

TRENDS IN EDUCATION IN WISCONSIN SYNOD PARISHES  
FROM THE END OF WORLD WAR II UNTIL 1957

by  
Luke C. Werre

Senior Church History  
Prof. Westerhaus  
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Why does it seem perhaps that our synod needs a spiritual renewal at this time? Why does it seem we have a large number of adult members of our body who have little or no devotional life, are hard put to produce even a simple confession of their faith, or are unfamiliar with even basic biblical truths? These are perplexing questions with which pastors are struggling today. Our synod has even called several men to begin to address and remedy the situation full-time in the Division for Parish Services headed by Rev. Wayne Mueller.

The purpose of this paper, however, is not so much to pinpoint all the reasons for our need for spiritual renewal. It is also not to conclude the best solutions. The purpose of this paper is simply to observe on a synod-wide basis the general trends in education in the parish from 1945 to 1965. Thus, any suggestions by the writer as to why certain conditions existed then or now may be taken with a grain of salt since he was not alive during those times and he very well does not have the whole picture of the age. Any "old-timer" who read this paper may observe that immediately himself.

We must tie a few other loose ends before we begin the main content of this paper. Since this paper overviews the general educational trends of all the parishes in the Wisconsin Synod, the only sources used in this research have

been the synodical convention proceedings and the BORAM's. The particular time bracket of 1945 - 1957 was chosen because the end of World War II ushered in a new age for the American society which had its own effect on the methods of the church. Things would simply be different from this point on. By 1957, things had developed to the point that a complete make-over of the constitutional duties of the Board of Educationkey had taken place. This was a first during those twenty years and thus a giant leap in the continuing education of the parishes. This paper assumes that the trends of that period play a part in shaping the trends or the reactions to trends today. I will try to be as objective and basic as possible.

"The family that prays together, stays together," my mother always used to say. This is true in a sense. A family surrounded with the Word has the very best cement for a Christian bond. When the parents educate their children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord, a family will function like it is supposed to and even all of society will benefit. Certainly the church will. But World War II had an effect on typical family life. Many men giving their lives for the nation did not come home. Many women began working outside the home, as a popular Norman Rockwell painting indicates. President John Brenner in 1947 voiced the following concerns during his opening sermon at the convention in Watertown:

We are told by some that our churches should do more for the young. They suggest new organizations

that provide safe environment, social life, recreation, and amusement for our children and adolescents. We cannot here and now discuss this subject. But we can call attention to the fundamental fact from which all thought on this matter must proceed: God Himself has founded an organization to which He entrusts the care and training of the young; which He has ordered and equipped so wisely that no other organization can supplant it or compete with it, and which He holds accountable for the faithful performance of its duty - the CHRISTIAN HOME.

Many of the evils of our day are rightly attributed to the breaking down of the home life among us. Are all the homes of church members truly Christian homes filled with the presence of the Lord? The remedy? Further aids of all kinds? No, indeed. So much "aid" may be offered that the home loses the sense of its responsibility. So much of the time of the young can be claimed by organizations that the home cannot establish and maintain its influence over them. In the case of inter-congregational organizations, the home church, next in importance to the home, is similarly affected. If the Church is to be built soundly, the home must be made conscious of its duties and willing to perform them. Let us as wise builders endeavor earnestly to restore and strengthen the Christian home among us (proceedings, p.12).

How timeless are his words and warnings! It's almost eerie! But why would Pres. Brenner feel so strongly about this particular subject to speak so vigorously about it? Was he indeed reflecting the general sentiment and concerns of the times? Did he foresee trouble?

Though he may have foreseen trouble, he still did not offer a solution to head it off at the pass. But given the nature of his statement, what could he suggest -a seminar on how to be parents? -a family support group? This was the very type of thing he was speaking against. In the Committee Report on Pres. Brenner's report a solution was offered. It stated concerning strengthening the Christian home, "We join

our President in the conviction that this can be accomplished not through the introduction of popular innovations, but through the continued, faithful use of the means of grace which have been the source of spiritual growth throughout all generations" (proceedings, p.19).

Interesting solution. Though I do not disagree with anything these men suggested, I submit to you a dilemma. Although the means of grace would continue to be used in the church, and people would be in contact with the Word by coming to worship, the solution suggested by the Committee Report would not bring the Word directly into the homes. It would not train parents how to teach their children. How would parents learn this? What if they would forget to train their children as their own parents had taught them before? Would a twenty-minute sermon once a week have been sufficient to insure no trouble? Would Pres. Brenner's prophetic warning manifest itself into a reality? Would the Wisconsin Synod -in an effort to make up for what the homes should have been providing but were not- get caught up in a complicated web of synodical programs and aids to compensate for the lack -the very thing Pres. Brenner warned against?

Perhaps a first step in this direction would be the extreme emphasis of the synod on the value of the Christian Day School. Already in 1945, the Christian Day School was held high as a main sustaining staple of Christianity in general. Wartime seemed to have an effect on the attitude of the parents toward such schools. The School Board

reported in the BORAM,

The fox hole has taught many of our Christian young men how little money is worth to them there and has filled their hearts with a new appreciation of what the Christian Day School has done for them in preparing them for the hour when any moment they may have to enter eternity. . . . During these war days, perhaps more than ever, parents at home have learned to appreciate the real value of a Christian Day School (p.31).

Agreed, a Christian Day School is a very precious and valuable thing. But is it possible that already at this early date we see a trend in which the training of children took place a little less in the home and a little more in the schools? Well-meaning, God-fearing parents who wanted their children to have the best possible Christian training would send them to the local Christian Day School. This is good. But if this had ever supplanted the training which should have taken place first in the home, then there would have been problems.

In the year 1951, the value placed on the Christian Day School was held so high that it was credited in a large part for the doctrinal stability of the synod. In the BORAM of that year the Board of Education reported:

May we ever value and appreciate the precious heritage which we have in our Christian schools, in which all instruction is governed by, and pervaded with the Word of Life, and which spare no sacrifices, labor and prayers for the establishment and maintenance of Christian Schools.

In these days in which the flood of unionistic tendencies is making powerful inroads upon the church, we need to arm the church's youth against this evil by thorough indoctrination of the Word of God. The best means to accomplish that aim are our Christian Day Schools (p.50).

I do not mean to be disrespectful in the least. I wonder if at this point Pres. Brenner's prophecy is becoming more apparent: "So much 'aid' may be offered that the home loses the sense of its responsibility." Would it have been a more ideal situation if the parents had been the ones indoctrinated in Bible Classes, etc. and they would have passed it on to their children both by teaching and by example? How is it that this responsibility was attributed so strongly to the schools? It may have been thought that the schools would produce good, indoctrinated, future parents. Very possibly. But it also may produce a generation of parents who assume it's totally the school's responsibility to cover that area of their children's upbringing. After all, that's the way **they** were raised! Granted, the schools are an invaluable aid, but they are an **aid.**

It is clear, however, that much emphasis was placed on the Day School throughout this time period. Already in 1945 the tracts "An Appraisal of Educational Principles in the Light of Scripture" and "A Right Way For Our Little Ones" which promote the Christian Day School were written. The Board of Education in the synd proceedings of 1947 speaks of the growing interest in the schools (p.88). Again, they credited orthodox stability to the schools when they said, "God has been wonderously gracious to our Synod in preserving to us this priceless gem, our Christian schools, which have in no small degree helped to preserve our Synod from

doctrinal indifference, unionistic tendencies and other grievous dangers" (p.88). Each year they included in their report a list of the new schools that had just been opened. The lists far exceeded anything we see today. In the year 1948-49 alone the school enrollment for synod parishes had gone up by almost a thousand students (BORAM, p.51). One gets the impression that opening these schools was a real priority -in the limelight, we might say. Is it possible that when so much emphasis was placed on grade school education, other forms of education in the parish would be found lacking? Did people drop off into a spiritually educational void as they graduated from eighth grade?

This brings us to the group immediately responsible for the grade schools -the Board of Education. The study of this board is quite fascinating. As in most things, it is a study of good and bad. The reason it is fascinating is because of the expansive nature of its duties throughout the years. Many duties seem to have been tacked on to their list because of their name. The discovery was being made that education in the parish consisted of more than just opening and maintaining grade schools. Being concerned only <sup>with</sup> ~~of~~ educating the children leaves out 3/4 of the other people. As early as 1945 there was a motion to change the name of the School Board to the Board of Education, Wisconsin Synod, "since the scope of duties of the School Board has been enlarged in the past few years" (proceedings, p.28). They began to be a material-producing body as is evidenced, for example, by the



catechism revision of 1949 (proceedings, p.104). VES materials, Bible story materials, and Sunday School materials were readily produced in 1953 and '55 (proceedings, '55, p.23).

There is very strong evidence too that materials for the education of other age groups was being produced by this board as well. Youth group materials were put out (BORAM, 1945, p.32). We especially see this realization in a special committee report in 1955 to study the scope of the Board of Education's work. In the "whereas" portion of a memorial they produced they made two pertinent observations: "There seems to be a growing need and an increasing demand for materials and helps for all agencies of parish education," and, "75% of our congregations rely mostly on other forms of parish education than a Day School" (proceedings, p.15). At this point in time the synod had not yet officially declared the duties of the Board of Education to be anything beyond the care of the parish schools.

The result of the study was a giant step for the role of the Board of Education in parish education. In 1957 a whole new scheme for its duties was drawn up and <sup>added</sup> adopted to the constitution by the synod. This new plan included not only the maintenance of the colleges and grade schools as usual, but also a new division for other areas of parish education. It states as follows:

The Department of Part-time and Adult Education shall encourage, advise, and aid the local congregations in establishing and maintaining such educational endeavors on the elementary level as

Sunday schools, Vacation Bible schools, and Saturday schools; and such educational endeavors as are undertaken by Bible classes, youth organizations, and other adult groups; it shall study materials and publications and recommend such as are helpful; it shall gather, prepare, and publish new materials as needed in its department; and it shall generally cooperate with the Districts of the Synod in such manner as the Synod may from time to time determine (proceedings, p.98).

The motion passed by the synod for the Board of Education seemed to reflect a real revival of interest in the education of our flocks. More than ever materials were being produced for the benefit of synodical spiritual growth. In an essay delivered to the convention of 1957 Prof. Armin Schuetze captured the spirit:

Happily there are also new movements in our church life which should have unitive effects. I refer to the revival of the Christian year as the summary of the great acts of God to which the Church needs always to return for refreshment, to the new interest in liturgics and church music, to the scholarly work in Bible study that is being done in various study groups and by a number of gifted individuals. I could also point to the new devotional booklets that are being readied for distribution, to the many papers and pamphlets that have been produced by many men on subjects in controversy between us and a sister synod, to the projects of creating Lutheran Young people's clubs and of publicizing our work by the stewardship committee, to the ever continuing work in education, the new texts, manuals and courses for vacation Bible study, Sunday and parish schools (proceedings, p.115).

To be a part of this "great awakening," as it were, sounds absolutely exiting and exhilarating. The action for the Board of Education taken in 1957 was a real breakthrough in the response to a need for education.

Or was it? It is true that the Board of Education had been providing such materials for a while already. But how

sold were pastors on this sort of thing? On the one hand, the fact that this was drawn up and adopted shows an increased sensitivity and awareness to the need for continuing education varied forms. However, an opening sermon presented by Pres. Oscar Nauman in 1957 seems to indicate a reluctance of the pastors to whole-heartedly use the materials and programs produced. He remarked,

In past years our Synod has frowned upon any synod-wide organizations of groups of members united for a common purpose. The evils that might arise from such organizations have driven us to forego the blessings that could be enjoyed through such practical cooperation. Our rugged individualism has insisted that each pastor take care of his flock and every phase of the work of his flock. But we do not all receive the same gifts, we are not all endowed by our Creator with the same skills and abilities. . . . We as a Synod put forth great effort to pool our best gifts for the Christian day school training of our children, and to improve upon this training from year to year. Could we not pool our gifts in the education and edifying of our other age-groups (proceedings, p.14)?

How interesting that in merely a decade synod presidents would seem to be working in opposite directions! One (Brenner) warned against organizations, one chided because of a reluctance to ascribe to such organizations! By the synod's actions with the Board of Education, had they turned right around and done the very thing Pres. Brenner warned against? Would they be undermining the value of family and its responsibility to train their children? Or were they simply being sensitive to needs that developed and had not been quite as obvious ten years earlier? I suggest that the bottom line is that we are looking at a period of time when the synod recognized a need and was struggling to find the

narrow middle ground to meet that need without going overboard.

Many of the things listed by Schuetze would be excellent solutions to the need for spiritual growth without undermining the home. For example, the revival of the church year, written materials like devotions, papers or magazines, -these things are in keeping with Pres. Brenner's guidelines. Some of the things might pose a danger as Pres. Nauman suggested when he spoke of the "evils that might arise from such organizations." Youth group might be one. Does it get the children to interact with their parents or does it take them away from home? To all things there is a trade-off. Here, the struggle had to be made -do we allow a problem to continue and grow, and pay that price, or do we react to it and, by trying to resolve it, hopefully pay a lesser price?

Before I go on with this paper we should consider two other reasons why the move toward continuing education in our parishes might not have been quicker. One is the shortage of man-power. In 1949 Pastor Conrad Frey reported to the synod, "At present there are 25 to 30 vacancies which can not be filled. At the present rate and also the probable future rate, the Seminary is not producing enough candidates for our needs during the next 12 years" (proceedings, p.34). In the face of this grim prospect, can you imagine how they must have wrestled to move forward with large education projects? Who would do it? Who would have time? Is it justifiable to take someone out of the field to do this full-time?

Secondly, let us remember that these years were heavy with severe doctrinal controversy with the Missouri Synod. Many men concentrated much time and energy on the issues at hand. This was on the front burner. Education would just have to take a back seat, unless it was to educate the people <sup>as to</sup> what the controversy was about.

If we consider once again Pres. Brenner's warning about taking away from the responsibility of the home and shifting it to the synod organizations, a viable solution might be the materials synod produces which may enter the homes directly. Parents could use the materials for their own strengthening and then educate also their children. They could also use things directly intended for their children.

The first area we will discuss is the use of tracts. Tracts have always been a popular method of reaching large numbers of people for religious purposes in America. Koehler, in his History of the Wisconsin Synod, records very early use of tracts. Tracts were also used between 1945 and 1957. Earlier I had mentioned the printing of "An Appraisal of Educational Principles" and "A Right Way For Our Little Ones." Both were printed in 1945 and discuss the benefits of the Christian Day school. In 1947 a motion was adopted to form a committee on the publication of tracts (proceedings, p.94). Thus the number of tracts issued would increase from that point forward. Tracts would be helpful especially in reaching the adults to inform them on current issues. They were easy to take home and usually not too laborious to read.

The second educational tool that would reach homes is the periodical. Our synod began the "Gemeindeblatt" in 1865 and the "Northwestern Lutheran" in 1914. Later would be added the "Junior Northwestern." There was a healthy enthusiasm over the purpose of these publications. One Publications Committee Report said, "It is obvious that our church periodicals (the "Gemeindeblatt, the "Northwestern Lutheran" and the "Junior Northwestern") are handmaidens to our church work" (proceedings, p.107). Here was educating, indoctrinating material that would encourage the inner growth of church members at home. During the time-period of this paper, however, subscriptions to these magazines had entered a slump. Efforts to raise the number met a little success: "The Committee devoted its main effort thus far toward increasing the number of subscriptions to our periodicals. Subscriptions to the 'Northwestern Lutheran' have increased from 14,447 to 19,200; to the 'Junior Northwestern' from 10,420 to 11,240" (proceedings, '53, p.110). But the slump returned the next two years: "Because of the deplorable decrease in subscriptions in the past year all workers in the church are encouraged to make concerted efforts to increase the subscriptions to our periodicals" (proceedings, '55, p.126) These were an excellent way to teach the members in their own homes, but for some reason were lacking in popularity. (The "Quartalschrift" is not being discussed since its main audience is the called worker, especially the pastor, and not the average lay-person.)

Next, we might consider books and booklets published for the education of church members, especially adults. Part of the job of the Board of Education is the oversight and production of suitable materials for the schools. An example of this might be the catechism (proceedings, '49, p.104 and '55, p.69). The Publishing House would work together with the Board of Education to produce other materials for the growth of our people. The centennial book **Continuing in His Word** was made ready for distribution in 1951. Pres. Brenner endorsed it in this way: "Every effort should be made to place it into every home in our Synod" (proceedings, p.14). The Committee Report on the president's address underlined Brenner's endorsement of the book with this reason, "A good understanding of the history of our Synod can only be conducive to a greater interest in its work" (proceedings, p.20). Thus its purpose was clear.

Devotional materials were on the horizon. Work on "Meditations" was encouraged in 1951 (proceedings, p.104). In 1957 the Publishing House reported, "At present our Literary Editor is devoting the greater part of his time to the development of our "Book of Meditations" (proceedings, p.171). They had hoped to have it ready to go by Advent of that year. This one is a puzzle. Why wasn't work on such a project begun years and years before? It seems to have been a popular thing to publish many sermons for general consumption. Several were listed by the Publishing House in the proceedings of 1957. Finally, a booklet entitled **Bible**

Companion, a comprehensive listing of Bible passages, was produced. This would serve as a devotional aid.

The last area of education we will discuss is the use of audio/visual materials. There does not seem to be a very heavy use of these tools throughout the synod at this time -- certainly not as heavy as today. The pioneer in using these tools was the Board for Information and Stewardship. Not only did they make heavy use of tracts and pamphlets, but they worked hand-in-hand with the Audio-Visual Aids Committee (BORAM, '55, p.130; proceedings, '57, p.178-9). It seems their work was almost considered one and the same. In the 1957 proceedings they listed a host of material printed and sent out during the past biennium. So that you can have an idea of the kinds of films they came out with that biennium, here is a list of what they produced: "Planning With God" (1955 Synod Convention Report), "Mit Gott Planen Wir" (German version of above), "Life In Rhodesia" (religious, social, and medical conditions), "We Build - He Prospers" (new Synodical School buildings), "Out of the Night - Into the Light" (Mission in Germany), "Bringing Light to Darkest Africa" (movie on Rhodesia). They were also at this time working on a film of life at a theological seminary.

It is curious that the teaching tools most highly praised for education today were used almost exclusively by the Board for Information and Stewardship from 1945 -1957. Why would they use the best methods for education above the others? It's hard to say. One reason might be the



unfamiliarity with or unavailability of movie, slide or sound equipment in those days. They just didn't have projectors yet the same way we have VCR's. Another might be that people like to see what they are giving to and where their money goes. And a third might be that the squeaky hinge gets the grease. In other words, the area of sanctification which needs the best and most education gets it.

Perhaps this paper has served only to foster several unanswered questions in your head as to whether our synod was on track during this period with regard to education. What I hope it has accomplished is that each reader be led to carefully evaluate the quality and efforts of education --not only during these years, but also in his own time. It will never result well to blindly follow the spirit of the times without question. We have seen the years in which two loud messages rang clear: We need to educate, but at the same time we need to use caution. Has our synod continued down the road of the organizational trend in education too far? Did they find the right balance? Is the home still the foundation of all our learning or were we party to its undoing? These questions I leave for the reader to decide. But always do this: think about it.