

X

How Northwestern Lutheran Reported on World
War II and the Military Chaplaincy From the Early
1940's Through the Mid-1950's

Church History 331: Lutheranism in America
Prof. Brenner
April 19, 2000

Written By:
Jeffrey Duquaine

Introduction

The question of the military chaplaincy was a major issue for the Synodical Conference in the years leading up to, during, and after World War II. Since the Wisconsin Synod did not participate in the government's chaplaincy program for valid biblical reasons, it had to find an alternative method of reaching its members who were serving in the armed forces. The Synod served its military members well through various means of communication. But what about the people living in the United States? They would want to be informed as to how their Synod was caring for the souls of their fellow Christians fighting in foreign lands. How were they to be kept up to date with what was going on? Was there any way they could help? How were they to understand why their church body refused to be a part of the military chaplaincy program that seemed to be such a good idea, a program their sister Missouri Synod joined so confidently? The aim of this paper will be to show how the Northwestern Lutheran served to answer those questions and in doing so played a significant role in this critical time period. In reporting on the the Synod's efforts in the World War II years and following, the Northwestern Lutheran played an important role in informing the Synod's people what the Synod was doing to serve those enlisted, telling them how they could help, and informing them about the errors and dangers of the military chaplaincy program. The scope of this paper will be to look at Northwestern Lutheran's reporting on these issues from the time period beginning in the early 1940's through the mid-1950's

The Missouri Synod's Shift in Thinking

There were Synodical Conference members who served in World War I, but the military chaplaincy wasn't an issue. None of the Synodical Conference churches joined in the government's chaplaincy program but served its enlisted members through pastors supplied and paid for by the churches themselves. This arrangement worked very well and didn't cause any doctrinal problems or concerns. But in the years following the first World War, there was a shift in the Missouri Synod's view of the military chaplaincy. At the 1935 Missouri Synod convention, they decided to join in the government's chaplaincy program. The resolution stated that after

looking into the requirements of the government's program they found "nothing that is contrary to the doctrines, tenants, and practices of the Lutheran Church." So then, it was resolved at that convention: "that the Ev. Luth. Synod of Missouri, Ohio, and Other States cause the appointment of a committee to be known as the Army and Navy Commission of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Missouri, Ohio, and Other States, as provided for under the provisions of the Army Regulations No. 605-30."¹

In contrast to this resolution, the Wisconsin Synod had yet to officially consider the chaplaincy program. At the 1937 Synod convention a report was given by the Committee on Chaplaincies that stated, "we are not in a position because of insufficient information to definitely decide whether it is fully compatible with the principles of the Lutheran Church to recommend pastors of our Synod for such positions on Government payroll" and that if any pastors in the Synod decided to serve as a chaplain, they would be "doing so without the sanction of the Synod until the Synod definitely decided in this matter."² The report was adopted and included a statement that a committee would be appointed to do a thorough study of this question and report its findings at the 1939 convention.

In the mean time the Missouri Synod continued to pursue its participation in the government's program. At their 1938 convention, a report that outlined the duties of chaplains and the Army and Navy Commission for Chaplains was given and adopted by Missouri without reservation.³ An opposite conclusion was being drawn by the Wisconsin Synod's committee that was readying itself to give their report at their Synod convention. At the 1939 convention the committee on Army and Navy chaplaincies reported that "after a thorough study of all the available information and literature is of the unanimous opinion that we do not commission pastors to function in this capacity according to the governmental regulations." The report listed a number of reasons for their findings that included the following: it would be a mixing of church and state, and it would

¹1935 Missouri Convention Proceedings, pg. 133

²1937 Wisconsin Synod Convention Proceedings, pg. 55

³1938 Missouri Synod Convention Proceedings. pp. 122-124

be a practical impossibility for chaplains to practice sound doctrine and confessional Lutheranism.⁴

The Northwestern Lutheran Reports for the Spiritual Welfare Commission

A couple of years later the Wisconsin Synod, after failing to reach an agreement with Missouri's Army and Navy Board because of a difference in policies and principles, suggested that the Spiritual Welfare Commission (SWC) take a more prominent role in its service to the Synod's enlisted men and women. Among other things, the SWC was to "continue to operate to the best of its ability in providing spiritual care for our men in service." The report said the SWC would aim to do this by keeping up communication with each enlisted man's local congregation, by sending pastors to places where large groups of Wisconsin Synod members were stationed, and by directing its men to a local pastor when possible.⁵ But how would the SWC let people in the Synod know what was going on? How would they tell people they could help with the Commission's work? The reporting of the Northwestern Lutheran (NWL) was the answer.

Throughout the years of the war, NWL served as sort of a liaison between the SWC and the Synod's civilians. Articles concerning the SWC began appearing in NWL on a regular basis. In the March 9, 1941 issue of NWL President John Brenner let the people and their pastors know that the Commission was busy at work:

The Executive Committee of the Spiritual Welfare Commission held another meeting on February 20 to study the plans for the development of its work. The Commission realizes that it is not dealing with an emergency that will soon be a thing of the past and is, therefore, proceeding with deliberation.

The article also told the pastors some of the ways they could help with the work the SWC was doing. It was suggested that the pastors send the names of all their enlisted members to the SWC so they could locate each person. The pastors were also asked to urge their members to increase

⁴1939 Wisconsin Synod Convention Reports and Memorials, pp. 38-39

⁵1941 Wisconsin Synod Convention Reports and Memorials, pg. 19

their contributions for the SWC's work and to send the NWL itself to its military members at a special price of \$1.00 per year.⁶

As the war continued, so did the activity of the SWC. In the March 23, 1941 NWL the Commission wrote an article to let the Synod's membership know how its work was progressing and that they were working to establish effective policies as a basis for its work :

Our church is greatly concerned about the spiritual welfare of our members serving in military and naval camps and bases and in providing them with such spiritual care, but this must be done sanely, and not hysterically, not under emotional pressure at the cost of Christian principle and practice...At present, because of constantly changing circumstances in governmental policies and unpredictable future circumstances, our cue must be, 'make haste slowly.'

The last half of the article gave a basic outline of what had been accomplished so far, including: the establishment of a Bureau of Records (a list with ~~the~~ each serving member's name that had been turned in), they were working on sending NWL to those pastors who ordered it for their military people, it had been arranged that informative articles appear in NWL, the work of publishing good spiritual material for use by those serving was underway, they were trying to contact Synodical Conference pastors who were near military bases, and that the Commission would re-study the chaplaincy program and report at the 1941 Synod Convention. The article close with this encouragement: "let us cooperate and not each one follow his own course to the detriment of efficiently fulfilling our common task and duty, the spiritual welfare of our members in service."⁷ All this served to show the Synod's pastors and lay members that something was indeed being done by their church to help their loved ones get through this difficult time.

The SWC never claimed to be the whole solution to giving the Synod's enlisted members the spiritual care they needed. In the NWL they encouraged the local congregation and pastors to help service men and women through the SWC itself and to keep in contact with them on a congregational level. In NWL articles by the SWC, the pastors and congregations were urged at

⁶John Brenner, "The Spiritual Welfare Commission," *Northwestern Lutheran* (March 19, 1941 Vol. 28): pg. 71

⁷E. R. Blakewell, "What is the Spiritual Welfare Commission Doing?" *Northwestern Lutheran* (March 23, 1941 Vol. 28): pg. 93

many different times to continue sending the names and addresses of its members who were enlisted. The SWC kept urging the people to keep up or increase their mission offering so this important work could continue and grow.

The April 6, 1941 NWL contained an ~~article~~ article that emphasized the importance of the home congregation in caring for its military members. After stating some of the new dangers and temptations its enlisted members faced, it posed the questions, "What can we do to keep our boys loyal to their Savior and to their Church? Have we done our all when we supply them with a New Testament and a Prayer Book? Dare we content ourselves with this and claim we have done our full duty?" The article then answers the question with some practical advice about publicly praying for those in the service. Emphasizing the power of prayer it said,

Fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters, friends, and fellow-Christians, united in common prayer for the boys in the service, will not only strengthen the faith of our boys and inure them against the temptations of the devil, but will at the same time bring home to us the inestimable value and power of prayer in our everyday lives. Thus such intercessory prayer will not only be a blessing to our boys, but to all of us, making us willing to do all we can to keep them under the saving influence of the Gospel they have learned and believe.

Not only were the congregations urged to pray for them but to keep in contact with their people too. The article urged for people to keep in contact with the "occasional letter or a little token of friendship here and there" and to "keep them informed as to what is going on in their home congregation" since "that will keep their Church before them constantly."⁸ Another article that appeared in the May 4, 1941 issue put it this way:

It is not enough that we consent to the continued proclamation of the saving Gospel by our pastors, missionaries, and teachers, but we must put forth greater personal efforts in seeking souls for Christ's Kingdom of Grace and Glory, we must conscientiously increase our financial support of missionary endeavors; and we must send fervent prayers to God's throne pleading for the bestowal of his blessings...we need increased financial support of our important mission endeavor to meet the greater responsibility...your son and your brother and your friend

⁸W.A.E, "The Home Congregation and Our Boys," Northwestern Lutheran (April 6, 1941 Vol. 28): pp. 108-109

needs prayerful help in these unusual times and circumstances. Let us put forth united efforts to meet these opportunities and responsibilities.⁹

In order to facilitate the help of congregations and pastors, the SWC printed in NWL some of the tools needed to help with the effort. In one issue the SWC printed a picture of a military communion identification card to remind pastors they needed to fill it out for their military members. In the same article there was also a picture of a special mission envelope that would make it easier for the people to give money directly for the work of the SWC.¹⁰

As people cooperated with the SWC they would want to see that their offerings and such were put to good use by the Commission and were having an impact. To show the people how the work was going and how important their efforts were, the SWC printed a few unsolicited letters of appreciation it received from those in the military. This would help to show the Synod's members how they were helping on a more personal level. Some of the letters of gratitude that were printed include a letter from the Balboa Canal Zone:

Gentlemen:

It has given me a great deal of joy to receive your letter...It gives one a satisfied feeling that he is not among the so-called missing. It touches one to know that as my teacher of God you should feel so obligated...My home church keeps in touch with me too, and this also keeps me clear and steady on the path of right...Again I have never been more overjoyed than on receiving your letter.¹¹

Another letter sent from the U.S. Pacific fleet read as follows:

Received your welcome letter this morning. I am very glad to hear from someone besides my immediate family. Also glad to know that someone is taking an interest in the fellows in the service. I wish to take this opportunity to thank you for the spiritual literature and am looking forward to receiving much more. It make life in the service much easier than going without the messages from our own churches and members of our faith. It closes the breach between the entrance into a community and the people, by making them take an interest in the service men that partake of the word of Christ in their places of worship. Thank you for taking an interest in us, I remain a humble, God-fearing sailor hoping to hear from your organization in the very near future.¹²

⁹A. E. Frey, "Soul Winning and Soul Keeping," Northwestern Lutheran (May 4, 1941 Vol. 28): pg. 138

¹⁰E. R. Blakewell, "Address Changes," Northwestern Lutheran (September 7, 1941 Vol. 28): pg. 281

¹¹E. R. Blakewell, "Spiritual Welfare Commission," Northwestern Lutheran (June 15, 1941 Vol. 28): pp. 186-187

¹²E. R. Blakewell, "Spiritual Welfare Commission," Northwestern Lutheran (March 22, 1942 Vol. 29): pp. 88-89

One particularly interesting piece of mail NWL reported on was a postcard from a POW who was being kept in a war camp in Germany. The October 15, 1944 issue showed a picture of the postcard, which even had a stamp with Adolf Hitler's picture on it. The emphasis of the article was to show how effective the US Postal Service had been in sending and receiving mail (it was estimated at 98%!)--so it was well worth the effort of writing letters to those who were enlisted.¹³

The Northwestern Lutheran Helps Christians Understand Their Relationship to the War

Besides reporting on the work of the SWC and telling the Synod's membership how they could help, the NWL also contained some articles that helped Christians understand how a Christian is to conduct his life as he serves his government and his Lord. An article by E. Duemling clearly explained what a Christian's attitude ought to be in this difficult time. In the first part of the article Rev. Duemling explains the biblical basis for obedience toward the government. He wrote, "A Christian sees in his government the representative of God, Rom. 13, 1. 2. He knows that patriotic service is nothing less than serving his God and Lord. The conscientious Christian, therefore, is and should be the best patriot of the country." To help the people understand what that means in regards to the war he wrote:

It is entirely compatible with a Christian's religious principles to serve in the military department of his country. The Christian knows that when his country calls upon him to take up arms against an enemy, it is his bounden duty to obey. He will not refuse such service, but much rather willingly sacrifice his life's blood for his country's safety. In his patriotic service under the flag he acts for conscience's sake, yea, for the Lord's sake, for in serving his country, he serves his God. In refusing service he would "resist the ordinance of God" Rom. 13, 2. Furthermore, a good citizen will follow another duty...An American Citizen will give due honor to all officials in whom authority is vested, from the president down to the lowest officer...He will also honor the American flag, the symbol of

¹³E. R. Blakewell, "From a Prison Camp in Germany," Northwestern Lutheran (October 15, 1944 Vol. 31): pg. 204

his country, and will be careful never to sully nor besmirch it by word or deed. He will honor his country because he loves it.¹⁴

Among other articles written to help the Synod's membership understand the war, an article by President John Brenner was also included. The article is a letter that President Brenner sent to the National Council of Civilian Defense to explain why our church could not cooperate in the military chaplaincy program. The letter explained how the church and state must be kept separate in everything to uphold the freedom of religion in our country. He wrote:

According to our convictions, the Church is not the mentor of the State, nor, on the other hand, an agency of the civil government. Both the Church and the State, have a place in the life of the same persons, yet there is no conflict, for each has its own sphere of action and its own functions. As a church we endeavor to remain within our calling and studiously avoid interfering with the affairs of the State...We do not find that the present emergency demands a change in character of true leadership in the Church or the nature of its work...On the other hand, the declaration of a war, its prosecution, the legislation and the diplomatic negotiations accidental to it, etc., are most distinctly the affair of the civil government, which acts upon humanly established evidence, according to human ideals, philosophies, and judgment and through human means.

In the article President Brenner also emphasized how the Christian's dedication to his Lord would lead him to dedication to his country.¹⁵ Thus the letter served to let our people know our Synod's stand on this issue and to help them understand they were to heartily support the war effort.

The Northwestern Lutheran Reports on the Military Chaplaincy Issue

As NWL reported on the war it could not help but report on the military chaplaincy issue. After all, the Missouri Synod entered the government's program early on, so why hadn't the Wisconsin Synod? Besides printing articles such as the one by President Brenner, NWL reported on this issue in a few different ways. Sometimes it was discussed in the form of news items, sometimes it was written about in the editorial section, and other times it was reported in the form of articles

¹⁴E. Duemling "My Country," Northwestern Lutheran (March 8, 1942 Vol. 29): pg. 72

¹⁵John Brenner, "The Church and 'War Work,'" Northwestern Lutheran (November 29, 1942 Vol. 29): pp. 374-376

that were part of a much broader topic. This section will show how NWL kept people informed as to how the issue was developing.

In a news item from the March 21, 1943 issue, the NWL reprinted a brief article from "The Christian Century" magazine that explained how the government was stepping in to educate and pay military chaplains--a blatant confusion of church and state. The article explained how this was a disturbing trend:

Something new was added to American church life last week when the United States Navy announced that henceforth it would select and train its own chaplains...the students will be...drawing navy pay and allowances, and the navy will be in complete control of their studies...we are more than ever convinced that the whole system whereby chaplains are made commissioned officers is wrong in conception and spiritually disastrous in its implications.¹⁶

This news brief illustrated what the Wisconsin Synod had always maintained over against the idea of a government run chaplaincy program--not only was it in and of itself a mixing of church and state, but that it could have horrible consequences for the freedom of religion in our country.

In the January 18, 1948 issue of NWL, another article from "The Christian Century" was reprinted in the editorial section of the periodical. This article again displayed the truth that the military chaplaincy was in fact a confusion of church and state and thus something the church would want to stay out of. The article explained the problem in these terms: "the functions of the institutions of church and state are clearly intermingled in the chaplaincy as at present constituted. The constitutional wall of separation between the two is breached from both sides...it permits the state to overlay church jurisdiction over the clergy with another jurisdiction, that of the state." The article then went on to add that "Instead of consenting further to this hybrid arrangement, the church itself, in the person of its ordained ministers, priests, and rabbis, should follow its sons into the armed forces, conceiving its task in these fields as only an extension of its parish functions...(in doing this) own no allegiance save that to which they are solemnly committed in

¹⁶NWL Editorial Committee, "The Navy to Educate Chaplains," Northwestern Lutheran (March 21, 1943 Vol. 30): pg. 85

their ordination vows.” In agreeing with this article the editor added, “...To accept the stipulations laid down by our government in regard to the chaplaincy is, of course, the easier way out. But, it is not the God-pleasing way.”¹⁷ With these articles the NWL helped to show the Synod’s people not only the doctrinal problem with chaplaincy but also the practical implications of this arrangement.

Of course the confusion of church and state was not the only truth at stake in the chaplaincy issue. One of the other problems with the government program was that of unionism. The idea of using individual chaplains to minister to a broad range of religious backgrounds is unbiblical and could only lead to compromising the truth of God’s word. As this was also an important issue to understand, NWL printed many things that illustrated and explained this.

In article in the March 20, 1955 NWL an article appeared entitled. “As We See It: Another Report--Chaplaincy” by E. Reim who was at this time serving as the Secretary of the Standing Committee on Church Union. He addressed the “problem Military Chaplaincy” as it was discussed at a recent meeting of the Synodical Conference. He wrote very clearly concerning the problems of anyone involved as a military chaplain. He wrote,

the military chaplaincy as it is constituted today is incompatible with the nature of the divine call under which ministers of the Gospel should do their work. Army regulations make the chaplain responsible for the religious needs of the entire unit to which he is assigned. If he cannot render the required services himself (according to his conscience)...it becomes his duty to find someone who can--a Catholic priest, a Jewish Rabbi, or whatever the situation may require...We have been asking how a church which is mindful of its responsibility for the purity of its teaching can...place its pastors under such an obligation.¹⁸

Another article that reports on the meeting of representatives of the Missouri Synod with the Conference of Presidents at Milwaukee in January of 1954 had this to say of the problem: “It is freely admitted by the leaders of the Missouri Synod that grave dangers surround the arrangement. But it was also maintained that we should use the door that was opened to the

¹⁷W.J.Schweppe “A Hybrid Arrangement,” Northwestern Lutheran (January 18, 1948 Vol. 35): pg. 19

¹⁸E. Reim, “As We See It: Another Report--Chaplaincy,” Northwestern Lutheran (March 20, 1955 Vol. 42) pp.86-87

Gospel by the chaplaincy. We contend that the very regulations governing the chaplaincy are unionistic in nature.” Sadly the article ended saying that no discernible progress was made in the growing differences between the Wisconsin Synod and Missouri Synod in not only the chaplaincy issue but many different issues such as prayer fellowship and the use of the Common Confession. The report ended with the following quote, “A difference of spirit is apparently the chief divider.”¹⁹

To perhaps illustrate for its readers the way the chaplaincy led to problems of unionism, NWL printed a few points of view from those other than officials of the Synod. In a letter received by the Standing Committee on Church Union, a member of the armed forces wrote about the present condition of religion in the service. He wrote concerning three main points he took note of:

1. A general atmosphere of confessional indifference. I find that a great number of our Lutheran brethren feel that the Lutheran Churches in America are just one big ‘happy’ family. And, there are only a few *minor* differences between Synods.
2. Criticism of Synodical Conference on their attitude of closed communion...I personally know of Synodical Conference members who have received communion and also of non-Lutherans (at a ULCA church involved with a pan-Lutheran gathering center).
3. Compromises tending toward unionistic practices...I have heard the Wisconsin Synod violently denounced because they do not co-operate in this venture. (of pan-Lutheran fellowship activities.)²⁰

This article showed plainly that the idea of the chaplaincy leading to unionistic practices was not just a concern of a committee in Milwaukee but that it was happening in reality. Another such news brief that showed just how far members of the Missouri Synod had strayed in this matter was printed in an editorial of the December 11, 1955 issue of NWL. It read as follows:

The chaplains of Frances E. Warren Air Force Base in Wyoming conducted a religious mission...The Protestant missionaries were Luther Holcomb, pastor of Lakewood Baptist Church in Dallas, Texas, and Dr. Martin Scharlemann, who is the Director of Graduate Studies at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis, Missouri. Dr. Scharlemann conducted the service in Chapel 5 at the air base. The following choirs from Cheyenne churches participated...St. Paul Lutheran (Augustana),

¹⁹Irwin J. Habeck, “Report of the Committee of Presidents,” *Northwestern Lutheran* (June 13, 1954 Vol. 41): pp. 188-190

²⁰E. Reim, “As We See It...A Serviceman Speaks,” *Northwestern Lutheran* (June 26, 1955 Vol. 42): pg. 200

Second Baptist Church, First Methodist Church, First Christian Church (among others)...The following chaplains participated in these services...Chaplain Frank White, Baptist; Chaplain Alfred McWilliams, A.L.C.; Chaplain Alfred McWilliams, Col. Methodist Episcopal...In all these services Dr. Scharlemann was the principal speaker. We call this crass unionism.²¹

With these reports printed for all to see and understand, the NWL helped make our Synod's position on the chaplaincy very clear.

Conclusion

The years our Synod dealt with World War II and the chaplaincy issue were difficult years. We see the important purpose NWL served during that time as it helped keep the Synod's people informed about the church's war efforts and the military chaplaincy issue. In this very difficult time period, NWL's reporting on these topics served as a source of encouragement and truth to help keep our Synod on the right path.

²¹W. Schaller Jr., "Unionism," *Northwestern Lutheran* (December 11, 1955 Vol. 42): pp. 388-389

Bibliography

Brenner, John M. *How the Military Chaplaincy Led the Missouri Synod into Unionism and Thus Was a Major Factor in Her Downfall.* EF# 1792 c.2

Merten, Brett C. *The Spiritual Welfare Commission: The WELS' Answer to the Chaplaincy Question During World War II.* EF# 2365 c.2

Renz, Edward C. *A History of WELS Spiritual Services for Military Personnel.* EF# 582

Schoeneck, Mark E. *A History of WELS Ministry to its Service Members During the War Years.* EF# 2176 c.2

Woldt, Michael. *Chevrons or Chevrolets?: "A Look at the Wisconsin Synod's Ministry to its People in the Armed Forces Especially During the Two World Wars.* EF# 1991 c.2

Military Chaplaincy--Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Vertical File (3 folders)

Northwestern Lutheran: Years 1940-1958