

# **WELS Attitudes Towards Foreign and Minority Language Speakers And Their Cultures**

*By Paul Wendland*

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I wonder if it makes sense to ask me about WELS attitudes in these matters. The best people to ask would be the foreign and minority language speakers themselves. If we ask someone of our own number, "How're we doing, d'ya think?" what's he mostly like to say? "Fine, great!" It seems to make more sense to ask for the gift to "see oursel's as others see us." And then let the 'others' speak. Whatever surveys I've conducted could hardly be called scientific, just as whatever reading I've done could hardly be called exhaustive. So be forewarned: what you're going to get is the benefit of some very cursory reading, and some very impressionistic survey taking.

All the same, maybe it's better to express an opinion from an inbred WELS point of view than to say nothing at all, if only in the hope that it will inspire more discussion in an area that I think is very much worth talking about. Why do I think so? Well, we now live in a land where one out of every ten is foreign born, and where nearly one quarter of the population can be classified as belonging to a minority of one kind or another. So if we venture out into our communities at all, we're just bound to run into people who are not the same as us.

I must assume that this subject has something to do with the church's mission: to make the saving name of Jesus great among all nations, all tribes, and all tongues. We know that Christ transcends language and culture, but we also know that it is no easy matter for us to transcend our own culture and proclaim the message of Christ to people of a different language. We don't need to be geniuses to figure out us that differences tend to divide us, whereas the more we hold in common, the easier it is to stay together. Only the gospel can take our closed-off hearts and fill them with a love big enough to embrace a world of human differences. Only the gospel can give us the eyes to see linguistic and cultural difference as enriching gifts, not divisive curses--as a Pentecost, not a Babel.

As a matter of method, I intend to restrict myself to those attitudes which we can see displayed among WELS members as they have engaged with other languages and cultures in North America. It would take us too much time to bring into the discussion our world-wide mission fields, and I don't believe it would alter the basics conclusions that much. We will have a chance, however, to talk about the mission spirit displayed by our Synod at various times in its history.

## **Attitudes Displayed in Our Early Years**

What are some of the attitudes that WELS people have held towards people of other cultures? We should first ask the question of our history, because if we don't know where we came from, we can't know how we came to be where we are. And we won't know what we need to work on. Cultural attitudes persist over time. That's not to say they remain static and unchanged from one generation to the next. But we often can recognize the family resemblance--despite all the changes--in the ways my grandfather looked at things and in the way I see them now. Basic patterns endure.<sup>1</sup>

When we consider the founders of the WELS in their own historical context, we should realize, first of all, that it is extremely doubtful whether they could have even conceived of their little Wisconsin ministerium being some kind of majority group that needed to figure out a way to relate to people of other cultures. If you

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<sup>1</sup> Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan may shed more light on what I mean by this idea of cultural persistence. In their influential book *Beyond the Melting Pot*, they suggested that immigrant ethnic groups "developed distinctive economic, political and cultural patterns. As the old culture fell away . . . a new one, shaped by the distinctive experiences of life in America, was formed, and a new identity was created. Italian-Americans might share precious little with Italians in Italy, but in America they were a distinctive group that maintained itself." (from the preface to the 2nd edition, xxxiii. Cambridge: The M.I.T. Press).

had asked Muehlhaeser, Weinemann, or Wrede in 1849, "Say fellows, what do you think of foreigners?" they could only have been confused by the question. After all, they were the German foreigners and still very much in the minority in this English-speaking land.

A better question would have been, "How do you see yourselves fitting into this new country?" and then to follow up with, "How do you look at the dominant Anglo culture around you?" Both questions probe our immigrant parents' sense of identity in a situation where their culture was rubbing up against another. Since we can't expect the Synod fathers to answer these questions in person, we must let the historical record do it for them, and hope we don't distort too many things in the process.

### How We Saw Ourselves

Well, how did our Synod's founders see themselves in relation to their American environment? As decidedly German! The first of the founding resolutions read:

The synod to be formed should have and maintain the name, "The First German Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Wisconsin" and should be perpetuated for all time under that name and designation<sup>2</sup>

This sense of being German--with a desire to remain that way--was hardly something isolated to our Synod's enabling resolutions. Wisconsin Synod congregations often bore a "German" in their official names, and it was commonly stipulated in their constitutions that the language of worship and instruction should be 'German forever.'<sup>3</sup>

Now I don't in the least want to reduce our founders' sense of identity to their 'German-ness.' Any group's sense of identity is an extremely complex matter, formed of many different components that rise or fall in prominence depending upon the situation. Obviously, there were also deep religious convictions behind our founders' coming together. While Muehlhaeser may have lacked the confessional rigor of a Walther, he was without question also a man of firm, Biblical principles. Furthermore, I do not want to hold their attitude up for latter day ridicule as being hopelessly unaware of the forces of progress and history. There were good and sensible reasons for the men to see themselves and their new synod as German, reasons we will look at more closely in a moment.

What I do want to point out is that, among all the reasons for our Synod's coming into existence, our desire to retain our German-ness was by no means least. The German culture and the Lutheran confessions were profoundly connected in our forebears' thinking. Since a person's coming to Christ is always something that happens within a particular culture, it was only natural for their German heritage and the everlasting gospel to have been intertwined in their minds. It was also very difficult for them to distinguish between the two. To do so requires a conscious effort and a firm desire. And to form a firm desire, one has to see the need.

But there were no compelling reasons at the time to make such a distinction. This much becomes clear when we consider the number of German immigrants that were then flooding into this country. Decade by decade, the US Census bureau kept track of it:

1831-1840	152,454
1841-1850	434,626
1851-1860	951,667
1861-1870	787,468
1871-1880	718,182

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<sup>2</sup> E.C. Fredrich, *The Wisconsin Synod Lutherans*. Milwaukee: NPH, 1992, p. 12.

<sup>3</sup> Mark E. Braun, "Changes within the Ev. Lutheran Synodical Conference of North America which led to the Exit of the Wisconsin Ev. Lutheran Synod," Ph.D. diss., Concordia Seminary, 200, p. 30.

1881-1890	1,452,970
1891-1900	505,152
TOTAL	5,002,519 <sup>4</sup>

With this kind of immigration taking place year after year, the pool of German speakers in America was constantly being renewed and refreshed. Under such conditions, why ever would a church body want to abandon German? Obviously, the task closest to hand was the gathering of these German immigrants into congregations. Focusing on people who were just like us could easily satisfy that impulse every Christian has to reach out with the gospel. There was no need for us to cross cultural barriers to do mission work.

So that no false judgments are made on our fathers, we need to remind ourselves that what they were about was indeed mission work, even though it was aimed at their own ethnic group. These German immigrants were wandering in the land like sheep without shepherds, and the efforts of the *Reiseprediger* (traveling missionaries) to gather them into flocks were nothing short of heroic.

Yet there were also some leaders who foresaw the day when all this might have to change. From the start there were voices in the Synodical conference talking about the need to reach out to the English speakers in the land. Matthias Loy, for example, declared that our mission "without question" had to be "to proclaim the great deeds of God in the English language in this country."<sup>5</sup> This type of mission voice went largely unheard, however.

Our German church would finally make the change to English because of the pressures brought on by World War I and because of the need to retain our own members, not because of any mission drive. So until the 1890's we were "a German preaching synod exclusively . . . the question of preaching English rarely arose."<sup>6</sup> And the mission impulse to preach in English could continually be stilled by thoughts of the more pressing obligation to gather in the immigrants. In 1883, President Johannes Bading declared that the spiritual needs of these German Lutherans gave us "a holy and important mission [that we] will not be able to finish in our whole lives."<sup>7</sup> We can discern here how cultural patterns--formed in the crucible of necessity--can become persistent traditions even after the gospel-hearted reasons for them are no longer so pressing.

Our sense of ourselves during those formative years as a decidedly German synod cannot be adequately explained, however, on the basis of immigration alone, or from the mission obligation we felt because of it. The fact is, many among us saw the retention of German as an aid to the gospel and its preservation in an English-speaking land. In theory, at least, everyone understood that it wasn't necessary to speak German to know Jesus.<sup>8</sup> But when you yourself had come to know him in German, when your hymns, confessions, and doctrinal writings were almost exclusively in German, you would have a natural antipathy towards worshipping God in English.<sup>9</sup> This emotional attachment to German plus the lack of a sound theological literature in English worked together powerfully to build up the resistance to change. As late as 1914, one Missouri Synod pastor went so far as to say, "The loss of the German language is frequently accompanied by the loss of true Lutheranism."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Table of US Census figures from Don Heinrich Tolzmann's *The German-American Experience*. New York: Humanity Books, 1999, p. 223.

<sup>5</sup> as qtd. by Braun, op. cit., p. 29. As a matter of fact, Pastor Loy made this statement in the first doctrinal paper presented to the newly-formed Synodical Conference.

<sup>6</sup> Hans K. Moussa, "Seventy-Five Years of the Wisconsin Synod," *Northwestern Lutheran*, Vol. 12, No. 22 (November 1, 1925).

<sup>7</sup> as qtd. by Braun, op. cit., p. 49.

<sup>8</sup> See Braun, *ibid.*, pp.28-31; and Moussa, *op. cit.*, for expressions of this.

<sup>9</sup>The religious language of one's childhood is one that a person will naturally cling to as "*mau ogwiritsa mtima*," --the language that grabs the heart, as the Chewa people of Central Africa say. Our own difficulties over the shift from King James English offers sufficient evidence of this. August Pieper captured this feeling nicely in one comment attributed to him, "*Ich will auf Deutsch selig werden.*"--I intend to be saved in German. This will be all the more true for a band of immigrants who feel themselves to be strangers in a strange land.

<sup>10</sup>as qtd. by Braun, *ibid.*, p. 31.

Foes of English could also point to the history of Lutheranism in America in order to back up this assertion. German Lutheranism did not begin here with the immigration of the 1800's. Its roots went all the way back to colonial times. By the early 1800's, however, this first wave of German Lutherans found itself becoming rapidly assimilated into the Anglo culture. As they did so, they began to sound less and less Lutheran in their doctrinal pronouncements and more and more like the English Protestants around them. Small wonder, then, that for many Synodical Conference Lutherans, the connection between language and religion was axiomatic. To quote something commonly said in those days: "The language is the vessel of faith."<sup>11</sup>

Our fathers had other fears about themselves melting down into the dominant English culture as well. These fears did not have so much to do with their becoming imbued with a defective theology as with a desire to preserve their German heritage within an Anglo environment they perceived as alien. They saw a great deal to dislike in the Yankee culture and style. LCMS president Heinrich C. Schwan, for example, saw the real danger not being the English language so much as what he called "the American spirit," which he identified with materialism, doctrinal indifference, emotionalism, and moralism.<sup>12</sup>

Perhaps his expressions require some explanation. Yankees had become identified with an "anything for a buck" kind of materialism that made every human value subservient to the practical demands of business. Such sharp business practice had also invaded the church. August Pieper, for example, felt nothing but a withering contempt for any "American" church that "measured its worth by its outward success."<sup>13</sup> Then there were those emotional outbursts at American revivals and camp meetings. These struck the less emotionally expressive Germans as excessive. The dominant culture was also regarded with disfavor because of what was seen as the American penchant for moral crusading, demonstrated in a desire to legislate everything from Sunday-Sabbath laws to the prohibition of liquor consumption. Germans who liked to spend convivial Sunday afternoons at the local beergarden would naturally regard these efforts as an unwarranted intrusion upon their personal freedoms.<sup>14</sup>

Beyond this, Germans immigrants felt some irritation with the American majority in matters of high culture. In literature, for example, they could not understand why German poets like Schiller and Goethe should not stand alongside Shakespeare and Pope in the pantheon of Great Writers. In their view, English authors were overemphasized.<sup>15</sup>

These attitudes should not be read as anti-American, however. The wholehearted participation of German-American communities on the side of the North during the Civil War should be regarded as irrefutable evidence of the Germans' love for their new homeland.<sup>16</sup> Rather, German-Americans should be seen as the first proponents of a mufti-cultural or pluralistic vision of the United States.<sup>17</sup> Unlike the WASPs of the East, they did not see the need for America to be mono-cultural--in conformity with some kind of Anglo-American model of unity. The great German-American politician, Carl Schurz, said it best when he wrote:

As American citizens, we must become Americanized; that is absolutely necessary. I have always been in favor of a sensible Americanization, but this need not mean a complete

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<sup>11</sup> Willi Paul Adams, *The German-Americans: An Ethnic Experience*, translated and adapted by LaVern J. Rippley and Eberhard Reichmann. Indianapolis: Max Kade German-American Center, 1993, p. 23. Moussa, *op. cit.*, also speaks of the habit of WELS pastors and members thinking that "English meant sectarianism," though he goes to some lengths to refute the idea.

<sup>12</sup> *The Lutherans in North America*, E. Clifford Nelson, ed. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, p. 350.

<sup>13</sup> "Anniversary Reflections," *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, Vol. 84, No. 1 (Winter 1987), p. 14.

<sup>14</sup> Tolzmann, *op. cit.*, p.234.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 234.

<sup>16</sup> According to some estimates, there were anywhere from seventy-seven to one hundred German-American regiments participating in the war on the Northern side. This does not include those of German descent who were distributed throughout the regiments of the Union. See Tolzmann, *ibid.*, p. 210ff.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 235.

abandonment of all that is German. It means that we should adopt the best traits of American character and join them to the best traits of German character.<sup>18</sup>

To Schurz and many German-Americans of the Civil War period, Americanization did not mean the loss of the German language or heritage. It meant the acceptance of American political ideals, the adoption of English as the general medium of political discourse, along with the retention of their German heritage and language within their local communities.

In this connection, I find it ironic that the great-grandsons and daughters of these same German immigrants earnestly oppose any idea of cultural pluralism in America when confronted by its modern versions. As I would teach them in MLC's "Minority Cultures" class, I'd often encounter somewhat hostile attitudes whenever I would put forth some modern pluralistic theories of a multi-cultural America. For example, when I tried to mention some of the claims of the proponents of Bilingual education--especially if I'd try to present them in a positive light--I'd often feel like I was speaking to a convention of confirmed English Only advocates.

Returning to our past, it's worth noting that our parish schools were regarded as the vehicle to preserve both our theology and our German heritage. Remember how closely associated those two ideas were at that time. Our leaders emphasized the religious aspect, asserting the value of parish schools as preservers of orthodoxy among the next generation. In fact Walther very nearly made their establishment in every congregation into an article of faith.<sup>19</sup> But it cannot be denied that, among the laity at least, more was involved in their popularity than a desire to bring up children in the way that they should go. Moussa admits "The schools were really German schools and it is quite possible that many of those who used them for their children thought fully as much of learning German as they did of learning Christian truth."<sup>20</sup> Keeping cultural matters distinct from the gospel is a difficult business in any generation.

### **How We Reached Out To Others**

With all this talk about our self-consciously German attitudes in those early years, you might get the impression that our mission drive would have spent itself completely in gathering German immigrants or in building schools to preserve our German theological heritage. This would not be true, however. Already in 1877, delegates to the Synodical Conference voted to begin doing mission work among the former slaves of the South. The missionaries' initial efforts, however, almost read like a manual in how *not* to do mission work. Those sent were ethnocentric in the extreme.

One began his work by preaching to the black ministers of the town, setting forth to them the "complete" understanding of the truths of Scripture. He had hoped that, upon being confronted with the palpable truth, they would come flocking over to his orthodox banner and beg to hear more. "He was quite crestfallen to find that of all those present "only two preachers confessed their ignorance and wished to learn from me."<sup>21</sup> In his mission reports, he referred to his pupils as "darkies" who "made the most scandalous racket" in school.<sup>22</sup> That he lasted three years is a miracle. For his replacement, the mission board sent a man whose knowledge of English was defective. His solution for the language barrier? "He set about teaching his black students German chorales and nothing else. He, too, did not last long."<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 236.

<sup>19</sup> In 1873, he wrote, "It is a crying contradiction to its profession if a church body. . .desires to be Lutheran [yet] evinces no earnestness and zeal to establish . . .orthodox parochial schools where they do not exist," as qtd. in Pieper's "Anniversary Reflections," *op. cit.*, p. 24.

<sup>20</sup> Moussa, *op. cit.*

<sup>21</sup> Jeff G. Johnson, *Black Christians: the Untold Lutheran Story*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1991, p. 154.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 154.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 155.

In the new English periodical of the Missouri Synod--launched in 1879--the Blacks among whom we worked were referred to in almost heroic terms as "the freedmen of the South."<sup>24</sup> Unfortunately, the way the mission was reported in the German church magazines of the time reveals a far more negative attitude. Southern blacks were depicted in the highly charged language of race, and referred to as "the perishing darkie heathen," or "the children of Ham."<sup>25</sup> This last Biblical reference is worth spending a little more time on both because of its historical importance and because of its persistence in many circles today, including our own.

Blacks had been called the children of Ham because of an early tradition that associated peoples of a darker skin color with Ham, the son of Noah. Loosely based on Genesis 9:18-27, the notion had gradually developed in Europe that God had cursed all the children of Ham with a darker skin color and in this way marked them for all time as peoples destined to be slaves. Although elements of this idea pre-dated both the slave trade and the institution of slavery in America, there can be no doubt that it provided a powerful theological warrant for slavery in the antebellum South. Many Christian churches taught it both before and after the Civil War as if it were the absolute truth, even though it was based on a laughably faulty exegesis of the Biblical text and had been utterly refuted at the time by Black intellectuals.<sup>26</sup> This racist theology hits even more closely to home than we might think. When I first attended Northwestern Prep in 1968, I was instructed to purchase "The Northwestern Bible Study Series-Revised 1952." In the first pamphlet, I encountered this explanation of Genesis 9:

The working-out of Noah's prophecy in history is truly remarkable. Hamitic peoples have never attained to world-leadership. . .even when they have not lived in subjection and slavery, their sensual and servile mind remains their dominant characteristic. . .The Japhethites, commonly known in history as Aryans, expanded over the face of the earth, wrested world-leadership from the Semites at an early date, and have given the world its culture and civilization. [page 6]

While this interpretation does not associate dark skin with the children of Ham, it does speak of a "servile mind" and undoubtedly sees this characteristic displayed in African-Americans, among others. The statement about Aryans is remarkable in view of the collapse of all notions of scientific racism (as well as of a single, dominant, European world-culture) following World War Two. Apparently these ideas managed to persist for a while among us.

Now I don't recall this false doctrine ever being explicitly taught in my undergraduate classes in the 1960's. In fact, I'm rather sure it wasn't. Furthermore, I remember the idea being specifically debunked at the Seminary during my years of study there. Recently I asked my father how widespread the notion had been during his own era as a student and early days as a pastor. He told me he had heard of it, and that it had even been taught by some, but by no means all. I can say, however, that this deeply offensive idea has not completely died in our midst. In my mission preaching in rural Minnesota I have been approached on at least two occasions by elderly gentlemen who attempted to use this Bible passage from Genesis to explain to me "why they [African-Americans] are that way."

People of every flavor undoubtedly possess ethnocentric tendencies, and we all have to come to terms with the racist within. I call attention to this unpleasantness not to demonstrate our moral superiority to the people of yesterday, but so that we guard against any racist attitudes that may exist among us today. No group is immune from them, it seems, not even church groups.

Returning to our narrative of the Synodical Conference's outreach among the blacks: in 1891, contact was made in North Carolina with an independent group of black Lutherans, a group that even had their own pastors! They had been more or less pushed out of an older white Lutheran Synod in the South and were now in need of financial support. To their credit, the Synodical Conference accepted the challenge, but as one might

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<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 156

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 156.

<sup>26</sup> See an abstract of Werner Sollors' essay on the curse of Ham at <http://www.umsl.edu/i/-cfh/abstracts/han-1.html>.

imagine, there were soon issues that developed between the mission pastors and the group requesting aid. Most of them revolved around matters of money and control. But after these were resolved (albeit in favor of the whites who were holding the purse strings), the "Immanuel Conference," as it became known, was the "largest and most stable area of the mission board's work."<sup>27</sup> Equally important was the fact that the Synodical Conference committed itself not only to establishing schools in black congregations, but to training black pastors as well. Efforts to do the latter culminated in the founding of Immanuel Seminary and College in 1903, which was specifically charged with the training of church workers. Immanuel successfully carried out this task for the next 57 years.<sup>28</sup>

This commitment to education and worker training earned for us the praise of no less a figure than Booker T. Washington. He recommended the Synodical Conference Lutherans to Rosa J. Young when she was looking for a church body to help the people of Wilcox County, Alabama.<sup>29</sup> Rosa was a remarkable black schoolteacher who was determined that the residents of that rural southern county should reap the benefits of a solid primary education. Again the Synodical Conference answered the call, and by 1948 could count nearly 4,000 as baptized members of Lutheran churches there.<sup>30</sup>

Although we have been looking primarily at actions here, we may fairly infer some attitudes from what we have seen. The gospel clearly demonstrates its compelling power here in the way it enabled these Synods--working in concert--to overcome prejudice and fear and reach out to people from an entirely different background. We see how the gospel can transform a firm commitment to parochial education in such a way that schools become effective tools for outreach. Parish schools were not just "our" good; the gospel helped us see them as treasures from God, treasures he had given to us to share with others. From their establishment on the mission fields, we also can conclude that the Synodical Conference was not operating with any kind of double standard when it came to the thorough instruction of prospective members. Finally, instead of trying to do the work entirely through missionaries, the Synodical Conference placed an early emphasis on the training of church workers from the culture it was seeking to reach.

We turn now to our own Synod's first solo venture into cross-cultural mission work: our work among to the Apache of Arizona. We began the enterprise in 1893 by sending G. Adascheck and J. Plocher out to serve the "just barely pacified" Indians.<sup>31</sup> Once again we find in the attitudes displayed a great deal of good, and a great deal that is not so good. But both the good and the bad can serve us by helping us examine our own attitudes today.

To begin with, there were differing views over whether the Synod should be engaged in this type of mission work at all. J.P. Koehler believed that the advocates of doing 'heathen' mission work went too far in insisting that "a church is not living up to its mission" unless it was carrying out the Great Commission among people who'd never heard the gospel. He characterized this attitude as "dogmatism with a streak of pietism."<sup>32</sup> He went on to suggest that a more intensive and inward-looking mission was perhaps more suitable for a smallish church body like the WELS, since "numerical growth ought to . . . come from within to assure the compactness of the body and the inward strength that grows from close identity and singleness of purpose, instead of having various heterogeneous elements thrown together."<sup>33</sup> This inward-looking mission, Koehler maintained, would be carried out by a firmer support for our educational system.

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<sup>27</sup> Johnson, *op. cit.*, p. 162.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 164.

<sup>29</sup> John M. Brenner, "Forward in Christ: The Maturing Synod Looks Beyond Itself," *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, Vol. 97, No. 2 (Spring 2000), p. 91.

<sup>30</sup> Johnson, *op. cit.*, p. 168.

<sup>31</sup> E.C. Fredrich, *op.cit.*, p. 98.

<sup>32</sup> In his *History of the Wisconsin Synod*, St. Cloud: Sentinel Publishing Company, 1970, p. 198.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 196.

In setting cross-cultural mission work and our educational system in opposition like this, Koehler also demonstrated, in my opinion, the way a cultural pattern (formed in one generation out of necessity) can persist to become a norm in the next. At first the overwhelming flood of German immigrants demanded our attention. Our educational system was the Synod's response to that pressing need. But Koehler transforms something that "had to be that way for now" into "the way things ought to be." We recognize, of course, that it doesn't have to be an either-or proposition. Mission work and Christian education, outreach and nurture do not have to be seen as conflicting goals. Yet according to our best historian in the last generation, "The cautious approach to [the Great Commission] gained ground and was a formidable factor a half century later."<sup>34</sup>

We can also detect in Koehler's words fears that are often expressed when the matter of cross-cultural work comes up. "How will we assimilate these new people into our midst? Will they be so 'heterogeneous' as to dilute our own identity?" These fears are natural, and in a sense what is feared will come to pass. A group's identity (insofar as it is a matter of earthly culture) is bound to change when it takes in people from another culture. If we don't understand this from the outset, we are not properly counting the cost. The gospel not only helps us overcome these fears, but helps us see these changes as a blessing, not a curse. We become richer by them, not poorer.

On the other hand, Koehler in life was not as dogmatic on the subject as his written statements may sound. He himself spent time on the Apache reservation, observing our missionaries at work. He continued to show interest in the mission.<sup>35</sup> And he was right in at least some of his assessments of our first solo venture. We were very naïve in the way we entered the work, and remained somewhat slipshod and halfhearted in the way we carried it out afterwards. The two young missionaries-Adascheck and Plocher--had really not been prepared in any special way to take on the challenge of cross-cultural work.<sup>36</sup> The financial and moral support the mission received was less than adequate.

As might be expected, there was a great deal of turnover in the mission staff during those early years. Some of it was due to illness. Some of it was due to climate. Some of it was due to language difficulties. A great deal of it, no doubt, was due to a deep sense of alienation felt by missionaries of German stock who found themselves suddenly placed into an very different world. Often called "culture shock," this malady affects those who have been asked to "play the game of life with little or no understanding of the rules."<sup>37</sup> Despite all the difficulties--the lack of support and training for the missionaries, the naïveté of the Synod--the gospel did its work not only in the hearts of the Apache, but also in the hearts of the missionaries, helping them find ways to work effectively in their new environment. The establishment of primary schools, as one might expect, became a key feature of the outreach effort, but not in such a way as to keep the missionaries from riding out on horseback to meet with the nomadic Apache in their camps. Since the Apache people were often desperately poor and since disease took a devastating toll on them and their children, Christian love led the missionaries and their wives to respond to the need with acts of kindness and mercy. Accounts of Edgar Guenther's efforts during the flu epidemic of 1918/19 make inspiring reading. Some missionaries also became experts in the Apache language. In evangelizing, a non-confrontational approach was preferred by many.<sup>38</sup> The lives of missionaries like Guenther, Harders, Meyer, and Uplegger clearly demonstrate an inner attitude of committed, self-giving love combined with a humble willingness to listen and learn as well as preach and teach. They were sensitive to the culture they were trying to reach.

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<sup>34</sup> E.C. Fredrich, *op.cit.*, p. 102

<sup>35</sup> Brenner, *op.cit.*, p. 105

<sup>36</sup> E.C. Fredrich, *op. cit.*, p. 99

<sup>37</sup> Ferraro, as qtd. by William B. Kessel, "WELS Pioneers in Apacheland" WELS Historical Institute Journal, October 1995.

<sup>38</sup> Presenting Christianity as the "right way," without directly criticizing the "wrong ways" of the Apache--unless absolutely necessary. And when the wrong way did need to be rebuked, the Apache Christians best handled it themselves. See William Kessel *op. cit.*, p. 28. Also his paper "Apache Indians and Anglo Missionaries: A Study in Cross-cultural Interaction," paper delivered at the Native American Symposium in Tucson, Arizona, May 5-6, 1992. C.F. esp. pp. 13-15.



One of the most beautiful fruits of the gospel in those years was the way it brought white missionary and Apache interpreter together to work in partnership. "Such native assistants did more than merely convey the Biblical messages into the local vernacular . . . They also taught the missionaries about Apache life, customs, and beliefs."<sup>39</sup> As a result, missionaries were able to communicate in the style and with the concepts of the Apache people. As their relationships with the missionaries deepened, some Apache interpreters quite naturally wanted to take their training to the next level and serve their people as pastors. With all that we know today about the necessity of developing an indigenous leadership early in cross-cultural situations, it seems in hindsight that the time was right to honor their request.

Unfortunately, it did not happen. Pastoral training of the Apache would have to wait. Though on several occasions Missionary Guenther recommended to the mission board that a way be found to do the job, nothing came of it except the board's suggestion (made some time in the 1940's) that anyone who wished to become a pastor was welcome to attend Northwestern College and Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary.<sup>40</sup> In order to be successful, people engaged in cross-cultural work need to be flexible. They need to figure out ways of doing the same thing differently. We didn't understand this as well then. Perhaps we know it better now.

### **Big Changes**

World War One caused the WELS to come out of its Germanic shell a little more quickly than it would have done otherwise.<sup>41</sup> Even so, despite the pressure of Nativism and the "English Only" versions of Americanism being forced upon people of German descent, the change was not as abrupt for us as it might have been. We were still somewhat shielded by our being located in the rural and small town regions of our midwestern strongholds.

Our transition to English really began around the turn of the century. From that time on, many of our young people grew up speaking more English than German. The effect of the war was to speed things along until, by the end of the 1930's, the changeover to English was more or less complete. Considering that we had been in the country since 1850, one could hardly call the speed with which the WELS moved blinding. Many had hoped the conversion could have come more gradually still, and that bilingualism could be maintained in some areas at least.<sup>42</sup> And although some of the voices advocating the change to English envisioned doors being opened to wider populations,<sup>43</sup> evangelism was not the prime motivating force. Retaining our own people was. The Americanization movement fueled by the passions of Great War served to underline that necessity and helped us to focus on it.

Also inward-turning was our decision during the boom years of the 1920's to spend the lion's share of our Synodical budget on education.<sup>44</sup> Necessary improvements were made throughout the system: in buildings, in curricula, in training, in salaries.<sup>45</sup> The first area Lutheran high school in our circles was founded. Hans Moussa, in his jubilee essay of 1925, summed up what was for him the chief reason for it all:

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<sup>39</sup> Kessel "Apache-Anglo Interaction," p. 10.

<sup>40</sup> See Kessel, "WELS Pioneers," p. 30. This paragraph also based on a personal interview with the author of that essay on June 13, 2001.

<sup>41</sup> This is the opinion of both Brenner, *op. cit.*, p. 178, and Fredrich, *op. cit.*, p. 139. Fredrich goes on to call it "a long overdue transition."

<sup>42</sup> See Brenner, *op.cit.*, p. 180

<sup>43</sup> As for example A. Pieper in his convention essay of 1919. C.F. Hoenecke, *op. cit.*, p. 205.

<sup>44</sup> See Fredrich, *op.cit.* "Focus on Education," pp.143-153

<sup>45</sup> To a large degree the debts incurred during the school building programs of the 20's contributed to the gloom and doom feelings of the 30's.

It doesn't matter what the diminishing supporters of the German language do or not do; it does matter tremendously what you as a pioneer of the new Lutheran English church in these parts are going to do, to serve best yourself and your children by keeping the gospel pure . . . .Let us become English, if we must; if some Asiatic conqueror ever makes us Chinese, let us become Chinese in speech, if we must; but whatever we become, *let us take our parish schools with us* (italics his; underlining mine).

Certainly no one would call the basic thrust of these decisions unwise. We must be concerned about educating our young, and about nurturing them in the faith. We can even see the wisdom in placing a decided emphasis on the re-tooling of our educational system at the critical time of the language shift. Yet we note both in the changeover from German and in the emphasis on education that same pattern mentioned before. The way we talk about our mission of proclaiming the gospel seems to focus primarily on ourselves, and on our needs as church body.

If this attitude and approach becomes a church's consistent one, then the church's sense of its God-given mission has been distorted.

Our zeal to preserve the gospel through Christian education must flow out of a heart that contains an equal ardor to share Christ with all the world. Our gospel mission begins right where we are in teaching our children to know Christ, but it continues with our neighbors in ever-widening circles until it reaches them in the uttermost parts of the earth. If the two are not felt as different sides of a single coin, then a school, or a congregation--or even a Synod for that matter--can easily become simply a man-made safety zone where we find an ersatz refuge from a stormy world of change.<sup>46</sup> Still, we were not completely preoccupied with educational issues during the 20's. During that same decade we also began a mission to German-speaking Lutherans in Poland.<sup>47</sup> And at the end of the decade, some far-sighted members of the Michigan District expressed this vision of our mission opportunities:

America in the last decades has developed from an agricultural to an industrial nation. . .[which] has led to an immense growth in city population . . . .Along with this many rural inhabitants. . .are attracted and absorbed by the cities . . . .Many opportunities. . .present themselves and what is at stake is mission in the true sense of the term. In the cities all kinds of people live together. . .It is not only a matter of finding in the cities the members of our own church. . .but also to approach with the gospel the unchurched masses.<sup>48</sup>:

The vision was not, for the most part, shared by the rest of the Synod. And, in any case, shortly thereafter the Great Depression set in, making it an impossible dream.

Gloom and doom would be the most apt descriptors of our church's attitude during the 30's. Saddled with debt, lacking in resources, our Synod had to pursue a policy of retrenchment on nearly every front. A church preoccupied with its own sad state was not likely to be looking out to the needs of others. Yet even in this hard, dry land of near-despair, the Lord caused one gospel flower of hope to bloom. The 30's witnessed the commencement of the Synodical Conference's mission work in Nigeria.

Cooperative efforts between Missouri and us were to become increasingly problematic as time went on, however. Missouri's attitude began to shift towards a desire for broader participation in mainstream American church life. As it did, Missouri also began to change in some of its doctrinal stands. This, in turn, compelled us to devote more and more of our Synodical energies towards the admonishment of our wayward sister. Despite

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<sup>46</sup> Jesus prays that the Father will preserve his disciples' identity in ,a hostile world "by the power of your Name, the Name you gave me" (John 17:11). Only the saving Name of God can preserve us in perfect unity of faith. Our institutions will do so only insofar as they reflect that Name and are expressions of a hearty reliance upon it.

<sup>47</sup> See *To Every Nation, Tribe, Language, And People*, Harold E. John and Ernst H. Wendland, eds. Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1992, p. 66ff

<sup>48</sup> as qtd. in Fredrich, *op. cit.*, pp. 172-173.

this, there were also positive signs that we were shaking off our despairing mood as we paid off our financial debt. For one thing, in the 40's we redoubled our home mission efforts. For another, the Synod resolved (not without some heated discussion)<sup>49</sup> to explore world mission possibilities overseas. These eventually led to our first solo 'foreign' mission efforts in Japan and Central Africa, begun in the 50's.

All this would have an impact on our general Synodical attitude towards people of other cultures. The WELS was breaking free from its customary pattern of being somewhat isolated and inward turning.<sup>50</sup> First we left our original language behind, then we began leaving our Midwestern enclave, then we started reaching out overseas. But the changes came gradually over the next few decades. The older pattern never disappeared entirely, and from time to time would reassert itself in both congregational and Synodical life.

When we emerged from the great conflict with Missouri in 1961, we felt a new sense of identity and had a stronger desire to reach out to our neighbor. Home mission expansion then began in earnest. We began to see new reasons for spreading the Word throughout America, and to develop new ways of doing so. In the 60's and 70's our stated objectives were 1) to reach the unchurched, 2) conserve the membership of the WELS, and 3) to serve others who shared our confessional concerns.<sup>51</sup>

As we moved into the 80's, we tackled objective number one with renewed zeal, and the concept of the 'mission exploratory' was born. Back in the heartland, personal and congregational evangelism began to be emphasized as never before. In the 80's and 90's, we became aware of the rising percentage of immigrants and minorities in our national demographic. This led to initiatives in urban and cross-cultural work. New forms of gospel ministry came into being.

Meanwhile the scope of our world mission work continued to expand as well: Asia, Latin America, and Europe--the opportunities seemed endless. By the late 90's we were supporting 72 missionaries in 24 different mission fields.<sup>52</sup> Our goal was never to create clones of the WELS, but self-dependent churches that could stand side by side with us in a genuine gospel partnership.

### **Our Attitudes Today**

All this brings us to the question: how are we doing today? What are current WELS attitudes towards foreigners and minorities? There are many positive signs: we can point to Home Missions' renewed emphasis on cross-cultural mission work. We can point to WELS Kingdom Workers and the way its lay volunteers seem willing, even eager to work in foreign and cross-cultural situations. We can point to the way more and more students and faculty at our institutions of higher learning have begun to participate in cross-cultural programs of various kinds. We can point to a growing desire among our congregations to have ESL programs. As one excellent home missionary puts it, "The most important [kind of cross-cultural] 'tact' is contact."<sup>53</sup> Nothing changes attitudes like rubbing shoulders with people from diverse backgrounds.

Still, how widespread and generally accepted have these initiatives become? How much further do we have to take them? Has cross-cultural work really become part of our Synodical ethos? Just how willing have we become to leave our safety zones and make that contact? To find answers, we might first look at a scale measuring stages in cross-cultural ministry. I once heard Peter Kruschel describe them in these terms:

1. Awareness: We become aware there are people of other cultures or races in our neighborhood

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<sup>49</sup> see Johne and Wendland, *ibid.*, pp. 144-146 for more on this.

<sup>50</sup> Norman Berg points to our mood of "isolation" as being one of the reasons for our slow growth. See his "Home Mission Moods and Modes--125 Years in WELS" in the *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, Vol. 73, No.4 (October 1976), pp. 266-267.

<sup>51</sup> Berg, *op. cit.*, pp. 264-265.

<sup>52</sup> Daniel Koelpin, "WELS World Missions-Now And Into the 21" Century," presented at the Minnesota District Convention of the WELS, June 20th, 2000.

<sup>53</sup> Mark Cares, in a Convocation hour held at MLC on March 30th, 2001.

2. Toleration: We learn to tolerate our new neighbors, but make little effort to get to know them. We assume they have their ways and that we have ours.
3. Concern: We approach our new neighbors because we are concerned about their eternal welfare. We care enough to proclaim sin and grace, but we do it our way, on our terms, and in our own language.
4. Endorsement: Here we have shared Christ with our neighbors, and have learned from them who they are and why they do things the way they do. We accept them for what they are, but we are still people from differing cultures.
5. Partnership: We know and respect each other's culture. God-pleasing aspects of each other's cultural styles and behaviors are welcomed and supported. Leadership is fully shared. Trained leaders from the host culture are identified, trained and equipped.<sup>54</sup>

A person might quibble with this or that feature of the scale, but I believe it can be used as a handy tool for assessment. Here you might ask yourself, "Where do I and my congregation fit along this continuum?" Better yet, ask the leaders of the group you're working with. Do you think your relationship has reached a place where they'd give you straightforward answers? Why or why not?

As your thinking that over, let me add into the mix this assessment (from an African-American point of view) of the Synodical Conference's work among the blacks:

The Synodical conference had . . . confused the Gospel with human culture. To put the matter differently, in its work in the black community, the Synodical Conference had attempted to convert black people to German culture under the guise of bringing them the Gospel. Black congregations had to be organized like German Lutheran congregations. Black congregations had to sing German hymns as German Lutheran congregations sang them. Black Lutherans had to think in German theological categories as German Lutherans thought. All issues of church life had to be defined and thought through as German Lutherans defined them and thought about them. In order to be a "good black Lutheran," one had to become a "good black German."<sup>55</sup>

Does Jeff Johnson overstate his case? Perhaps. But if he does, he at least helps us understand from the host culture's point of view how frustrating a cross-cultural relationship with Lutherans can sometimes be, and how easily misunderstandings can grow. If we only listen to happy talk, we might never appreciate this. We might well ask ourselves: have we been guilty of some of these loveless attitudes and approaches to our work?

In 1997, the Seeking Our Neighbor (SON) Committee made its official report to the Synod after it had conducted extensive interviews among foreign and minority members of our churches. Its conclusions were revealing. Among other things, its members concluded the following about our attitudes:

- Many of us are uncomfortable in speaking with people of racial or ethnic backgrounds different from our own.
- There is a hesitation to reach out to those who are socially and economically different from our norm.
- We are comfortable in our congregations and are reluctant to do the things which would make others comfortable in our midst.
- There is a tendency to see mission work as something which someone else does in my name rather than something which I can do personally in my neighborhood and community.

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<sup>54</sup> Adapted from "A Cry From the City: WELS' Need to Address Multicultural Issues," *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, Vol. 96, No. 2 (Spring 1999), p. 97.

<sup>55</sup> Johnson, *op. cit.*, p.196.

Does any of this sound familiar to you? Cultural patterns persist. Our aloofness is one of those patterns. We might call it a WELS bubble.

Let me explore what this aloofness means from my own experience as a teacher. I don't believe any of the students I've had the privilege of working with at MLC was a confirmed racist. Far from it. In general, I believe the rising generation is much less racial in its thinking than were their fathers and mothers. Yet they are still, in the main, young people who come from the Midwest. They are mostly white, and from a small town, rural, or suburban background. Most of them have received their pre-college education entirely within the system.<sup>56</sup> And they're going to college in New Ulm, a city with many fine features, but not known for its diversity!

Now this is no sin. We can't, after all, repent for our demographic. But we should realize how this general homogeneity of background affects our thinking. By the time they enter the ministry, many of our students simply haven't had much experience rubbing shoulders with people from other cultures. This can only contribute to our Synodical aloofness. If the most important kind of tact is con-tact, then we really do need that program of cross-cultural experiences I mentioned earlier. After all, these young men and women are going to be our congregational leaders.

How this affects their attitudes, we can learn from asking our minority and international students on campus. Over the past four years, I've had occasion to interview them about how things have been going. They've responded to me both in private and by making presentations to class. One man stood in front of a group of his peers and drew a large, blue circle on the whiteboard. Then he drew a stick man standing well outside the circle. He said, pointing to the stick man, "Here's me. No matter how hard I try, I can never fit in. Even after four years here." In addition to this, our African-American students have admitted hearing the "N" word from time to time, while students of other ethnic groups have reported to me remarks they've heard dismissive of their race, color, or national background.

But the most general result, I believe, is not the insensitive crack or the racist remark. The most general result is a lack of curiosity about other cultures. One African American student put it this way, "They're afraid to offend us, so they don't say anything. Or they just avoid people who are different."<sup>57</sup> Sometimes I think of it as a failure of the imagination, an inability or perhaps even an unwillingness to put yourself into the shoes of someone different, to imagine his possibilities as if they were your own.

This same sort of thing happens in our congregational life as well. The easiest pose for us to strike is one of aloofness. The pattern has been set. It's of long standing, and so we slide right into it almost without thinking. We might put it even more strongly: such aloofness is a sin of omission. It's not so much what we do; it's what we don't do. Obviously, we won't even start walking down the road to partnership with other cultures if we don't make contact with them, or open ourselves up to them.

How does this aloofness demonstrate itself? When challenged to think and act differently, we stick with the tried and true. We avoid getting ourselves into difficulties. Amongst ourselves, we avoid unpleasant subjects like racism. With others, we steer clear of conversations where there might be a real exchange of views, and where we can't control the outcome. If we do find ourselves talking with a non-WELSian, we want to make sure they know who we are, and so we'll give them the whole burden of our history, and strive mightily to get them to understand how hard we've struggled to remain Lutheran in this land. Instead of listening and learning about them, we're more concerned with them knowing about us.

As we look out on our world, we don't see the changing face of the neighborhood. Certain thoughts don't occur to us, like crossing the river and preaching to the African Americans--the Asians, the Hispanics--on the other side. After all, they all have their own temples, their own churches, their own ways. They'd just be more comfortable with folks of their own kind. If someone of a different race wanders into our church, we are less worried about how he might feel than about how uncomfortable we feel.

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<sup>56</sup> From a survey taken of students in my 8078 "Minority Cultures" class this past year

<sup>57</sup> Interview taken on April 23rd, 1998.

This same sort of thing happens in our schools. My father recently gave a paper to a teachers' conference entitled, "Mission Outreach in the Lutheran Elementary School." He knew it was a hot topic. He made some provocative statements in it, hoping to draw people out. "Do you know what provoked the most passion and energetic discussion?" he asked me sadly, "Not mission opportunities. Not the problems involved in evangelizing the unchurched in a school setting. Fellowship! That's how they spent the whole discussion period. Talking about fellowship."

Don't get me wrong: fellowship is undoubtedly a legitimate topic to discuss as part of a range of issues involved with outreach. Yet our loving God did not give us this teaching to use as a conversation stopper, in order to forestall all discussion on how to do outreach. The 'no' to false doctrine we must speak, but we must speak it before God--in fear of him and with a love for each Word from our Savior's mouth. We speak it--and here's the point because we know of no other Word that can preserve us or save our neighbor!

My own conclusion on the matter is this: we still have a ways to go in overcoming our inwardness. We must all examine ourselves and heartily repent of anything that stands in the way of God's love being freely proclaimed. Then we need to open our eyes, and see more clearly the nations that are flocking to our shores, that are camped on our doorsteps. Not only do we need to become aware of them, we need to take the next step and reach out to them--through ESL, through our schools, through special cross-cultural ministries. To that end, I pray that our progress may continue in those cross-cultural ministries we've already begun. I pray they continue until by God's grace we come to share with them a complete partnership in the gospel. I pray our efforts to train a ministry that is more culturally aware may be blessed. I pray that more and more of our congregations make take up the challenge within their own communities.

I would urge you, then--by means of the gospel--to foster in your own congregations and schools a true boldness and confidence to seek others for Christ. Only the gospel of God's lavish grace to poor sinners can free us from our crippling fears regarding others. The gospel frees us from all fear toward our neighbor except that one great fear of putting any unnecessary obstacles in his path. Through the gospel, we'll find the heart to work hard at distinguishing God's eternal Word from transient and changeable culture. In that way, we'll become more adept at differentiating between the things that cannot change and things that can or must change. Through the gospel we'll find the freedom to adapt and grow anew our forms of organization, worship, and ministry. Through the gospel, Christ will make us willing to become all things to all people.

We will then more and more come to see our congregations and schools not as besieged cities but as beachheads of God's invading army, where the love of Christ makes its presence felt in a hostile and dying world. We will encourage all our members to explore ways of reaching others who are not like us. We will teach our children by word and example to be open to people of other cultures. We will encourage them to be curious and to learn by exploration. As we reach out to others, we will listen as well as speak; we will learn, as well as teach. We will pursue acts of kindness and mercy to people who struggle in their earthly lives so as to build with them the kind of relationship in which we can freely speak of God's loving kindness to us all in Christ Jesus. We will uphold and support with our prayers the nascent leadership of the host cultures in which the gospel has been newly planted. Our goal is not to control them, but to share with them and to grow together into the full measure of Christ.

I am convinced that God has placed a great challenge before us in this generation. The German immigrants are no longer coming to our shores. Other people are. They live in our cities. They walk on our streets. They shop in our malls. They work in our businesses. How will we react? By surrounding our schools and congregations with walls of custom that are insulated with layers of indifference? Will we close all the gates, and block up every chink in the sides and roof so that no air can circulate? Or will we strive by all possible means to make our church communities light and airy spaces, full of open windows, where the Spirit of Christ blows freely and where his light shines out into all the neighborhood?

I remain optimistic that the gospel will continue to bear fruit among us in ways that will exceed all that we could ask or imagine. I know that fruit comes in ways and in places we don't expect and had not planned for. I was reminded of this recently when I saw a WELS Connection featuring a segment on Mrs. Adela Spaude.

Mrs. Spaude once called Watertown Wisconsin her home, a heartland city of the WELS if ever there was one! As she pursued her daily life, she became more and more aware of a growing community of Hispanics. She was determined to help them out. Her reasoning was simple: "They need help. They need the gospel. I'm here. I can help." And although she knew no Spanish when she got started, she studied it until she could get by. She was tireless in her efforts. If her friends needed medical attention, she saw to it. If they needed help communicating with the government, she was there. Her work inspired others, and these avenues of earthly mercy became channels of God's grace. The Lord blessed her work. Now, St. Mark's congregation has its own Spanish services. And Mrs. Spaude sings God's praises in glory.

That's really how it's done in cross--cultural work. The most important attitude to have is a willingness to try.