

The Lutheran Free Churches of Europe

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The battle for confessional Lutheranism continues in our world today. In the United States the Evangelical Lutheran Synod (ELS) and the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS) attempt to hold high the standard. In Europe the battle has been waged on many fronts over many years, usually by small groups who have left the territorial and state churches. Those who struggle for confessional Lutheranism in Europe do so at the cost of personal sacrifice, often of heroic proportions.

This article attempts to introduce the reader to the history and present status of Europe's Lutheran free churches. It will not give an exhaustive treatment. Rather, it hopes to familiarize the readers of the *Quarterly* with those bodies which at one time or another have had ties or dealings with the Wisconsin Synod. Acquaintance with these groups takes on added significance in the light of the proposal of the Commission on Inter-Church Relations (CICR) to establish a new "synodical conference" of international scope. Such a conference, which was endorsed by the 1987 convention of the WELS, would "bring together churches or synods so that they might strengthen one another in maintaining and extending a faithful confession to Scripture and to the Lutheran Confessions."

One of the proposed criteria for membership in a new "synodical conference" is "freedom from triangular fellowships." As will be seen, when it comes to the Lutheran free churches of Europe, such triangular fellowships often pose serious problems. For that matter, because of their fellowship ties with the Lutheran Free Church in the DDR (German Democratic Republic), which still has to clarify its relations with the Independent Ev. Lutheran Church (SELK) and The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LC-MS), neither the ELS nor the WELS can at present pass that test.

Germany

The German free churches trace their roots to September 27, 1817. On that date Frederick William III, King of Prussia, celebrated the 300th anniversary of the Reformation by uniting the Lutherans and Reformed into one Evangelical church at the court and among the military. By 1821 candidates for the ministry were required to pledge loyalty to this union. In 1823 ministers were to pledge to the confessional writings of the united church in so far as these confessions were in harmony with one another. In 1830 it was decreed that the term *Evangelical* be substituted for the distinctive names *Lutheran* and *Reformed*. Reaction against this Prussian Union led to the formation in 1830 of the Evangelical Lutheran or Old Lutheran Church. For a while pastors who refused to honor the Union were imprisoned or defrocked, until in 1845 the Old Lutherans were granted legal status.

1. The Evangelical Lutheran (Old Lutheran) Church—Breslau Synod

This church body was formally recognized by the German government in 1845. Its purpose was to supply a Lutheran church in German lands (especially Prussia) in which the official church was the Union Church.

The Breslau Synod remained in church fellowship with the Lutheran territorial churches until 1947, practicing fellowship on a selective basis. When the *Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland* (EKID:) was formed in which both the Reformed and Lutheran confessional positions, especially also on Holy Communion, were given equal status, the Breslau Synod felt that it could no longer practice fellowship with the Lutheran territorial churches which joined EKID. In 1948 the Breslau Synod then established fellowship with the Saxon Free

Church on the basis of the very thorough and carefully worded “Theses of Agreement” (*Einigungssaetze*), settling former doctrinal differences. On that basis in 1949 the Breslau Synod was also accepted into fellowship by the Wisconsin Synod, and by the entire Synodical Conference at its next convention.

2. The Evangelical Lutheran Free Church—Saxon Free Church

The Saxon Free Church owes much to the confessional testimony of Pastor Friedrich Brunn of Steeden in Nassau, who had withdrawn from the Union State Church of Nassau in 1848. Subsequently he testified more and more clearly also against the apostasy in the Lutheran territorial churches. After Dr. C. F. W. Walther’s visit to Germany in 1860, Brunn, in addition to his pastorate, conducted a preparatory educational institution at Steeden. In this school he trained at least 250 German students for entrance to Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, to help meet the rapidly growing Missouri Synod’s need for pastors.

The first free Lutheran congregations in the Kingdom of Saxony were organized by confessional Lutheran laymen who had left the Lutheran territorial church because of its departure from scriptural teaching and practice. These congregations and the like-minded Lutheran free churches of Nassau founded the Saxon Lutheran Free Church in 1876. From its inception it was in fellowship with the Evangelical Lutheran Synodical Conference of North America.

3. The Independent Evangelical Lutheran Church (old SELK)

Old Lutheran free churches, similar to those we have just described, developed in other areas of Germany also. Five such bodies were (a) the Independent Evangelical Lutheran Church in Hesse, (b) the Hannoverian Free Church, (c) the Hermannsburg-Hamburg Free Church, (d) the Evangelical Lutheran Free Church in Baden, and (e) the Renitent [Resisting] Church of the Unaltered Augsburg Confession in Lower Hesse. The first three of these bodies united in 1947 to form the Independent Evangelical Lutheran Church (*Selbstaendige Evangelisch-Lutherische Kirche*, i.e., SELK). The Evangelical Lutheran Free Church in Baden (d) joined the SELK in 1948 and then withdrew in 1965. In 1950 the fifth of the above-mentioned churches joined this “old” SELK.

In 1950 this “old” SELK established fellowship with the Breslau Synod (1) and the Saxon Free Church (2).ⁱ The SELK had not participated in drawing up the “Theses of Agreement,” nor did it formally sign them. It merely stated that it found nothing in those theses that went beyond Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions. In later discussions it became evident that this SELK position left room for the contention regarding some aspects of the doctrines agreed upon in the theses that also different understandings did not necessarily go beyond Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions.

Two factors kept the Wisconsin Synod from establishing fellowship with the SELK. One was the fact that the Hermannsburg-Hamburg Free diocese of the SELK still carried on the Hermannsburg mission jointly with the Hannoverian State Church. The second factor was that at a conference attended by Wisconsin Synod representatives the superintendent of the SELK, Pastor Schrocka, had expressed disagreement with the plenary inspiration and full inerrancy of the Holy Scriptures.

The Breslau Synod, the Saxon Free Church and the old SELK remained organizationally independent but formed a federation of churches and in an increasing measure carried out joint projects, notably, the *Theologische Hochschule* at Oberursel and the Bleckmar Mission in Natal, South Africa.

4. The Evangelical Lutheran Confessional Church

The German free church with the closest historical ties to the Wisconsin Synod was the Evangelical Lutheran Confessional Church (*Evangelisch-Lutherische Bekenntniskirche*). This body grew out of the Evangelical Augsburg State Church in Poland. Pastor Angerstein of Lodz was one of the few pastors in this Lutheran state church of Poland who was trying to preserve true Lutheranism among the many Germans living

in this predominantly Roman Catholic land. He encouraged young men to study to be pastors at the seminary of the Saxon Free Church at Zehlendorf, Germany, or at the seminaries of the Wisconsin or Missouri Synods in the United States rather than at the universities of Europe. This led two large congregations in Poland to ask to be served by Wisconsin Synod pastors. Pastor Otto Engel was sent to Poland to supervise the founding of a confessional Lutheran church, and in 1924 our Poland Mission was begun. In 1937 the Evangelical Lutheran Free Church of the Unaltered Augsburg Confession in Poland was organized. In 1939 it had 12 congregations and 14 preaching stations. About 5000 members were served by eleven pastors.

During World War II the pastors and people of our churches in Poland were forced to flee, often at gunpoint. Six pastors of the Poland Mission survived the war and both in West and East Germany attempted to serve their scattered refugee flock. In the Western Zone of Germany the refugee congregations and their pastors were at first organized as the Evangelical Lutheran Refugee Mission. In 1951 it was incorporated as the Evangelical Lutheran Confessional Church, the *Bekennniskirche*.ⁱⁱ

5. The Independent Evangelical Lutheran Church (new SELK)

In 1966 the Breslau Synod (1), the Saxon Free Church (2) and old SELK (3) began consideration of an organizational merger. Soon the *Bekennniskirche* (4) was also included in these merger deliberations. Years of discussion followed in which the Wisconsin Synod's CICR was deeply involved. In 1972 a new SELK was formed by the first three churches mentioned above. In 1974 the *Bekennniskirche* also resolved to seek merger with this new SELK.

In July 1973 our CICR met in Mequon with representatives of SELK (5), the *Bekennniskirche* (4) and the Evangelical Lutheran Church—Synod of France and Belgium (9). Full agreement was sought on the plenary inspiration, full inerrancy and external clarity of Holy Scripture and on the rejection of the historical-critical method of biblical interpretation.

At the first meeting of the CICR delegates and SELK representatives in the interest of establishing doctrinal unity in September 1969, the latter had expressed dissent concerning the statement in the WELS' *This We Believe* regarding creation that "all this happened in the course of six normal days ..." The CICR members at that time responded that, since Scripture itself considers Genesis I to be a historical account (Ex 20:11), the inerrancy and external clarity of Scripture call for this confession. As a result, the creation days were discussed in subsequent deliberations, but always in connection with the external clarity and inerrancy of Scripture. At the Mequon meeting the agreement was reached: "The understanding that the Creation Days are days whose duration was determined by the function of the sun and moon (Genesis 1:14) is also our understanding, to which we obligate ourselves as representatives of SELK."

On the basis of these discussions it appeared that doctrinal unity existed, and the meeting closed with a joint worship service. In fact, the 1973 Wisconsin Synod convention approved "the practice of church fellowship with the SELK upon formal endorsement by the SELK *Kirchenleitung* of the doctrinal agreement reached at Mequon." The SELK *Kirchenleitung* was, however, not ready to acknowledge the Mequon agreement as a prerequisite for church fellowship or as a basis on which doctrinal discipline would be carried out in its midst.

In 1974 our commission had to report, therefore, that it could not recommend a formal declaration of church fellowship with SELK. In 1977 the WELS convention noted with sadness that through its merger with SELK the *Bekennniskirche* had severed its confessional fellowship with our synod.

SELK is by far the largest of the free churches covered in this essay. In 1985 it counted about 39,000 members.

6. Evangelical Lutheran (Breslau) (Old Lutheran) Church in the DDR

After World War II a new factor entered to confuse the German free church picture. Germany was divided into East and West. The free churches were split apart also. That portion of the Breslau Synod (1) which

now found itself in the German Democratic Republic continued to function constitutionally as the Evangelical Lutheran (Old Lutheran) Church in the DDR [*Deutsche Demokratische Republik*].

As a sister synod of Breslau in the West, this East German church body found itself in fellowship with SELK and the Missouri Synod, as well as with the Wisconsin Synod. The WELS had no direct contact with any representatives of the Old Lutheran Church in the DDR until 1979. Then two representatives attended a Leipzig meeting of the Lutheran Free Church pastors at which our CICR representatives expressed their scriptural concerns about long-extended triangular fellowships and urged that evangelical church discipline be carried out regarding an open denial of scriptural inerrancy in the midst of the Old Lutheran Church. After a request for doctrinal discussions in March 1987 was turned down by the Old Lutheran Church, the CICR had to report to the 1987 Wisconsin Synod convention “that a scriptural basis no longer exists for God-pleasing church fellowship with the Evangelical Lutheran (Old Lutheran) Church in the DDR.”

The final straw in the breakdown of relationships with this church had been the WELS’ endorsement of the Lutheran Free Church’s (7) 1984 suspension of fellowship with the Evangelical Lutheran (Old Lutheran) Church (6). The latter insists that no further discussions can be held until the WELS retracts this endorsement.

7. Evangelical Lutheran Free Church in the DDR

Another group of Lutherans, split off from their western brethren by the iron curtain, continued to function as the Evangelical Lutheran Free Church in the DDR. Most of the pastors and two-thirds of the congregational members came from the Saxon Free Church (2). One-third of the membership constitutes the Diaspora District, presently served by four pastors. Its members are to a large extent refugees of our former Poland Mission and their descendants. These refugees had been gathered together in churches under the leadership of Pastor “Opa” (Grandfather) August Lerle. The East German government did not permit the formation of any new and independent churches. Hence, the WELS encouraged these brethren to affiliate with the Saxons and become the *Diasporabezirk* (the Dispersion District) of the Evangelical Lutheran Free Church.

Plans were well under way for the Evangelical Lutheran Free Church (7) to merge with the Evangelical Lutheran (Old Lutheran) Church (6) when differences in the doctrine of scriptural inerrancy surfaced. As a result, in May 1984 the Free Church (7) suspended fellowship with the Evangelical Lutheran (Old Lutheran) Church (6). It has stated its full agreement with the church fellowship position of the Wisconsin Synod and is giving attention to its fellowship with SELK (5) and the LC-MS.

The Evangelical Lutheran Free Church in the DDR is the group featured in the cover story of the May 1, 1987, *Northwestern Lutheran* under the title, “A Courageous Remnant in the Land of Luther.” This group is in confessional fellowship with the Wisconsin Synod and is served by some 20 pastors.

England

8. The Evangelical Lutheran Church of England

Lutheran influence in England goes all the way back to Martin Luther himself. Luther’s writings were translated, circulated and discussed as soon as they were smuggled in by merchant ships. The *King James Version* is based to a large extent on Luther’s German Bible. When England was ruled by the German House of Hannover in the 1700s, Lutheranism actually was made the third official faith of the royal court.

The 19th and 20th centuries were marked by the formation of Lutheran congregations of various nationalities and languages throughout England. This was due to several factors. Lutheran immigrants, who had intended to go to America or Australia, settled down short of their goal in England. The home churches of these immigrants in turn sent pastors to meet the spiritual needs of their transplanted members, as well as the needs of Lutheran seamen. Then in the 1930s and again after World War II, tens of thousands of Lutheran political, religious and racial refugees crowded into England.

The church body known today as the Evangelical Lutheran Church of England traces its history to 1896. Six young men, most of them still in their early twenties, left their native Germany and began new lives in England as apprentice bakers. Visits to various churches left them disillusioned by the rationalistic preaching they heard. They decided to do something about it. Attracted by a stray copy of *Der Lutheraner*, they wrote to the editor, Professor L. Fuerbringer of Concordia Seminary in St. Louis, and asked for his help. In August 1896 the first pastor, the Rev. F. W. Schulze, arrived from America to organize the new congregation. Some years later this German congregation adopted the English language and eventually became a purely English-speaking congregation.

Following World War II, the influx of refugees overtaxed all existing Lutheran congregations in England. Applications for help were made to The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod and to the National Lutheran Council in the United States. These appeals met with positive answers, and additional Lutheran resources were poured into England. In time many of these smaller Lutheran groups joined the Lutheran Council of Great Britain and the Lutheran World Federation. Meanwhile, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of England, with its strong ties to the Missouri Synod, went its separate way, becoming one of Missouri's "partner churches."

Our WELS was in fellowship with the Evangelical Lutheran Church of England through the Synodical Conference. In fact, Pastor Norman Nagel from that church attended the Conference of Theologians held in Mequon July 20–30, 1960. This conference was one of the last attempts at working out the problems that were breaking up the Synodical Conference. The Evangelical Lutheran Church of England is one of the church bodies specifically mentioned in our synod's 1961 resolutions suspending fellowship with Missouri. The Wisconsin Synod has never formally suspended fellowship with this English church. Fellowship fell by the wayside over the years, however, because of that church's close ties with Missouri.

Today this church belongs to the International Lutheran Conference, the association of Missouri's partner churches. In the most recent records available it reported 11 pastors and about 1,000 baptized members.

France and Belgium

9. The Evangelical Lutheran Church—Synod of France and Belgium

The Lutheran state church of Alsace, the Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession, had been left intact when in 1648 Alsace-Lorraine was ceded to Catholic France. Subsequently, this church deteriorated into rationalism and liberalism. Yet in the second half of the nineteenth century the Lutheran confessional awakening that swept through Germany made itself felt also in this church. Its confessional pastors, such as W. A. and F. R. Horning, Huser, Magnus and others, in gathering their congregations around the pure Word and sacraments did not leave their state church but founded protest congregations in the vain hope of winning the state church back to Lutheran confessionalism. When these confessional pastors died or were called away, the state church authorities consistently replaced them with liberal pastors in spite of congregational protests. In such conflicts the faithful members of these protest congregations, generally a minority, organized as free congregations. Congregations in Mulhouse, Strasbourg and Lembach organized during the time that Alsace was German territory (1870–1918), became members of the Saxon Free Church, and received pastoral service from the Saxons or the LC-MS. Four other congregations in Woerth, Schillersdorf, Heiligenstein and Obersultzbach, formed after 1918 when Alsace was again French territory and cut off from Germany, looked to Missouri for pastors.

On February 25–28, 1927, these seven Lutheran free congregations organized as the Evangelical Lutheran Free Church of Alsace with the encouragement of LC-MS leaders. With Missouri's help this church now established a center of theological studies for training ministers in a suburb of Paris. With Missouri's encouragement and help it also started congregations in Paris and in the harbor of Rouen. Through prospects won through the French Lutheran Hour broadcast, it began other missions in France itself. In 1939 Trinity congregation, gathered by Pastor Lambert Bellings in Antwerp, joined the synod, and in 1951 Trinity

congregation in Brussels, with its Pastor Corneil Hobus, likewise joined it. These last two additions account for the present name of this free church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church—Synod of France and Belgium.

As a staunchly confessional church body it was deeply involved in the admonitions that preceded the demise of the Synodical Conference and the SELK merger before all differences were settled. In 1971 it declared itself in protesting fellowship with The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. In 1980 President Frederic Bohy declared that his church body “considered it a duty to remain in some kind of protesting fellowship with church bodies where members are still contending for the truth.” At this time it also entered upon a new joint mission endeavor in Zaire, Africa, with the LC-MS.

With deep regret our Wisconsin Synod convention in 1981 notified the Synod of France and Belgium that the WELS could no longer continue its fellowship with this body. The resolution, however, expressed hope for the reestablishment of fellowship when triangular fellowship would no longer be involved.

Upon the LC-MS’ termination of fellowship with the ALC, the French-Belgian free church in 1984 lifted its protest against Missouri.

Scandinavia

10. The Lutheran Confessional Church (Scandinavia)

In the fall of 1970 a group of Christians in Uppsala, Sweden, resolved to call Dr. Seth Erlandsson and Dr. David Hedegard to preach and administer the sacraments in Sunday services. As they relate it themselves,

Those who gathered in this group found it impossible to continue to attend the other service in Uppsala, since as a rule false doctrine was proclaimed or tolerated there. It was especially distressing to note how pastors who otherwise still wanted to hold to the Scriptures at the same time took up collections for manifestly unbiblical purposes and participated in services with manifest heretics.ⁱⁱⁱ

In the summer of 1972 Dr. Siegbert Becker of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary lectured in Sweden to various groups of confessionally-minded members of the Swedish Lutheran State Church. The following year a small nucleus of Lutherans formally withdrew from the state church in Sweden and organized St. Matthew’s congregation in Uppsala as an independent free church. They were led by Dr. Seth Erlandsson. (Dr. Hedegard had died in 1971.) In October of that same year three pastors met with our CICR in Milwaukee, and the commission declared itself to be “agreed in doctrine and practice with St. Matthew’s congregation.”

In September 1974 three congregations in Sweden met to establish the Lutheran Confessional Church (Scandinavia). The Wisconsin Synod declared fellowship with that new church body in 1975. The Confessional Church expanded into Norway in 1978. It also gained individual members in Finland. In 1986 the Lutheran Confessional Church (Scandinavia) had a total of eight congregations in Sweden, three in Norway and several preaching places in Finland. It also was associated with Biblicum, an institute for biblical research and Bible teaching in Uppsala. The Lutheran Confessional Church (Scandinavia) has not declared itself to be in church fellowship with SELK or the free churches of Finland or Denmark.

On July 25, 1987, this small church body broke into two groups. Pastor Per Jonsson and about 75 members severed their fellowship with the rest of the body and with the WELS. Pastor Jonsson’s group differed with the WELS on issues related to the consecration of the Lord’s Supper and the public ministry. The larger segment of the Lutheran Confessional Church (Scandinavia), about 300 members, remained in fellowship with the WELS. Pastor Lars Engquist is chairman of the church board for this group.^{iv}

11. The Confessional Lutheran Church of Finland

In Finland, a land where 98 percent of the inhabitants belong to the Lutheran state church, a small free church holds up the banner of confessional Lutheranism. Back in 1869 a new and more liberal church law was enacted. Reaction against the resultant lack of confessionalism in the state church led small groups of Lutherans to form independent congregations in six cities. They were led by five pastors. All resigned from the Finnish National Church in October or November of 1923. In 1924, *The Theological Monthly* reported on their condition.

The pastors and their people have an arduous task before them. They have no churches in which to conduct their services, no parsonages for their pastors, no funds for meeting expenses. They are living from hand to mouth in every respect and trust their needs will be provided for from day to day.^v

In 1928 these independent congregations formed the Free Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland. This church body established fellowship with the Synodical Conference. In 1967 it adopted the name Confessional Lutheran Church of Finland. It reported 385 members in 1980 and was under the leadership of President Markku Särelä. Services are held for the most part in the homes of members.

The Confessional Lutheran Church of Finland terminated its fellowship relations with the Missouri Synod in 1971, citing as its reason the unscriptural position which the Missouri Synod held with respect to the doctrines of church fellowship and the Holy Scriptures. In 1984, however, the Confessional Lutheran Church of Finland declared itself to be in fellowship with the LC-MS once again. Representatives of the Finnish church have explained that the Missouri Synod's fellowship with the American Lutheran Church was the only thing which stood between the Finnish church and the Missouri Synod.

In addition to this triangular fellowship problem, there remain unresolved church and ministry issues between the Finnish church and the Wisconsin Synod. Moreover, the Finnish church has not responded to a formal inquiry asking how it views its relationship to our synod. As a result of all this, the CICR resolved in 1986 to recognize the fact that we are presently not in fellowship with the Confessional Lutheran Church of Finland. Recently the Finnish church has participated in doctrinal discussions with the Lutheran Confessional Church (Scandinavia), although no declaration of fellowship has resulted.

12. The Evangelical Lutheran Free Church in Denmark

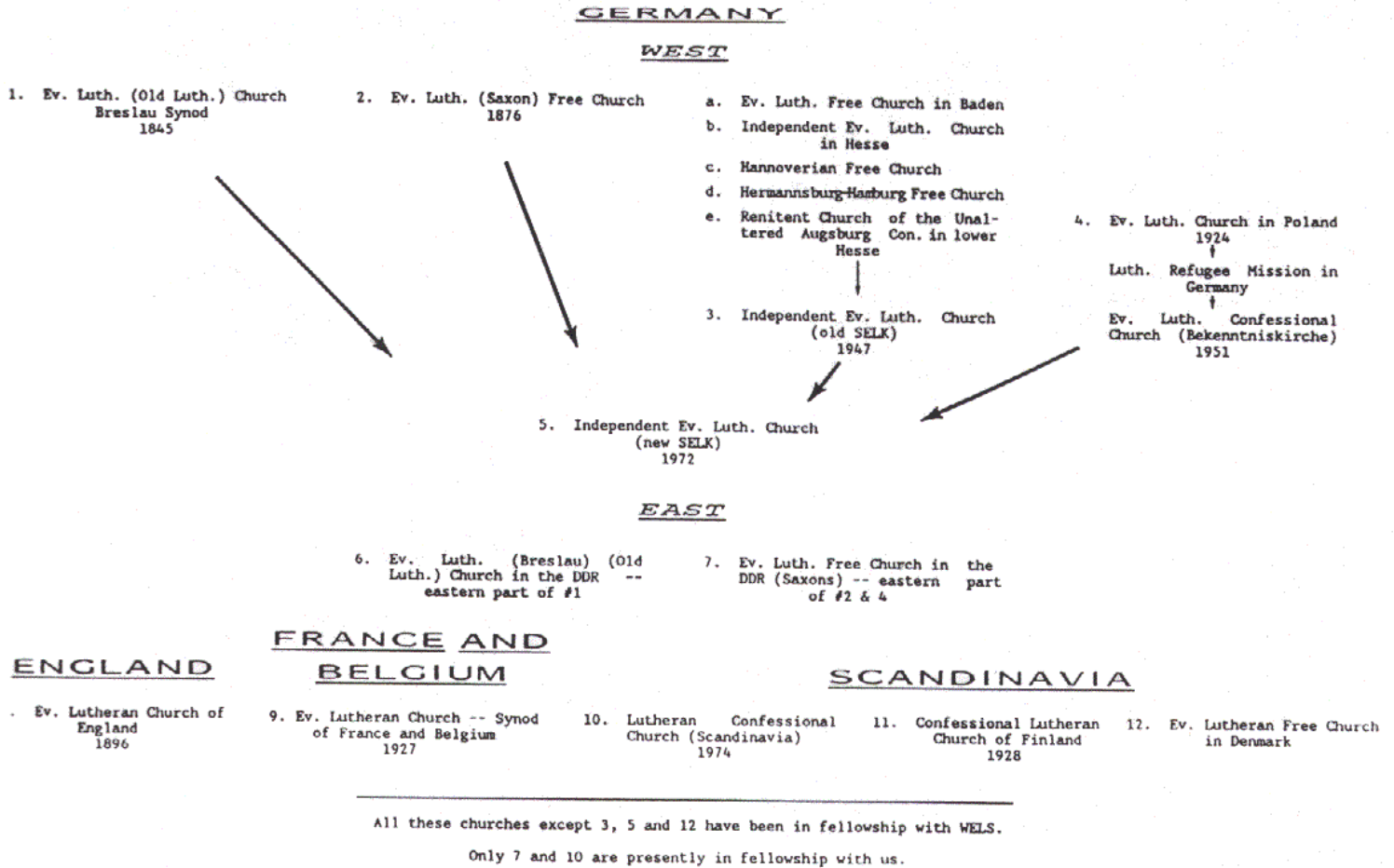
In 1855 Pastor N. P. Grunnet withdrew from the state church of Denmark and organized the Evangelical Lutheran Free Church of Denmark. Later he was joined by his son, who had studied at an LC-MS seminary. As a result of employing lay preachers this church body subsequently experienced a serious setback. After Grunnet's death, Missouri sent over two pastors who took charge of the remnants of his flock and continued to give it support. In 1911 the Danish Free Church united with the Saxon Free Church. It was thus one of the affiliates of the Synodical Conference.

This church body is presently led by President Leif Jensen. Pastor Jensen studied at Biblicum in Uppsala, Sweden, and visited Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary before taking up his work as president. He is the successor of President Walter Michael. CICR representatives had met with Pastor Michael in 1968 in Copenhagen and shared confessional concerns with him.

Recently this church body has participated in free conferences also with the Lutheran Confessional Church (Scandinavia). Two pastors, one the president, represented this church at the tenth anniversary of the Lutheran Confessional Church (Scandinavia) in September 1984. The Free Church in Denmark is in fellowship with SELK and the Confessional Church in Finland. In 1980 it numbered 184 members.

A Concluding Word

From our vantage point the Lutheran free church situation in Europe is confusing, to say the least. The confessional and doctrinal issues that separate the former members of the Synodical Conference in the United States may appear just as mindboggling to Lutherans in Europe. Those engaged in the struggle for confessional Lutheranism in Europe need our prayers—and our patience. They also need all the support and assistance we can give them in their battle for the truth of God's Word. A new synodical conference of international scope may be one way to give some help.



ⁱ The numbers in parentheses here and in the rest of this article refer to the sections of this article and the corresponding numbers assigned to the various church bodies on the accompanying chart.

ⁱⁱ The history of this church is recorded in its periodical, *Durch Kreuz zur Krone*, Vol. 25, Nos 4-9 (April-September 1974).

ⁱⁱⁱ *Rundbrev*, No 2, September 1973.

^{iv} See the *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, Vol. 85, No 1 (January 1988) pp 60-65.

^v *The Theological Monthly*, IV (1924), p 148.