup> One correspondent put it in a less complimentary way: "In the Milwaukee area liberals in the Missouri Synod were not as recognizable as in other areas, with the exception of the pastors in the English District."

<sup>22</sup> The fact that some Missouri pastors seemed to endorse Wisconsin views rather than those of their own synod, yet chose to remain members of Missouri, was noted by several respondents. Recalling a neighbor Missouri pastor who "told me everything that was wrong with Missouri," one remarked: "If things were really as bad as he said they were, it seemed to me that he would have to get out of the synod almost immediately. The fact is that he died in the LCMS about two years ago. Now that I better understand Missouri's Doctrine of Church and Ministry, I can see how it was possible for him to do that." Two respondents, in a post-survey interview, remarked that a lot of Wisconsin pastors would have loved to continue relations with Missouri because of their friendships with solid theological conservatives, but "Missouri loyalty" kept Missouri pastors in that Synod rather than coming our way. "That," one added, "and their pension." In a 1953 letter, a member of Wisconsin's Standing Committee on Church Union speculated "to what extent Missouri's pension system has now shut the mouths of its older pastors" on intersynodical matters. "It would certainly seem to be a dangerous situation for individual and church alike - when one's lifelong earnings are tied up with synodical loyalty and under the administration of synodical officials." Letter, O[scar] Siegler to John Brenner, June 4, 1953. Oscar Siegler, File # 1, Union Committee, March 1952-August 1955, Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary archives.

Milwaukee's original City Conference was surrounded by the Eastern Conference, also known as the Horseshoe Conference. One respondent remembered the Eastern Conference as mildly opposed to breaking with Missouri; another recalled "some rather prominent Wisconsin people" who opposed the split. Good local relations colored evaluations of the synodical situation. The Southern Conference, however, strongly favored breaking with Missouri, influenced perhaps by its proximity to Missouri's conservative Chicago Study Club.

The Southeast Wisconsin District was also less inclined to break with Missouri because the two synods shared numerous mutual interests, notably Milwaukee Lutheran and Racine Lutheran high schools, the Lutheran Children's Friend Society, the Home for Aged Lutherans, the Lutheran Institutional Ministry, and a joint radio broadcast on Milwaukee radio station WTMJ-AM.

The contrast between the readiness of Wisconsin's western districts to break with Missouri and the reluctance toward such action in the east is best illustrated in the Michigan District. Until the early 1950s Missouri's Michigan District was "very conservative," its pastors "troubled over the theological shifts slowly transpiring" in Missouri but "tending to take the attitude of the proverbial ostrich." Intersynodical relations were especially cordial in the Saginaw Valley and Detroit; Missouri pastors in both areas "for the most part were very, very conservative as were their congregations which had in almost every instance strong German, Bavarian backgrounds." Many "simply couldn't envision their Synod getting seriously caught up in more liberal Biblical interpretation and practice." Pastors and laymen of the two synods shared personal friendships and confessional commitment, and they joined one another in men's clubs, youth groups, joint worship, mission festival invitations, retreats, excursions, and mixed pastoral conferences.<sup>23</sup>

Charges of Missouri false doctrine, voiced boldly out west, embarrassed some Wisconsin pastors in Michigan. Wisconsin had not had a proud history of confessional soundness in Michigan. As one story had it, when a Missouri pastor in Michigan told his elders in 1961 that Wisconsin had broken fellowship because of Missouri's false doctrine, the elders snickered; for years members of their congregation, disciplined for lodge membership, had fled to the local Wisconsin parish where they were eagerly welcomed.<sup>24</sup>

There was even a persistent if unfounded rumor that, should Wisconsin sever its relations with Missouri, the entire Michigan District of Wisconsin would defect to Missouri.<sup>25</sup> By the late 1950s, however, relations had grown more strained between the synods throughout the state; in Saginaw voices were especially insistent that Wisconsin make the break. But in southwest Michigan "Wisconsin and Missouri men also in these years were still much of one mind and spirit" concerning intersynodical issues.

#### 4.

*How many pastors and congregations from your area left the Wisconsin Synod, either to join the Missouri Synod, form the CLC, or become independent?*

According to a 1974 study based on the Wisconsin Synod *Statistical Reports*, 82 pastors, 8 professors, 12 teachers, and 8,065 communicants left the Wisconsin Synod between 1957 and 1964. Numbers for communicant members were admittedly incomplete and relatively unreliable because in some places only a few members withdrew from a congregation with their pastor, while others may have left one WELS congregation to join a neighboring church or to form a new congregation.<sup>26</sup>

---

<sup>23</sup> James P. Tiefel, "A Few Faithful Men," in Forrest L. Bivens, Richard A. deRuiter, and Daniel L. Schaller, eds., *Michigan Memories: Things Our Fathers Have Told Us* (Saginaw, MI: Michigan District of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, 1985), 295.

<sup>24</sup> Tiefel, "A Few Faithful Men," 295-296.

<sup>25</sup> While others beside Tiefel have referred to this rumor, one respondent disagreed forcefully in a follow-up interview, "I was there, and that was never true."

<sup>26</sup> Mark Krueger, "The Cost in Pastors, Professors, Teachers, and Communicants in Connection with our Severance of Fellowship with the Missouri Synod," senior church history paper, Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary library, April 30, 1974, 8. Krueger concluded that as a general rule, those who left before 1961 joined the CLC, while those who left after 1961 were

As one respondent pointed out, pastors also moved to the Wisconsin Synod. Undoubtedly the most well-known and influential of former Missouri members was Dr. Siegbert Becker, who left Concordia Teachers College in River Forest, Illinois, in 1963 to serve on the faculties of Milwaukee Lutheran Teachers College, the old Wisconsin Lutheran College, and Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary for more than twenty years.

Though most respondents could recount fewer than five pastors or congregations in their neighborhood that left the synod, in the Pacific Northwest eight pastors out of 20 and seven congregations left. In the Dakota-Montana District, one pastor recalled around ten men "who left or were pushed" into the C. L. C. "Some of them did not really want to leave, but after the big power shift in the district, they were disfellowshipped. Those were scary days. It was three strikes and you were out."

Respondents remembered the pain of this separation. "Unfortunately he took his large congregation with him," said one. "Two from my Seminary class," said another. "Two from the Seminary class immediately ahead of me. One from the Milwaukee area." Another could number five classmates who left. In another area two large congregations, each with more than a thousand members, were lost to the LCMS because the pastors had served previously in the Missouri Synod "and had money in their pension fund." One concluded:

My own class is an interesting case study. One went to CLC and on the way back bypassed WELS and died in the Missouri Synod. Another, who was a real left wing renegade in school, is today a hawk in the CLC. One came from the Missouri Synod and never served in our Synod. Another had a mother who came from Missouri. He bypassed our Assignment Committee and engineered a call for himself from Missouri. Another came back to the WELS. Another went to the LCMS via the ELS. Another went to Missouri because WELS did not recognize his talents. I suspect there may have been others, who might have been called to our seminary at the time when they thought they should have, who would have turned out quite differently.

## 5.

*When did you detect changes in the Missouri Synod? In your view, what were the contributing causes of those changes?*

"The common perception in my experience was that Missourians away from the heartland, both East and West, were more influenced by ecumenism and higher criticism," one man recalled. This may have occurred "because of isolation and a determination to break free of stuffy doctrinal restraints, to 'play with the big dogs' (nicer than we thought) in the denominations."<sup>27</sup> By the 1940s "Missouri was extremely conscious of its public image," noted another. A third saw Missouri in the 1950s exhibiting "a strong concern about their P. R. or public image. They wanted to be and be looked on as one of the major American denominations."<sup>28</sup> Still

---

more likely to join the Missouri Synod or remain independent.

<sup>27</sup> Karl Krauss remarked in 1956 that Missouri's unofficial magazine *The American Lutheran* had "for quite some time exuded and promoted a liberalistic and unionistic doctrinal and practical theology." Although subscribers and supporters of the *American Lutheran* lived throughout the United States, the perception persisted that such tendencies were more prominent in areas outside Missouri's heartland. Karl F. Krauss, "The Voice of the C. U. C.: On the Credit Side of the Ledger," *The Northwestern Lutheran* 43:10 (May 13, 1956), 153

<sup>28</sup> By contrast, Wisconsin's disinterest in, even distrust of, publicity is readily apparent in a comment by Egbert Schaller following a favorable portrayal of the synod in an editorial in the New Ulm *Daily News* following the synod's 1951 convention. "We are able to quote the approving words with good grace," wrote Schaller, because "the testimony of the *Daily News* was neither expected nor solicited." Schaller considered it characteristic of his synod that "we do not desire to have our virtues extolled, nor do we seek to try our case in the public press." Though not naming Missouri, Schaller charged: "There are church bodies who live by the publicity they can achieve, sensational, sordid, or otherwise." By contrast, Wisconsin usually found itself embarrassed by approving comments because "the friendliest appraisal of our Synod on the outside rarely reveals an understanding of the real character of Synod's pronouncements and objectives." E[gbert] S[challer], "Newspaper Reporter's Opinion of the Wisconsin Synod," *The Northwestern Lutheran* 38:18 (September 9, 1951), 274. (Footnote continued on the bottom of the next page...)

another noticed "a growing dissatisfaction with the status quo" (by which he meant "a confessional Lutheran church with growth determined by the Spirit") and "a desire to become 'big' like the other Lutheran churches." Missouri seemed "embarrassed by its immigrant, parochial status," feeling "it was entitled to a larger role on the Lutheran stage." Said another, "I have never got past the sense that [Missouri] wanted to stop being immigrants, different, 'strict,' and start being 'American,' 'Protestants,' 'accepted.'"<sup>29</sup>

For others, a telltale indicator of Missouri's transformation lay in its "toleration of [a] liberal interpretation of Scripture." At least one contributing cause of changes in Missouri was "the 'liberal' theology of many on the faculty of the St. Louis seminary." Changes in Missouri "came with a growing unwillingness to endure the criticism from less orthodox and unionistic church bodies." One Missouri pastor was heard to ask, "Why must we always swim against the stream?"<sup>30</sup>

One Wisconsin pastor, who received part of his education in Missouri Synod schools, recalled that the faculty of Concordia Seminary in Springfield "respected our Synod's position and welcomed us from Wisconsin." In their classes faculty members commented on "the liberal, left-ward thoughts and actions of such groups as 'the forty-four,' the American Lutheran Publicity Bureau, the Atlantic and English Districts, and some St. Louis professors," and they noted with approval "those who opposed and sought to curb the liberals." Walter W. F. Wolbrecht, Clarence Spiegel, and Martin Naumann were remembered for censuring such trends. But some saw "a smugness that took the attitude: 'We are the Missouri Synod, whatever we do must be OK.'"

One pastor, while a student at Concordia Milwaukee, recalled reading in *The Seminarian*, the student journal of Concordia Seminary, about a visit made by Concordia students to a nonSynodical Conference seminary. The article called it "uplifting" to take communion there and to see "the old separations passing away." The pastor recalled thinking, "If they can print that, I guess the profs there must be in agreement with it."<sup>31</sup>

Numerous Wisconsin respondents cited Missouri's participation in the military chaplaincy program, its approval of Scouting, and its change in prayer fellowship practice, but one added "I don't know whether one should call a change in fellowship doctrine and practice a cause of changes or the effect of change. Really

---

(continued....) Carleton Toppe, "A Time-Honored Warning Against Present Dangers to the Church from Pharisaism," *Theologische Quartalschrift* 48:2 (April 1951), 125, compared "the publicity craze in the Lutheran church today" to "the publicity the Pharisees loved so much." Toppe faulted "many of our zealous Lutherans, who want the public to 'sit up and take notice' of what the Lutheran Church is doing" for "craving and soliciting public approval and admiration." Citing an example of favorable publicity in a Pennsylvania newspaper devoted to a three-state Lutheran conference, and the obvious pleasure it gave the church reporter who noted it, Toppe wrote: "The Lord is in danger of playing second fiddle to the Lutheran Church."

<sup>29</sup> Elmer Kiessling, who in his published reflections displayed a more congenial, less contentious outlook on most of life's vicissitudes, remarked: "An increasing number of Missouri Lutherans believed in what Pope John later called *aggiornamento* or accommodation to the needs of the modern era." E. C. Kiessling, *History of the Western Wisconsin District* (Watertown, WI: Northwestern College, 1970), 35.

<sup>30</sup> Edmund Reim quoted Missouri Vice-President Arnold Grumm who asked at a Lutheran Laymen's League rally in Milwaukee in January of that year, "As a Lutheran Church we are in the stream of American life - why must we always say no-no-no?" Reim felt Grumm's comment "shed a great deal of light" on the intersynodical problem:

"We of Wisconsin are often charged with being too aloof from the highways and byways of life, and therefore from the men whom we are to win for the kingdom. And we must grant that there is more than a grain of truth in this accusation. But it is another matter entirely for a Church to find itself 'in the stream,' and to take pride and find satisfaction in that unaccustomed role." [Edmund] Reim, "As We See It: Two Necessary Questions," *The Northwestern Lutheran* 42:8 (April 17, 1955), 120.

<sup>31</sup> Writing in *The Seminarian* in 1949, editor Martin Marty commented favorably on the Association of Lutheran Seminarians, through which students could promote "organized communication" and "good and pleasant unity" with other Lutheran seminarians. Martin Marty, "Wartburg: A. L. S. Unofficial impressions by an official visitor," *The Seminarian* 41:3 (November 16, 1949), 11-12. Carl S. Meyer, *Log Cabin to Luther Tower: Concordia Seminary During One Hundred and Twenty-five Years Toward a More Excellent Ministry, 1839-1964* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1965), 228-229, recounts the significant role Concordia students played in the Association. Formed in 1946 at Wartburg Seminary in Dubuque by representatives of ten Lutheran seminaries, the Association received the St. Louis seminary's support despite protests from Missouri pastors and a plea that the seminary discontinue its membership. By contrast, Concordia Springfield, when invited, gave an "inadequate response." Bethany offered no reply, and Thiensville considered it "inadvisable" for its representatives to attend. Concordia's membership in the Association provoked debate at the 1950 Synodical Conference Convention.

both." But Wisconsin pastors noted other contributing causes. "Missouri's Doctrine of Church and Ministry made it difficult if not impossible to deal with problem areas." This reluctance or inability to carry out doctrinal discipline was frequently cited in connection with Missouri's *Statement of the 44*; said one pastor, "After the '44' had published their statement and through it had done much damage, instead of exposing its 'new' ideas and practice, Missouri simply allowed the subscribers to withdraw the statement from further discussion without retraction." It seemed, he concluded, that Missouri "was finding it easier to sweep religious aberrations under the rug than to face them." One pastor, a St. Louis graduate who subsequently switched synods, remembered that when he entered Concordia in 1950 "the clouds were on the horizon," and that "the JEDP movement and Higher Critical Theory played a large part, since it stemmed from European theologians. European theologians were the rage at the time." Another felt Missouri's seminaries "became too impressed with advanced degrees for their professors rather than sound theology." Former Concordia professor Paul Kretzmann was heard to remark that the shift came about as "the result of calling Ph. D.s instead of Th. D.s to the St. Louis Seminary." Another respondent commented in greater detail:

I believe that the practice of sending promising theological students off to Harvard, Yale, the University of Chicago, etc., led to these men coming back to teach what they were taught. Doctrinal statements were appearing and not being quashed which were certainly not in accord with Missouri's doctrinal confessions. I had the assignment of writing a paper on [St. Louis Professor Gilbert] Thiele's paper about [the] immortality of the soul and the resurrection. Following the lead of [Oscar] Cullmann, Thiele denied any life of the soul between the time of death and the resurrection. His treatment of the Bible and his whole attitude of "prove me wrong" was most disturbing.<sup>32</sup>

Still another remarked on "a growing high church tendency" in Missouri, "which almost inevitably breeds doctrinal indifference."<sup>33</sup> One respondent offered the theory that Missouri "went astray" because of "a reliance on [its] leadership instead of grass roots reliance." By "grass roots reliance" he meant "each individual going back to the Word of God on his or her own and coming to a conclusion." While admitting that this is "sort of like re-inventing the wheel," he added, "When it comes to the Bible, I feel each and every one of us must reinvent the wheel."

## 6.

*Do you have any recollections of specific noteworthy incidents of any of the Wisconsin or Synodical Conference conventions during the years of the dispute (1939-1961)? Did you serve on convention floor committees, or in an advisory role, for any of those conventions?*

Wisconsin met in convention every odd-numbered summer (1939, '41, '43, '45, '47, '49, '51, '53, '55, '57, '59, '61), Missouri every three years (1938, '41, '44, '47, '50, '53, '56, '59), and the Synodical Conference

---

<sup>32</sup> Karl F. Krauss, pastor in Wisconsin's Michigan District and former first vice-president of the Synodical Conference, was often heard to remark, "The Missouri Synod went down by *degrees*."

<sup>33</sup> Toppe, "A Time-Honored Warning Against Present Dangers to the Church from Pharisaism," 124-125, noted "the growing emphasis on ritual and ceremony under the guise of going back to Luther's day when the Lutheran Church was just crawling out of its Roman Catholic shell and still outwardly observing many Roman Catholic ceremonies." Toppe faulted Synodical Conference churches, where "we hear of perpetual lamps burning, custodians crossing themselves before exhibiting sacramental vessels to visitors, altar boys, marriage communion for the bride and groom, and, in general, the dangerous tendency to crowd out the sermon by expanding the liturgy." No wonder, Toppe observed, that a young man who left a Lutheran congregation to join the Catholic Church "felt very much at home in it." See also H. C. Nitz, "High Church Practices," *The Northwestern Lutheran* 46:19 (September 13, 1959), 291; and "High Liturgical Fences," *The Northwestern Lutheran* 50:25 (December 15, 1963), 395, for complaints about "certain Romanizing externals" that were "creeping into some Protestant churches," including use of the term "sacrifice of the mass," using a sanctuary lamp ("we have seen them in Synodical Conference churches!"), genuflecting at the altar, and the use of incense.

in even-numbered summers (1940, '44, '46, '48, '50, '52, '54, '56, '58, '60). World War II forced cancellation of the Synodical Conference convention in 1942.

Wisconsin held special recessed conventions in 1953 and 1956. The Synodical Conference held special recessed conventions in 1954 and 1961. Each synod maintained its own committee on doctrinal unity, and each placed representatives on the Joint Doctrinal Unity Committee. The Conference of Lutheran Theologians, made up of theologians from Europe and Australia, understandably nervous over stateside intersynodical strife, met in 1959 and 1960 in a last effort to hold the synods' crumbling fellowship together. Living almost a half century after those trying times, we find it hard to untangle the knot of conventions, conferences, letters, overtures, replies - putting in order who met last, who would meet next, and what the current status of the major questions was. But, as Fredrich noted, "at the time, when the matter was being discussed was a burning issue and had been one for some years, the intricate argumentation was not difficult to follow."<sup>34</sup>

Some remembered personalities more than dates or events. "I still recall the patience of Minnesota President M. J. Lenz and Synod President Oscar Naumann," said one. Another recalled Naumann's assurances to delegates in 1953, upon accepting the presidency, that the course of the "barge" (the synod) would remain as it had been under the leadership of the man he was replacing, John Brenner. More often men recalled disagreements between synods and within Wisconsin.

I remember the period as one of extreme tension. People's ministries were judged by their position on the intersynodical controversy. It became *the* consuming issue. People who sat on the same side of the issue sat together, ate together, held rump sessions to plan strategy. I remember a plea at one meeting of the Former Synodical Council by the late President E. Arnold Sitz in which he pleaded with the brothers to mix up during the lunch hour and talk about something else for a change.

Comparing those events to a more current synodical upheaval, one respondent said, "The hot and sometimes bitter 'amalgamation' struggle does not approach that [of the] late '50s and early '60s for paranoia."

Synodical Conference conventions proved fruitless in resolving intersynodical differences.<sup>35</sup> In 1952 at St. Paul, President Brenner was "treated shabbily on the floor of the convention" and "hooted down when he tried to bring some brotherly admonition to Missouri." Another, who served on the Synodical Conference Floor Committee on Church Union in 1950 or 1952 recalled meeting with the individual doctrinal committees of all the synods and drawing up "what I considered to be a reasonably good report." When presented to delegates, however, "the liberal-minded movers and shakers of the Missouri Synod, sitting in the front section of the convention hall (I believe by design), made a motion to table the report," and "the report never returned, being effectively consigned to outer darkness." Such developments "did little to sweeten the dispositions of the conservative sector in Missouri and especially of the WELS and ELS contingents." By 1956 at Chicago "the WELS and ELS delegates had their own opening communion service in the ELS church while the LCMS and Slovak delegates worshiped at the scene of the convention."

In 1952 Wisconsin delegates declared themselves *in statu confessionis*, a state of protesting fellowship; the following summer Wisconsin in full convention ratified that position. When Missouri appeared unwilling to abandon its support of the *Common Confession* in 1954, the stage was set for a turbulent convention in 1955."<sup>36</sup> The chairman of Wisconsin's 1955 Floor Committee # 2 on church union recalled vividly the turmoil of that service, calling it "the most trying week in my professional life." After "countless hours of meetings and discussions, often running late into the night," his floor committee drafted a unanimous report, but the chairman

---

<sup>34</sup> Fredrich, "The Great Debate," 164.

<sup>35</sup> Fredrich, "The Great Debate," 165-166, explained that the Synodical Conference "never presumed to be an umbrella-type organization that sheltered any and all brands of Lutheranism," but that "it presumed the full doctrinal unity of its member synods." Missouri's insistence on following an "errant pathway" was "not something the Synodical Conference caused or failed to prevent but simply had to recognize."

<sup>36</sup> Fredrich, "The Great Debate," 167: "One would have to go back as far as 1868 for a synodical convention to equal that of 1955 in significance for the interchurch relations field."

then insisted, "purely out of courtesy," that the floor committee meet with the Synod's standing committee on church union "to just read the report to its members," but hoping "there would be absolutely no discussion of the report." The report had scarcely been read to the standing committee "when it seemed that 'all hell' broke loose." Presidents of the Dakota-Montana and Pacific Northwest districts "demanded that there be discussion, obviously to sabotage the report." Soon members of the standing committee were seen "marching" floor committee members "up and down Court Street in front of Michigan Lutheran Seminary, obviously remonstrating" with them.

When the floor committee did meet later in executive committee, it was readily apparent that what had been perhaps an uneasy unanimity had been lost. We were now a divided committee which, of course, resulted in majority and minority reports being presented to the Synod. Their presentation to the Synod constituted a long and trying day and morning. The up-shot, after sometimes rancorous discussion, was a decision to adopt the majority report but to hold the action in abeyance pending a special convention the following year. This led to a parade of individuals who had insisted on a break with Missouri on a march to the rostrum to sign formal protests over the Synod's sinful actions.<sup>37</sup>

Remembered by many at the 1955 convention was that, following the delegates' decision to postpone breaking with Missouri until the following year, Seminary President Edmund Reim offered his resignation from the seminary and the synod on the convention floor. "I was strongly moved by his speech," said one pastor. Two years later in New Ulm, when the resolution to break from Missouri failed by 16 votes, Reim again announced "that he could not in obedience to the Word of God accept the resolutions of the convention" and felt "compelled to discontinue his fellowship with the Synod."<sup>38</sup>

By 1961, a clear majority came to conclude that "to maintain ties [with Missouri] could have led to worse things," and voted 124-49 (71.7%) to break fellowship. Still, "debate was lengthy and emotions ran high." Coach Umnus of Northwestern College later called it "the most difficult decision he ever had to make."

It came only after significant opposition. As it grew increasingly clear that church fellowship would be *the* issue to separate the synods, some pastors challenged what was now being called Wisconsin's "unit concept" of fellowship, in which church fellowship was defined as "every joint expression, manifestation, and demonstration" of a common faith. The "Overseas Delegation," involved in the Conference of Lutheran Theologians, favored an approach emphasizing the marks of the church as a basis for fellowship.<sup>39</sup> Said one proponent: "Fellowship to me was a state or condition created by God through the Means of Grace, rather than an activity of faith with proof by inference [instead of] by direct application of Scripture." Supporters "spoke

---

<sup>37</sup> The respondent also reflected on the residue of his 1955 decision: "I received some mail [that showed] little evidence of a Christian spirit as it conferred on me the title 'liberal'- a kind of sobriquet that resurfaces even to this day. I was comforted, though, by a letter from a young pastor who stated: 'Prof. John Meyer doesn't know any theology and neither do you.' The comfort came from lumping me with John Meyer. I concluded that I must know more theology than I thought I did."

<sup>38</sup> In 1955, Reim said from the convention floor, "I can continue in fellowship with my Synod only under clear and public protest." Under such conditions, he resigned his position as secretary of the synod's Standing Committee on Church Union, and, "since I cannot change my stand and teaching in order to conform to the synodical policy" laid down for the 1955-56 school year- to postpone breaking with Missouri until 1956 - he resigned as president and professor at the seminary (*Wisconsin Proceedings, 1955, 87-88*). According to one respondent the seminary's board of control voted not to accept Reim's resignation, but board minutes contained his announced resignation as well as a question raised by one of the board's members: "Do we vote our personal convictions or the will of the Synod in convention?"

In 1957, after the vote to break with Missouri failed 61-77, Reim cited his 1955 statement, that stated that the convention's action not only failed to remove the occasion for his protest, but "increases and confirms it." Since his "clear and strong" protest to the synod "has been disregarded," Reim found himself "compelled to discontinue [his] fellowship with the Synod," adding: "I trust that you will realize that I take this step, not in anger, but in deepest sorrow, and because I am constrained by the Word of God" (*Wisconsin Proceedings, 1957, 144 - 145*).

<sup>39</sup> See E. H. Wendland, "Church Fellowship-A Unit Concept?" paper presented to the Southwestern Conference, Michigan District, January 1961. E. H. Wendland, "The Biblical Concept of Church Fellowship: paper written to answer questions related to the Wisconsin Synod's Doctrinal Committee on matters relating to the Fellowship Theses," February 1961.

frequently from the floor," and although one later called justification for the convention's decision "inevitable," he wrote, "I still can't agree with the *reason* given in 1961 for the split of the Synodical Conference."<sup>40</sup>

In a prepared statement presented just before the vote, Milwaukee pastor James Schaefer said he had listened to "contradictory counsel" from men "of equal stature, of equal acumen, of equal scholarship, equally devoted to the Holy Scriptures and to the Lutheran Confessions," but insisted:

There is nothing in the past history of this controversy that would tend to indicate to me that today, 4:30 P. M., August 17, 1961, and no other day, we must break fellowship with the Missouri Synod. The case today is no more hopeless, no more hopeful - than it ever was before ....

Schaefer insisted that each Wisconsin delegate must be so convinced that fellowship with Missouri must be broken that "it would be as preposterous to vote on that proposition as it would be to put the Trinity to a vote."<sup>41</sup>

Perhaps the most poignant recollection for many in 1961 involved the brother against brother face-off of Martin and Werner Franzmann. Raised in a Minnesota parsonage, Martin had taught at Northwestern before accepting a call to Concordia Seminary in 1946, while Werner remained a Wisconsin Synod pastor. The differing views of their synods had now turned brothers into opponents. At one microphone, Martin pleaded with Wisconsin delegates not to break; at the other, Werner, chairman of the floor committee on church union, replied that the time for patience had expired.<sup>42</sup> A third brother, Gerhard, recalled, "Since I loved and admired both brothers, it was a very wrenching experience." One delegate recalled Martin explaining that it was easy for a small synod like Wisconsin to take a firm stand, but it became more difficult if not impossible when a synod became as large as Missouri. Another remembered meeting Martin in a hallway off the convention floor and asking him, "How can you do what you're doing?" Franzmann answered, "You can't play with coal without getting your hands dirty."

Martin gave an "impassioned" good-bye speech to the assembled delegates, "quite lengthy," and "shortly thereafter" took a call to England. "After a short time Martin died. Was it because of a 'broken theological heart'?"<sup>43</sup>

## 7.

---

<sup>40</sup> According to newspaper accounts of the convention, the overseas theologians charged Wisconsin's fellowship theses with being "unscriptural." One pastor suggested that confusion among delegates might indicate the inadequacy of the synod's presentation. Another expressed doubts whether all avenues of negotiation had been exhausted. "Lutheran Unity Impasse Cited," *The Milwaukee Sentinel*, August 10, 1961. James Johnson, "Lutheran Split Theses Rapped as 'Unclear,'" *The Milwaukee Sentinel*, August 17, 1961. David A. Runge, "Delegates Divided on Synod's Stand," *The Milwaukee Journal*, August 16, 1961. David A. Runge, "Sharp Debate Erupts at Lutheran Meeting," *The Milwaukee Journal*, August 17, 1961.

<sup>41</sup> James P. Schaefer, "Statement to the WELS Convention, August 17, 1961," typed manuscript; letter, William J. Schaefer to Mark Braun, September 17, 1996.

<sup>42</sup> According to a *Milwaukee Journal* article the day after the split, Werner Franzmann said: "We have gone the long mile of Christian love with the Missouri Synod with the course and kind of admonition we have given until now. Today a sterner kind of admonition and love is required." David A. Runge, "Wisconsin Synod Votes to Split With Missouri," *Milwaukee Journal* (August 18, 1961), 1, 4.

<sup>43</sup> Martin Franzmann remained at Concordia Seminary until 1968, then accepted the preceptorship at Westfield House of the University of Cambridge, England, retiring in 1972. He died on March 28, 1976. Gerald Hoenecke, in his obituary in the *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 73:3 (July 1976), 226, cited Franzmann's contributions to statements on the doctrine of Scripture and the Antichrist, but also noted that Franzmann was chief author of Missouri's statement on fellowship in 1960, "which led to an impasse in our joint discussions and subsequently in our Synod's resolution to suspend its highly cherished fellowship of 90 years with its former sister synod."

A. L. C. union proponent E. C. Fendt remarked in his memoirs that "the man who suffered more pain and anguish than any other in my acquaintance" over the intersynodical strife was Martin Franzmann. Finding himself out of synodical fellowship with most of his family members, former classmates and associates "weighed heavily on his mind and heart." Fendt recalled Franzmann telling about his son, still attending a Wisconsin Synod college, who would no longer have prayer fellowship with his father when he came home from school. As tears fell from his eyes, Franzmann said, "There must be something wrong with the synodical resolutions when they destroy prayer fellowship in the family." E. C. Fendt, *The Struggle for Lutheran Unity and Consolidation in the U. S. A. from the Late 1930s to the Early 1970s* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1980), 191-192, 317.

*Do you recall any significant opposition among Wisconsin Synod members or pastors to the Synod's position on Scouting, prayer fellowship, or the chaplaincy?*

Five respondents answered, "No," one added two exclamation points "No!!" intimating, perhaps, that internal dissent was either inconceivable or unmentionable. "Not in our district," said one pastor. "No significant opposition among the congregation members I served," said another. "Not really," said a third. "Where I served there was great unanimity."

Several respondents credited thorough, ongoing instruction with keeping synodical disagreement to a minimum. "Our doctrinal commissions and Seminary faculty kept our members and pastors well-informed with Scripture-based studies. Another added, The more we studied the questions on the basis of Scripture, the more sure we became that our position was the Biblical and correct position." Helpful to pastors was that it could clearly be demonstrated "that it was not the Wisconsin Synod that had changed its position on these matters, but the Missouri Synod."<sup>44</sup> Observed one respondent, who entered the ministry in the late 1950s: "All of us were opposed to Scouting and chaplaincy *union* services. Fellowship with other churches was not condoned."

Other respondents answered, "No," but then hedged: maybe there was a little disagreement with synodical positions. Opposition existed "in very small pockets," but was "not widespread." One pastor could not remember "any overt opposition," another could not recall "any particular opposition that was repeated over the years." There may have been "a feeling of unease, but in general there was agreement with the basic underlying principles of opposition to (excessive) unionism as reflected in some of these things."

Others conceded disagreement mostly from laymen, who displayed "some lack of understanding" and were "unfortunately uninformed" on Scouting. There was "a pastor here or there who did not agree completely," or "a few pastors" who had "difficulty accepting the 'unit concept' concerning prayer fellowship." Or "here and there some WELS pastors expressed the thought that the military chaplaincy was a matter of government control and thus out of our hands."

Still others acknowledged more deep-seated disagreement. "There were pockets of resistance in many areas of the Synod," answered one pastor, adding that Pastors Oscar Siegler and Oscar Naumann from the Commission on Church Union "were traveling extensively to put out the fires." Said another, "There were many individuals, as well as 'pockets' of individuals, who very vocally took exception to the stance of the WELS on any and all of the above." Two respondents recalled that some opposition voices came from pastors "who had received training in Missouri, especially at the Springfield Seminary," or from "those who had deep family ties with LCMS pastors and members," or from those who operated joint high schools and grade schools with neighboring Missouri congregations. Both hastened to add, however, that some Wisconsin pastors with Missouri training, and even some Missouri pastors, supported Wisconsin positions, because they "saw what effects the creeping loose and liberal practices were having on the church."

One pastor related "an almost humorous incident" which occurred at a pre-convention delegate conference.

I had been given the assignment of reporting on intersynodical matters. The [synod's] Church Union Committee was recommending a break [with Missouri], and I simply reported what the book said. After I was finished a layman got up and said, "Now that we've heard from the prosecution, I move that we also hear from the defense."

---

<sup>44</sup> In the 1962 Dialog article cited previously, the author considered Wisconsin Synod frustration "certainly understandable" in view of Missouri's "paternalistic denials" and its "apparently deliberate attempts to slant or suppress the evidence" of synodical change: "Wisconsin was ultimately forced to conclude that the representatives from Missouri either were incredibly ignorant of the state of affairs in their own churches or were deliberately glossing the troublesome differences and making promises they could not, or did not intend to keep."

Other recollections were neither humorous nor pleasant. "My brother who was in the Army thought that an army without the problem-solving power of the chaplaincy was unthinkable." Uncertainties over prayer fellowship "caused constant friction among the brethren because of close ties with Missouri Synod congregations and people in many areas." Prayer fellowship "was hot enough that we invited Carl Lawrenz and Oscar Siegler to present [the] WELS position in an open meeting, and the church was filled. The presentation did not do much good." One pastor recalled "little opposition to ending prayer fellowship with the Missouri Synod," but "a lot of opposition to the 'unit concept' when it came to praying with other Christians in a family setting." Most outspoken on fellowship was this comment:

Prayer fellowship was highly confusing. From reading the study on fellowship principles and applications of the same, I think there was much to be desired. I felt sorry for our members upon whom a great burden was placed - in some cases, quite needlessly. It was through this unfortunate use of the fellowship principles as a club of righteousness that we required an attitude of "stand-off-ishness," rather than being known for the three solas, and positively moving forward.

Another respondent estimated that "more than 50% of Wisconsin's lay members were out of step with Synod's leadership," citing Wisconsin's 1955 convention at Saginaw, in which "the overall vote against breaking fellowship with Missouri was 2 to 1 against." Scouting "was not a doctrinal problem for members, but a social convenience for their children." Another wrote, "I think back to the days of my childhood. We were members of a Wisconsin Synod congregation with a Christian Day School, but also had a Scout troop at that time." His father refused to allow him to join the Scouts because "in his youth [the father] was a member of the Missouri Synod churches and that church was opposed to Scouting." This same pastor heard a presentation at the St. Croix Pastoral Conference in Minnesota in which a neighboring pastor praised the good features of the Scouting program and was never criticized for his remarks. "Personally," he recalled, "I feel that this was done to antagonize a new member is of the Conference - a super conservative pastor, who had replaced a liberal pastor at one of our churches."

Some arguments employed against Scouting "were almost ridiculous." The Scout problem "was blown way out of proportion" and became "much too important an issue at the time." Said another, "Many of us felt that 'Scouting' was raised to the level of the 'shibbeloth' of the Wisconsin Synod.<sup>45</sup> It was a subject used by other Lutherans to make us look bad - and thus it was a deterrent to growth." Two respondents recalled hearing district presidents remark that "Scouting was not originally meant to have any religious aspects," and that "the Confessions don't mention Scouting, so we should not say anything."

## 8.

*What effect(s) do you think the break of fellowship with Missouri has had on the Wisconsin Synod since 1961?*

Clearly "there were prophets of doom" who predicted separation from Missouri would cause the demise of the Wisconsin Synod. Richard Jungkuntz, professor at Watertown, took the convention floor just before the

---

<sup>45</sup> Armin Schuetze, "Foreword-1978: Shibbeloths," *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 75:1 (January 1978), 3-5, used the same word but as a positive indicator. Citing examples of creation "in the course of six normal days" and the historicity of Jonah, Schuetze acknowledged, "The implication is that the Wisconsin Synod is too much concerned about insignificant matters; it lets what is inconsequential divide it from other Christians who believe as the Wisconsin Synod does in whatever really counts." But such instances "provide an opening for some aspect of the historical-critical method of Bible interpretation that must be resisted at the beginning. The time to be warned is when we hear a 'shibbeloth' in place of a 'shibbeloth.' Once the enemy has crossed the Jordan, he may be beyond resistance."

1961 vote and announced dramatically, "Brethren, it is one minute to twelve for the Wisconsin Synod."<sup>46</sup> Fears were voiced that Wisconsin "in Linus-like fashion" would take its "doctrinal security blanket of anti-Scouting/chaplaincy/ecumenism/ theological conservatism and sit in the corner sulking."

The split proved "far less disastrous than I possibly feared at first," said one, "at least outwardly." Many saw the decision to go it alone as "all positive," "one of the best things that ever happened to our Synod," "the right thing to do," an action that had a "most salutary" and "very wholesome effect" because it "definitely made Wisconsin stronger."

Chief among its benefits was that "during the years of controversy, pastors, teachers, and lay members studied the Scriptures. Not that study hadn't been done before," but at that time "we were reminded to know what Scripture taught and how to apply them." The controversies "compelled our theologians to get back to the scriptures and do some real digging. Each generation has to take possession of scriptural doctrine for itself, not rely upon the 'fathers.'" It provided "good training" by making pastors and members "fully aware of the importance of God's Word and their sole reliance upon the promises in the Word for our very existence as a synod." The break "unified and strengthened our Synod in its present scriptural position." One pastor, who left Missouri for the WELS, remembered what "a real treat" it was "to experience the doctrinal unity among the pastors" - something he had not experienced in Missouri. The break made Wisconsin men "thankful for the faithfulness of Prof. Lawrenz" and others like him.

The understanding of Scripture came, not all at once, but was "a process." Paraphrasing something Lawrenz told him, a pastor wrote, "The Word of God is clear, but that does not mean it is clear to me as I read it. I have to read it many times before it gets through my thick skull." Though they had been trying times, this pastor regarded the experience as a positive thing, and he questioned whether later generations of WELS pastors, absent those stresses, study the Scriptures with as much intensity.

The struggle forced a generation to reread and reread, to study and reread the Bible. I think an interesting sidelight to your paper would be a comparison of the amount of time and effort spent studying the Word of God we preach as opposed to how to preach the Word in the conferences and conventions of those days with the conferences and conventions of today.

The controversy "cleared the air as to the direction our Synod would take in fellowship matters." Those who disagreed withdrew from the Synod; their departure "removed much ambiguity" and provided "a catharsis that rid the WELS of extremists on both sides," resulting in "a truer church." Ended were "the long debates, the uncertainties, the growing antagonisms." Although they lost cherished friendships and support from Missouri, "when the dust had settled we found a new kind of close fellowship within the Synod." What emerged was "a deeper fraternal spirit of cooperation among pastors and teachers and laity," and "more appreciation of whatever fellowship we have." This fellowship "helped prevent us from being swept up in a tide of false ecumenicity" and "preserved us from the influences of what was once called 'neoorthodoxy.'" Before the break, "WELS was somewhat tied to Missouri and the Synodical Conference," but the break "made WELS more self-sufficient and independent," more able "to stand on its own two feet." Realizing that "we could no longer lean on 'Big Brother' in our mission priorities, we became more independent in accepting these responsibilities," which "has worked out to our advantage." Reflecting the "small Synoditis" syndrome mentioned earlier, one respondent said, "I believe it helped the WELS shed its ugly duckling complex." Another added, "We no longer have to be the squeaking mouse intimidated by the roaring lion, LCMS or ELCA." Breaking with Missouri was "a wonderful

---

<sup>46</sup> Jungkuntz and Ralph Gehrke resigned their professorships at Northwestern College shortly after the 1961 convention. E. E. Kowalke, *Centennial Story: Northwestern College 1865-1965* (Watertown, WI: Northwestern College, 1965), 270, reported that one of the two (not identifying which one) said simply, "I share the Missouri position." Jungkuntz accepted a call to Concordia Seminary, Springfield, Gehrke to Concordia College, River Forest, following the 1961 convention. Northwestern's Board of Control refused to grant them a peaceful release of their calls, citing their "public rejection of the Synod's position regarding the principles of church fellowship."

thing. It was as if somebody took our water wings off, and we found out, 'Hey, I can swim!'" The WELS "emerged a more viable church body, no longer in LCMS' shadow."<sup>47</sup>

The break made Wisconsin more mission-minded. Previously it had been "fairly common to let Missouri or the Synodical Conference take care of outreach, while we hung back." No longer able simply to transfer members to Missouri congregations around the United States, "we became more conscious of outreach opportunities."<sup>48</sup> Wisconsin was compelled to recognize that "without the Synodical Conference, the WELS would itself be obliged to preach the Gospel to every creature." The break with Missouri "put us all on notice that the remark of one Missouri pastor was very much in place: 'The WELS is holding the *reine Lehre*, and is sitting on it!'"<sup>49</sup>

Thus in the 1960s and '70s the WELS became "a haven for those dissatisfied with liberalism" and "a refuge for those outside our circles who were troubled by unionism." Quite suddenly, the Wisconsin Synod, which for more than a century had been exclusively a regional church body, with congregations in 16 states in 1961, found itself announcing mission openings across the United States. "In our district it provided a new zeal and energy for mission outreach. The Missouri Synod no longer had 'squatter rights' to promising fields and areas in which they were located."<sup>50</sup> Unfortunately, former Missourians who endured the traumatic experience of a church body "changing out from under them" sometimes brought with them to their new synod fears that any change in church methodology, however incidental, were bellwethers that "Wisconsin will go just like Missouri did." One respondent commented on this mixed blessing.

I remember several LCMS pastors coming to our Synod and District, but quite a few of them didn't come just for doctrinal reasons. We inherited some problem cases with them, so that they didn't stay in the ministry and were asked to resign. They were of a different spirit.

The break fostered theological growth and increased the synod's appreciation for what it had been given. It helped "develop and utilize more fully the tremendous spiritual gifts with which God blessed WELS." The WELS became "better able to distinguish law and gospel in practice." It "spurred us on to value scholarship," helping the synod realize that "we had true scholars in our midst." This in turn stimulated scholarly activity that "strengthened our seminary program" and led to ongoing graduate study at the seminary. The break "stimulated

---

<sup>47</sup> James P. Schaefer, "Stewards of the Mysteries of God in Today's World," *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 74:4 (October 1977), 301, agreed that Wisconsin "gained an identity." Wisconsin could no longer lean, "carefree and comfortable, on Missouri's strength," nor could it comfortably escape wider notice. "Now its mission was clear: it was the last Lutheran church body of any size - I do not wish to slight the Evangelical Lutheran Synod - to maintain a confessional Lutheran posture, unyielding in its subscription to the Lutheran Confessions and to the theology of classic Lutheranism. It had moved out of Missouri's shadow. And the next decade dramatically documented the move."

<sup>48</sup> Schaefer, "Stewards of the Mysteries of God in Today's World," 302: "Such transferring after 1961 was no longer possible. Pastors could no longer commend Missouri Synod congregations as 'sister congregations.' Furthermore many of Missouri's pulpits were occupied by pastors who had received their seminary training under precisely those professors who were propelling Missouri into the ecumenical mainstream and experimenting with the historical-critical method."

<sup>49</sup> Dr. Siegbert Becker was a powerful exponent that since the WELS was now the last remaining orthodox Lutheran body, a debt of responsibility fell to it. In "2 Timothy 4:4-An Apt Description of Truth's Treatment by 'Modern' Theologians of the Lutheran Church" an essay read to the Minnesota District Convention in New Ulm, August 1, 1966, 18-19, Becker said:

"We are only a handful of people, but we are the largest Lutheran body in the world that has remained loyal to the Word in these days of apostasy. We are being called upon to share this gift in widespread areas of our country and of the world, and just because we are a small church body, our pastors, our teachers, and our laymen must learn to pray and to work and to give as we have never given and worked and prayed before in all our history .... We know that what is written in the Bible is no fable. We know that it is the infallible, inerrant Word of our God, made known to the world for the salvation of men through the vicarious atonement of our Lord Jesus Christ. A church which carries that conviction in its corporate heart ought not to be able to rest until it has done every last thing that it is able to do to share it with others. Humanly speaking, the next decade will be a crucial one for the Wisconsin Synod, and this is no time for anyone in the Wisconsin Synod to be sitting on his hands, or on his pocketbook, for that matter."

<sup>50</sup> See Robert C. Hartmann, "The Growth of the WELS Through the Years," *WELS Historical Institute Journal* 9:1 (Spring 1991), 37-38 on Wisconsin Synod growth in the 1960s and '70s.

publishing." The Synod "had to prepare our own devotional material," and now had more of its people - "writing religious books and commentaries on the Books of the Bible." Stewardship programs improved. "We had major building programs undertaken in our Synod's schools of higher learning," building a new Lutheran high school in Milwaukee, adding more than a dozen Lutheran high schools and a Lutheran college around the country.

On a more sobering note, one respondent wrote, "If the Wisconsin Synod had not broken when it did, we would have followed the ways of Missouri. Or the Synod would have fallen to pieces." Had Wisconsin voted to remain in protesting fellowship in 1961, hundreds of pastors may have left. Would Wisconsin have had the fortitude to carry on?

Not all viewed the split entirely in positive terms. It "created strained relations among relatives and friends" where there had been strong Wisconsin-Missouri family and working ties. Though acknowledging positive effects for Wisconsin, one respondent noted a "de-emphasis on doctrine" and an "increasing emphasis on practical training of pastors as opposed to theological grounding." Some wondered whether the same forces at work in Missouri a generation ago were now brewing in Wisconsin. As the Wisconsin Synod became "more centralized" and "more self-assured," it has also been "trying to show itself as modern and progressive." The respondent remarked: "It is disquieting to read, hear, and note language, articles, and actions similar to those things which took place as Missouri was getting set to fall." Another noted that "humanism began taking over the Missouri Synod, that is, the emphasis on man to do the job, 'we don't need God,'" as well as "the use of gimmicks, instead of the Word, to get and keep people in the Church," and added, "Some of these same tendencies now exist in our own Synod, sad to say." Other respondents, however, wondered whether breaking from a "more liberal" Missouri Synod had caused Wisconsin to become more reactionary. Being separate has made Wisconsin "more independent and aggressive" but also "somewhat more legalistic for a time and negative as a result."

WELS tended to look in some respects to Scripture as a kind of encyclopedia [of doctrine and practice] with the result that every issue had to be tied in a neat ribbon and put in its proper pigeon-hole. WELS has the ability to lay out basic principles very clearly but can get fouled up in applications<sup>51</sup>

Another said: "The pendulum has swung far to the other side concerning Theology of the Word and Theology of Fellowship." The same respondent who appreciated that Wisconsin had not been swept into the false ecumenicity of the late twentieth century also felt the break from Missouri "has contributed to a spirit of parochialism." In elaborating on his comment, this respondent wrote:

Jesus reminded his disciples in his high priestly prayer that he intended them to be in the world but not of it.

I understand that to mean that we are to insulate ourselves from the world without isolating ourselves from it. Parochialism tends to substitute isolation for insulation, or at least to confuse the two.

He feared that some WELS pastors today regard clergy from other denominations with suspicion, figuring "it's better to be safe," and so "we aren't even cordial [to them], as though cordiality would compromise our confessionalism."

Another way parochialism manifests itself is in the practical way of recognizing the church. We all confess to believe in the holy Christian church, the communion of saints, but we have a problem translating that belief into any kind of positive action - as though maybe there aren't any real saints outside the WELS. In applying fellowship principles we want to be sure to be on the safe side. We overreact. In doing so we exhibit behavior that in part gives credence to the stereotype people have of us. We live and work in an ecclesiastical

---

<sup>51</sup> This respondent's warning echoes a comment James Schaefer was frequently heard to make before his death in 1995: "The Wisconsin Synod has become more rabbinic."

ghetto, and act as though we think that is one of our strengths. The spirit of parochialism "operates with a ghetto mentality," which "obscures the love Jesus wants us to have for one another, even for our enemies."

In a 1996 essay presented to pastoral conferences in the South Atlantic District, former synod president Carl Mischke remarked on the oft-repeated adage that "the WELS is always twenty years behind Missouri," adding, "I don't ever recall anyone saying it because he wanted to pay the WELS a compliment." Usually the person who made the remark "was referring to something in the WELS that he didn't like and then would point out that he had observed the same thing in Missouri already 20 years earlier." If the Missouri Synod changed its practice of church fellowship, struggled over the doctrine of the Scripture, and succumbed to the desire of being more of a "big player" in the larger American Lutheran picture, and if it is true that "Wisconsin is twenty years behind Missouri," it would then be reasonable to assume- and to fear- that Wisconsin is destined to follow that same path.

But if, by separating from Missouri, Wisconsin preserved and espoused a more conservative outlook on fellowship and Scripture, then for Wisconsin the danger of legalism and a reactionary spirit may be greater than that of following Missouri's path. Mischke addressed that concern at the conclusion of his essay:

Legalism presents a special peril to a confessional Lutheran synod that wants to be faithful to the full truth of God's Word, and WELS is no exception. We want to be keenly aware of legalism's potentially menacing impact as we seek to deal evangelically with the challenges faced by the church in today's changed and rapidly changing environment. We will want to say all that Scripture says but also no more than Scripture says. We will need to distinguish carefully between what is descriptive and what is prescriptive in Scripture. We will need to be aware that on occasion more than one scriptural principle has a bearing on a given case. We will want to guard against making applications not supported in Scripture. We will need to understand that not everything in life is clearly black or white, that not everything fits into a predetermined, carefully-defined pigeon hole.<sup>52</sup>

Students of church history are well aware, as Samuel L. Stone expressed it in his great hymn, that now we see the church "by schisms rent asunder, by heresies distressed."<sup>53</sup> In the time of the Judges the writer lamented that "everyone did as he saw fit" (Judges 21:25), and "in those days the word of the Lord was rare" (1 Samuel 3:1). The New Testament church in the book of the Acts experienced insult, persecution, imprisonment, hypocrisy, factionalism, and martyrdom - and it had not yet even left Jerusalem. There is much in the story of the Wisconsin Synod of the mid-twentieth century to provoke sorrow instead of delight.

Yet the account of these trying times also displays clear-headed leaders, fiercely-held convictions, powerful emotions, ardent wrestling with the truths of Scripture, and unexpected blessings. Against this backdrop the Lord of the Church worked through fallible men to have his kingdom come and cause his will to be done. Though we struggle on in a divided Christendom, we look forward to the day when Jesus will bring to reality what he prayed for in John 17, "that they may be one."

---

<sup>52</sup> Carl H. Mischke, "Twenty Years Behind Missouri - A Caution for the WELS," essay presented to two pastoral conferences in the South Atlantic District, Fall 1996, 1, 24-25.

<sup>53</sup> Samuel L. Stone "The Church's One Foundation," *Christian Worship-A Lutheran Hymnal* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1993), 538:4.