

Interchurch Relations in Recent Years

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[In the fall of 1975 one of the topics treated at the Seminary Pastors' Institute was "Wisconsin's Interchurch Relations." This article is the last of the five lectures by the author on that topic.]

The twenty-five year clash with Missouri and the eventual separation from that body and the Synodical Conference, it should be realized at the outset, had a profound effect on that aspect of church life and synod history we are considering, interchurch relations. A few reminders in the way of bare but startling facts are in place.

When that tragic episode began back in 1938–39, a special committee had to be appointed by President Brenner to deal with the issue. There just was no Interchurch Relations Committee in those days. By the mid 1950's that committee, under a different name, was regarded generally as indispensable in the proper functioning of the church body. In 1961 the Commission on Doctrinal Matters placed before the Wisconsin convention a report consisting of eight major topics and two doctrinal statements, covering in all twenty-five pages of the *Proceedings*.¹

The break with Missouri did not halt, but rather accelerated this development. The 1975 *Book of Reports and Memorials* contains an Interchurch Relations Committee report that deals with ten different church groupings in six different countries on three continents and Australia.² The deterioration in Missouri and the dissolution of the Synodical Conference has cast Wisconsin, like it or not, into the role of one of the inheritors of the voice of the Synodical Conference and confessional Lutheranism in this country and the world. The century old goal of the Synodical Conference has become our goal, responsibility, and privilege, namely, "to strive for true unity in doctrine and practice among Lutheran church bodies."³

I. Intersynodical Relations in this Country

That is why there is an abundance of material to be considered in this final chapter of the history of Wisconsin's Interchurch Relations even though the time span involved is less than fifteen years. Much of that material is of an encouraging nature. If the places and people involved do not loom large on the total Lutheran world scene, the reports do represent one instance after another of opportunity to testify to the gospel truth of the Scriptures.

Relations with Brethren

This by God's goodness could be done in part with brethren in fellowship with us. If the dissolution of the Synodical Conference shrank the circle of our spiritual fellowship, it also drew us and the Evangelical Lutheran Synod closer together. Throughout the years of controversy and protest the Norwegians had supported us, as we endeavored to support them. In some of the single instances in the long conflict they may have been less concerned than we were, but in the overall matter of unionism and especially in the "Common Confession" issue they were loyal allies. Their method of operation varied in that they broke fellowship with Missouri already in 1955, but there was unity in goal and purpose. Together the ELS and Wisconsin pushed for a dissolution of the Synodical Conference in 1962, and together they and we withdrew in 1963.

That same year in August the Norwegians and Wisconsin sponsored the "Mankato Conference with Overseas Delegates." This was a continuation of previous conferences with overseas theologians, but with a

¹ *Wisconsin Synod Proceedings, 1961*, pp 168–193.

² *Wisconsin Reports and Memorials, 1975*, pp 107–114.

³ *Synodical Conference Proceedings, 1944*, p 93.

smaller attendance. The withdrawal from the Synodical Conference influenced some of the invited church bodies not to send delegates. Those that did attend devoted most of the time to a discussion of church-ministry and fellowship.⁴ Norwegian representatives were also present at the 1964 meeting with European free churches which will be described in a subsequent section.

A natural development in the ELS—WELS relations was the establishment of the Evangelical Lutheran Confessional Forum. Resolutions advocating such action were passed by Wisconsin in 1965 and by the Norwegians the following year. In April 1967 the first meeting was held, attended by twelve men from each synod. One of its resolutions can be quoted to supply a description of the Forum's purpose and operation. It reads:

The objectives of this forum shall be

- a) to manifest in a tangible and practical way the unity of faith and confession, which exists between the two bodies and to strengthen each other in our endeavors to remain faithful to the Holy Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions, especially necessary in a day of increasing doctrinal indifference and confessional laxity.
- b) to execute the above stated purpose in an orderly and beneficial manner, four fields of church activity are proposed as areas in which joint activity between the two synods might be explored to a greater degree. They are:
 - 1) Administration, 2) Doctrine, 3) Missions, 4) Education.⁵

In October 1967 a second meeting was held and set the pattern of annual October Forum meetings which still prevails. At the meetings common problems and prospects are given attention, and there is mutual encouragement to uphold God-pleasing doctrine and practice. The Forum has contributed to the fraternal relations that exist between Wisconsin and the Evangelical Lutheran Synod.

It is no secret that the ELS is encountering some difficulties within its own ranks regarding the church-ministry issue. This is understandable in view of the fact that so many Norwegian pastors received their training in Missouri schools. If we should be inclined to become impatient because a conclusive and successful end has not yet been achieved, we will do well to remember that our own body needed considerable time to find its position and has not yet achieved 100% unanimity.

An area of close cooperation between the ELS and our church body that deserves special mention is the Bethany Program of Special Pre-Seminary Ministerial Training. Inaugurated in 1962, this program enables men of our synod who have not followed our regular program of preseminary training to acquire the necessary prerequisites for Mequon enrollment at the Bethany College, which is able and willing to supply tailor-made student programs according to the individual need.

A decade of experience has demonstrated the value of the program. Over the years a considerable number of Mequon's graduates have been products of the Bethany program. At present over 30 Bethany program students are enrolled both at Mequon and at Mankato. Ties between Wisconsin and the ELS should grow even stronger as there is a steady growth in the number of pastors in our ranks who have had close school contacts with their opposite numbers in the Evangelical Lutheran Synod.

In 1972 the Evangelical Lutheran Confessional Forum was able to welcome at its annual meeting observers from the Federation for Authentic Lutheranism. This short-lived church body supplies a brief but interesting and gratifying chapter in the story of our interchurch relations.

From the time of its founding in late 1971 the Federation demonstrated that it shared fully the doctrinal position of our church body. Our Doctrinal Commission acknowledged this fact by word and deed, and formal declaration naturally followed at the earliest opportunity, the 1973 convention. This convention resolved:

⁴ *Wisconsin Synod Proceedings, 1965*, pp 269–270.

⁵ *Wisconsin Synod Proceedings, 1967* pp 37–38.

That the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod with joy and thankfulness to God formally and publicly declare itself to be in fellowship with the Federation for Authentic Lutheranism.⁶

In part because many from the outset visualized it as a temporary, halfway house for protesting Missouri congregations until they found a permanent home in an older confessional synod, in part because Missouri developments slowed almost to a standstill withdrawals of congregations, the Federation for Authentic Lutheranism soon realized its days as a useful church body in the confessional camp were numbered.

Six of its member congregations sought a release, motivated for the most part by a desire to effect a strange reactivation of a protest role against Missouri's policies and practices. The remaining congregations at their special April 1975 Oregon convention resolved to merge their organization with Wisconsin. Individual congregations, however, retained the right to determine for themselves their subsequent status, whether as Wisconsin or Norwegian or independent congregations. Consequently our 1975 convention welcomed into membership from the Federation several congregations, pastors, and teachers.

Relations with Former Wisconsin Brethren

Less encouraging and gratifying results must be reported in the section devoted to interchurch relations with former Wisconsin brethren. The major group to be considered is the Church of the Lutheran Confession, composed in the main of those who withdrew from Wisconsin because it continued its protesting fellowship with Missouri longer than they were willing to. At the close of 1959 and the beginning of 1960 this sizable group organized formally.

As could be expected, there were from the start extremely strained relations and in some instances actual clashes of opposition altars. Accusations of violations of the call were added to the list of grievances of the CLC against Wisconsin. In a short time, however, that issue subsided.

If there were hopes that the 1961 suspension of fellowship with Missouri would spell a speedy reunion of the CLC with its former body, these hopes very quickly proved unfounded. Our body's action in 1961 actually seemed to have the effect of engendering stronger language in CLC writing on the subject. This led to a formal discussion of the CLC's representation, or more accurately, misrepresentation of our 1961 action at a November 10, 1962 meeting. Our statement on *Church Fellowship* was also given attention.⁷ At this first meeting with CLC representatives Wisconsin was represented by President Naumann and Professors Lawrenz and Siegler. Our 1963 convention had before it a report of this meeting but had no reason to take any specific action.

Early in 1964 the same Wisconsin leaders met with CLC representatives to discuss CLC writings that distorted our fellowship position. What emerged was an understanding that there seemed to be no real difference between the CLC and Wisconsin in principle on the fellowship issue, at least while principles were under consideration. This then prompted the CLC to call for a review of all of Wisconsin's actions from 1955 on as the top agenda item for any subsequent meetings.

The CLC took this course, one must presume, because it felt the need to justify its continued separation and had not been able to do this by a discussion of principles. Hence it turned to practice in order to find there the substantive difference it insisted still existed.⁸

What resulted was a modern "agenda controversy," only this time there were no liturgical issues involved. The obvious fallacy in the CLC agenda proposal was pointed out. Two bodies that could not see eye-to-eye on substantive and principle issues had little reason to engage in a discussion of policies resting on principles not fully agreed upon. One meeting in December 1966 broke the agenda logjam, but did not resolve any differences. As the CLC report of the meeting stated:

⁶ *Wisconsin Synod Proceedings, 1973*, p 90.

⁷ *Wisconsin Synod Proceedings, 1963*, pp 211–212.

⁸ *Wisconsin Synod Proceedings, 1965*, pp 276–279.

The CLC Board of Doctrine contended that an examination of past official statements is necessary to justify its understanding of the “Theses”...but the WELS’ Commission still maintained that if no agreement in principles is achieved on the basis of the two published documents alone, proceeding to a thorough discussion of past official pronouncements and actions would not serve any wholesome purposes.⁹

The agenda controversy continued. Our 1971 convention resolved:

That our Commission on Doctrinal Matters continue to pursue every God-pleasing avenue of approach to resume fellowship discussions, giving consideration particularly to the possibility of a personal meeting with representatives of the Church of the Lutheran Confession to arrive at acceptable procedure.¹⁰

By July 1972 a meeting between CLC and WELS representatives was held. A previous agreement had placed at the top of the agenda list a discussion of the distinction between “weak brother” and “persistent errorist.” Discussion never got beyond that point. No great problems arose about the distinction, as long as the discussion centered on individual errorists, when talk moved to the church body, the old difference emerged. The CLC men disavowed an *in statu confessionis* such as we had employed. Our representatives pointed to its utility in fulfilling the Scripture admonition to put the best construction, to warn, to rebuke and the like.

At the July 1972 meeting our commission defined the scope and purpose of the *in statu confessionis* declaration under two points reprinted on page 99 of the 1973 Wisconsin *Reports and Memorials*:

1. In order to offer opportunity for determining what the confessional position of the group for which it must be held responsible really is (this may become necessary because of mutually exclusive statements, pronouncements, resolutions made in such a group, because of conflicting positions contending for mastery in this group, one or the other of which may for good reasons be considered to be only temporarily in control);
2. To offer opportunity to bring Scriptural testimony against the error infecting the group to those brethren who are not themselves advocating and propagandizing the errors—before treating such brethren as responsible partakers of the error or false practice infecting their group.

The matter must rest there. The specific point just mentioned serves as well as anything else to demonstrate the difference between us and the former brethren in the CLC. That the difference has not diminished in 1961 or the years since then but has actually seemed to harden into an irreducible gap, is reason to reflect and regret.

We ought to do all in our power to help prevent that solidification in perpetuity. It should be remembered that back in the 1940’s and early 1950’s it was Missouri that erred, neither the present members of the CLC nor Wisconsin. Somehow, however, between these two a conflict ensued. As one who can recall vividly how his view as to when the break with Missouri should occur shifted radically from 1954 to 1957, and who readily acknowledges that he could easily have been led into the ranks of those who make up the CLC, this essayist can understand why a beginning Wisconsin pastor might not understand why there is a break between the CLC and WELS.

As one who saw two of his faithful, exemplary pastors join the CLC and who participated in the happenings that, humanly speaking, made that step the “B” that followed “A,” the essayist will always be one who hopes that everything will be done that can be done in order to bring the CLC and WELS together again.

⁹ *Wisconsin Synod Proceedings, 1967*, p 280.

¹⁰ *Wisconsin Synod Proceedings, 1971*, p 113.

Perhaps fruitful discussion is ruled out for the present. That need not hinder each one of us from praying fervently for such a desirable outcome.

The worst that could happen would be for us to freeze the cold, bleak situation of the present into a permanent state of affairs by assuming no more prayers and no more efforts on our part are needed or wanted. In that case we will have a repetition of the outcome that confronts us in relations with those former Wisconsin members designated as Protestants.

A major effort was made, at the very time the conflict with Missouri reached its climax, to heal the break between Protestants and Wisconsin. In an October 1958 Church Union Committee meeting this resolution was passed:

That District President Sitz in the name of the Union Committee approach Pastor Beitz in the interest of a reconciliation with the Protestant Conference.¹¹

In 1961 the Wisconsin convention could adopt a study committee report that in essence asked the Western Wisconsin District “of its own free will” to reconsider action taken back in 1927 that involved suspensions and led to the formation of the Protestant Conference.¹² The original resolutions were found faulty in respect to scope, unanimity, and clarity.

In 1962 the Western Wisconsin District rescinded the old 1927 resolutions that had triggered the Protestant Conference’s organization. This rescinding, however, did not bring about any peace between Protestants and Wisconsin. Individual approaches were made, Protestant meetings were visited, discussions were attempted. The 1963 Wisconsin convention faced the fact of “disappointing results attained,” but still encouraged “the Western Wisconsin District and other districts that are involved in the Protestant matter...to seek steps to close this long-standing break.”¹³

Unfortunately it proved impossible to achieve any kind of settlement of difficulties. Total repudiation of all district and synod action taken against the Protestants from 1927 on seemed to be demanded as the advance payment needed just to get the meeting room door open. Fifty years after the Fort Atkinson case that set the stage for the first Protestant suspensions, there is still a Protestant Conference accusing Wisconsin of turning from the gospel and of obduracy.

Also in this sad controversy it is easy to declare what one wishes and prays for. It is much less easy to determine what can be done beyond that hoping and praying, by way of healing the old, broad breeches.

Other Relations

During the years that intervened between our withdrawal from the Synodical Conference and its dissolution there occurred some limited and formal interchange of views and positions between what remained of the Synodical Conference and our body. The 1964 Synodical Conference asked us to reconsider our 1963 action but failed to indicate specifically why we should. We declined to reconsider.¹⁴ On this note our relations with the Synodical Conference ended and soon thereafter the Conference ceased to exist, passing out of the picture as the Synod of Ev. Lutheran Churches opted for a merger with Missouri.

Before that decision of the Slovaks we had strange and strained relations with them. In 1965 we were still in fellowship with them and they were still in fellowship with Missouri. It had also been demonstrated that the Slovaks, although they had many ties with Missouri, did actually share our basic fellowship position.¹⁵ As

¹¹ *Wisconsin Synod Proceedings, 1959*, p. 170.

¹² *Wisconsin Synod Proceedings, 1961*, pp 199–200.

¹³ *Wisconsin Synod Proceedings, 1963*, p 222.

¹⁴ *Wisconsin Synod Proceedings, 1965*, pp 281–282 and 295.

¹⁵ *Wisconsin Synod Proceedings, 1967*, pp 275–278 and 297. Subsequent material on this subject is also drawn from the above *Proceedings* section.

the controversy worsened, the Slovaks added their testimony to ours in many instances. After the break with Missouri and the withdrawal from the Synodical Conference, the situation changed.

Meetings with them indicated that they agreed with Missouri regarding fellowship. In October 1965 their convention voted to join the Lutheran Council in the U.S.A., confirming the fact that they were not one with us in the doctrine of fellowship. Our 1967 convention took the necessary and inevitable step. It resolved:

That we regretfully acknowledge that the cherished confessional unity which we once enjoyed with the Synod of Evangelical Lutheran Churches no longer exists, and that all patient efforts to re-establish that unity have not met with success; and

That we now suspend fellowship with the Synod of Evangelical Lutheran Churches on the basis of Romans 16:17–18 with the hope and prayer that the Synod of Evangelical Lutheran Churches will hear in this resolution an evangelical summons to come to herself (Luke 15:17) and to return to the side of her sister Synod from whom she has estranged herself.

Before 1961 was over President Behnken was requesting a resumption of doctrinal discussions. At the same time Missouri was involving itself in the negotiations that would lead to the establishment of LCUSA. Our Commission on Doctrinal Matters answered Dr. Behnken:

Our Commission is presently of the opinion that any attempt at a joint meeting should be postponed until your Synod has met in convention next June and expressed itself on the issues between our two bodies.¹⁶

That 1962 Missouri convention urged renewed discussions. Our 1963 convention reiterated its willingness to discuss outside the framework of fellowship, “under conditions which do not imply a denial of our previous testimony.”¹⁷ Renewed requests for discussions had to be declined by us because Missouri was giving evidence that its fellowship position was worsening and even that its stand on Scripture was undergoing some revision.

There has been no basic change in the matter of Missouri relations since then. From 1969 on there has been somewhat more reason to rejoice and to hope, but in the crucial matter of fellowship there has been no basic improvement. Quite the contrary. Wisconsin has been granted the privilege of sending observers to Missouri’s convention, but President Naumann has steadfastly declined to join the march to the Missouri podium that presidents of other Lutheran bodies customarily make. When requested, our observers have supplied Missouri with their evaluation of its convention.

A three-part resolution of our 1973 convention can be drawn on to supply a summary and conclusion for this section on recent interchurch relations with Missouri. The first resolve expresses joy over the positive step taken by Missouri with respect to the authority of Scripture. The second resolve expresses hope that there will be a return to the scriptural fellowship principles, relations, and practices. The final resolve urges that there be no delay in taking disciplinary action and no compromise with the historical-critical approach.¹⁸

As of now there are no interchurch relations with the Lutheran Churches of the Reformation and to the human eye it might well appear that there is little likelihood that there will be such in the foreseeable future. When the LCR was formed a dozen years ago, our body initiated fellowship discussions. Some of the LCR components had separated from Missouri without separation from us. Others had been in the old Orthodox Lutheran Conference. Before the LCR came into being, there had been some “free conference” discussions with some of these men at Mequon.

There seemed to be much common ground between the LCR and WELS. There actually was. There also seemed to be and was one major doctrinal difficulty, the Wisconsin church-ministry position. Many of the LCR

¹⁶ *Wisconsin Synod Proceedings, 1963*, p 200.

¹⁷ *Wisconsin Synod Proceedings, 1963*, p 223.

¹⁸ *Wisconsin Synod Proceedings, 1973*, pp 93–94.

men were so concerned about maintaining the many good positions of “old Missouri” that they went all-out also in upholding the faulty church-ministry position.

The longer discussions continued, the more solidified became the positions. By the time of our 1971 convention the LCR had decided that the church-ministry gulf was genuine and great. We still sought discussions. An unfortunate reference in our periodicals, however, to the LCR’s position on the pastoral office in the local congregation caused additional difficulties.¹⁹ The reference was soundly based on LCR writing on the subject, but that LCR writing itself was unclear. Prolonged correspondence resulted. It was thought that proper and conciliatory steps had been taken, but no new discussions could be set up. That still holds for the present time.

Interchurch Relations Farther Afield

What remains of the national picture to be discussed falls under the rubric, “Interchurch Relations Farther Afield,” i.e., farther afield than relations with former Synodical Conference members.

One item worthy of note would be our decision to be 95 percent of Lutherans in this land that make up the 5 percent not in LCUSA. As part of the preliminary steps that led to the creation of LCUSA, an invitation was extended to our body to join the discussions Missouri was having with the NLC. This was late in 1962. In a lengthy letter of reply President Naumann declined the invitation and presented reasons in line with Wisconsin’s fellowship stand.

Missouri leaders pointed to the continuing discussion of theological issues as the desirable feature of the proposed replacement for the old NLC. On paper this sounded like a good feature and when President Behnken waxed eloquent on the subject it sounded even better. The realities, however, were something else. The theological discussions were not of the kind designed to establish a unity basis for the cooperative endeavors. Participating in the discussions would be the newly born LCA, whose platform called for fellowship with all subscribers to the Lutheran Confessions and the newly born ALC, whose major parent body held out for a toleration of doctrinal differences.

President Naumann pointed out that the invitation to join discussions to create a new cooperative grouping itself

describes it as an agency of joint Christian service, while it specifies that the establishment of pulpit and altar fellowship is to be outside the sphere of the agency envisioned. This proposed guiding principle likewise shows that the invitation reckons with the formation of a federation of Lutheran bodies without full doctrinal unity and that is based on the premise that such a federation can be God-pleasing.²⁰

Developments in LCUSA in recent years have demonstrated that its once highly regarded division of theological discussion has labored but has not produced much more than did the proverbial mountain. A commendable statement on lodges has been produced, but commendable statements of that type on that subject are valued at a dime a dozen. Practice consistent with the statements has always been the problem. Another product has been the study of distaff ordination. One should be able to presume that no Wisconsin pastor, teacher, or lay member regrets the step that made us the 95 percent of the Lutherans of this land that are the 5 percent not in LCUSA.

In this discussion of Wisconsin’s interchurch relations, the series of free conferences in the 1960’s deserves attention. By definition, free conferences are not supposed to be too closely identified with any single church body, but it is no secret that Wisconsin was very much interested and involved in that series of

¹⁹ This was in an Editor Wicke article in the April 1971 *Quarterly*, “Is the Pastorate in the Congregation the Only God-ordained Office in the Church?”

²⁰ *Wisconsin Synod Proceedings, 1963*, p 209.

conferences. In the state of affairs that prevailed among conservative Lutherans in the early 1960's free conferences seemed to meet the need of the hour.

Our 1963 convention had before it a report of the Commission on Doctrinal Matters regarding proposed free conferences and resolved to express its joy "that arrangements are being made to call a free conference where concerned Christians can contend for the Lutheran Confessions as a true exposition of Scriptural truth."²¹ In the summer of 1964 the proposal was put into action.

For seven consecutive summers there were sessions lasting several days. Usually free conferences do not run that many years. The famed Walther free conferences in the 1850's were considered to have had a long life and they did not get beyond a fourth meeting. Attendance was almost 300 at the first meeting and about 150 at the final 1970 session. The basis on which the conferences were called was agreement on the doctrine of the inerrancy, inspiration, authority, and historicity of Scripture and on the necessity of doctrinal unity as a prerequisite for joint worship and church work.

The first conference studied the doctrine of Scripture and the last had as its theme, "The Way to Lutheran Unity." At the intervening conferences major doctrines were discussed. As could be expected from the make-up of the conferences, agreement was manifested for the most part. Naturally, differences surfaced when the church-ministry topic was under discussion.

It is easy to find fault with free conferences in general and with this series of them in particular, if one is looking for tangible, practical results. Because of their very nature and make-up free conferences can hardly be expected to yield a packaged product of discernable accomplishments. Should not the evaluation of the conferences reflect a trust that the testimony to the truth of Scripture and the gospel has been and will continue to be a tool of the Holy Spirit in furthering the well-being of the body of believers? Walther's free conferences in the 1850's seemed at the time to have been rather barren of benefits. Now we count them a major factor in the development of confessional Lutheranism in our land. The Lord of the Church may well let us see in our time direct or indirect results of the free conferences that are "marvelous in our eyes."

II. Interchurch Relations in Other Countries

By now it is obvious that it will not be possible to give the overseas side of the story space and time equal to that accorded our interchurch relations in our homeland. Nor is that actually necessary or desirable, from the standpoint of relevance, immediacy, and interest. It should be noted at the outset, however, that there are numerous overseas interchurch relations subjects that merit our concerned study.

Germany

Germany naturally heads the list. We had German connections whose origins go back decades and we were most interested in developments there, especially as they affected brethren in the faith. The events are not easy to follow. For the person seeking to find clear reference material the intermittent reports on developments in the *Quarterly's* "News and Comment" section is recommended reading.²²

Attention had to be given to the unsettled situation on the Lutheran scene, both in Germany where new alignments of free churches were being sought and also in our land where fellowship was broken between two synods who were both in fellowship with several of the European free churches. This resulted in the Heidelberg meeting on August 11–13, 1964, where our three representatives met with representatives of independent churches in Germany and also France and Belgium.²³ Church and church fellowship were prominent items on

²¹ *Wisconsin Synod Proceedings, 1963*, p 222.

²² Attention should also be called to an as yet unpublished forty-page article by President Lawrenz, "WELS Efforts at Confessional Fellowship with the German Lutheran Free Churches." The essay was delivered at the October 1976 Evangelical Lutheran Confessional Forum and gives complete coverage to the subject.

²³ *Wisconsin Synod Proceedings, 1965*, pp 271–274.

the agenda. In view of the fact that misunderstandings of our positions came to light, the discussions were both necessary and useful.

Two years later in 1966 our representatives met again with representatives of several German and several non-German independent churches to continue the process of clarification and understanding. That same year special attention was given to the Breslau Synod and its seemingly deteriorating stand on Scripture and to the Saxon Free Church that was threatened by such developments.²⁴ Strong efforts were being made to aid brethren in the scriptural stand in a fluid situation that posed great temptations and dangers. Old ties with Missouri and new ties in the contemplated merger both presented problems.

A merger was effected on June 25, 1972, and brought together Breslau, the Saxon Free Church, and the Independent Evangelical Lutheran Church. We were intimately affected, for we were in fellowship with the first two partners mentioned. The merged church called itself “Selbstaendige Evangelisch-Lutherische Kirche, ” abbreviated SELK, the same name that one of the merged bodies had had.

A four-day meeting was held in July 1973 at Mequon with representatives of the SELK. Thorough discussions and official statements revealed that doctrinal unity existed between us and the overseas representatives. Joint worship in a thanksgiving service followed. Our convention, meeting shortly thereafter, concurred that “our Synod Praesidium would initiate the practice of church fellowship with the SELK upon formal endorsement by the SELK *Kirchenleitung* of the doctrinal agreement reached at Mequon.”²⁵

Subsequent developments indicated that the overseas representatives at Mequon could not make their position prevail among those whom they had been representing. The major problem revolved around Scripture, with the Genesis days serving as test case. Continuing fellowship with Missouri was certainly another matter of concern. Consequently in 1976 our Commission offered a recommendation, which the convention followed, to the effect that it could not at this time “recommend a formal declaration of church fellowship with the SELK.”²⁶

In this connection it is proper to mention that our old mission, the *Bekennniskirche*, was also becoming deeply involved with the SELK. Its resolve in 1974 to seek a merger with the SELK obviously created a difficulty in our relations. No previous treatment has been given to the *Bekennniskirche*, because its affairs under normal circumstances are viewed as a part of the mission program of our body rather than as a part of our interchurch relations.²⁷

Other European Areas

In the areas to the north of Germany some of the developments are “good news” and some are “not so good news.” The Free Evangelical Church of Finland from the earliest meetings with free European churches on showed a staunch stand on Scripture and fellowship. It soon ended its fellowship with Missouri. Most recently, however, the church-ministry matter has presented difficulties.

In Sweden a small group of Lutherans loyal to Scripture and the Confessions formed in 1974 the Lutheran Confessional Church in Sweden. That group had been in close touch with us and we with them, with Dr. Becker functioning as our chief agent in this respect. It followed as a matter of course that our convention declared Wisconsin to be in fellowship with these Swedish Lutherans.

These our newest brethren deserve our special concern. We want to get more fully acquainted with them as soon as possible. More than that, they are very few in number and face hard battles in the years ahead. Here is an instance where interchurch relations involve not just a few representatives of ours but should concern each of us directly and intimately.

²⁴ *Wisconsin Synod Proceedings, 1967*, pp 269–276.

²⁵ *Wisconsin Synod Proceedings, 1973*, pp 86–92.

²⁶ *Book of Reports and Memorials, 1975*, pp 107–111.

²⁷ To sum up the matter, it may be stated that the August [1977] convention of WELS will be acting upon a commission recommendation to “recognize that through this action [merger with SELK] the Evangelical Lutheran Confessional Church of Germany has severed its confessional fellowship with our Synod.”

Before leaving the European scene, a brief word is in place regarding relations with the Evangelical Lutheran Church-Synod of France and Belgium. This body has frequently demonstrated that it is sympathetic to our fellowship position. In 1970 it seemed on the verge of putting itself *in statu confessionis* over against Missouri. Subsequently it hesitated to take final action, pending the outcome of the Missouri civil war. We could only urge that decisive action be forthcoming to end the awkward and untenable triangular fellowship situation.

Beyond Europe

In Africa the most significant interchurch relations item revolved around developments in the old Synodical Conference mission in Nigeria. The rending of fellowship ties here in this land placed before the African mission an accomplished fact and called for a decision. Matters came to a head in 1964. In the previous year our mission contributions had been rejected by the Missionary Board of the Synodical Conference, and we had offered to explain our side of the case in person if the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Nigeria so desired.

The result was that our delegation, consisting of President Naumann and Professors Lawrenz and Siegler, appeared before a special convention of the Nigerian church attended by 500 congregational representatives and employing three languages. Dr. Schweppe was not included in our delegation to avoid any appearance of injecting personality into a doctrinal matter. It was the intention of our delegation to allow the doctrinal matter to be given due attention without the pressures that human ties or calls for hasty decisions could engender.

Our case and cause was put before the Nigerian Lutherans. Those who were minded to side with us immediately were advised to state their views before their brethren in an orderly fashion. The decision of the Nigerians was to become independent. Much unrest followed and there were many withdrawals on the part of individuals and congregations.²⁸

As time passed and new troubles came to Nigeria, it appeared that our church body would no longer share in the harvesting that the long planting time might be expected to produce. Then in the fall of 1969 requests began to come from Nigeria for help in establishing a confessional Lutheran church under the name of Christ the King Lutheran Church. A pastor of this church, Edet Eshiett, attended classes at our seminary during 1974 to update the training he had received in the Synodical Conference mission seminary decades earlier. It is hoped that the outcome, despite trials and difficulties, will be one more instance of the truth that in the Lord's mission work it is possible to cast bread on the waters in faith and hope.²⁹

In South Africa we have had ties with both the Free Ev. Lutheran Synod in South Africa and the more recently organized Lutheran Church in South Africa, known to us under the older designation, *Bleckmar Mission*. Also in these instances, ties involving personnel and support from the mother country have created complicating factors that have not been fully resolved.

The final geographical area to be given attention is Australia. Here in 1966 was effected a merger of Australians once in fellowship with the Synodical Conference and those in fellowship with the ALC. The new body formed resolved that all old ties should be dissolved to enable a fresh start in interchurch relations to be made.³⁰

Our Commission has evaluated the pertinent documents and has kept in touch. The Lutheran Church of Australia has, however, because of tensions within gone about its interchurch relations problems very slowly. As late as July 1974, a visit of the president of the Australian body in Milwaukee indicated that no ties of fellowship had as yet been established, in fact that no formal doctrinal discussions with Lutherans of other lands had as yet been undertaken.³¹

²⁸ *Wisconsin Synod Proceedings, 1965*, pp 274–276.

²⁹ *Book of Reports and Memorials, 1975*, p 113.

³⁰ *Wisconsin Synod Proceedings, 1967*, pp 281–282.

³¹ *Book of Reports and Memorials, 1975*, pp 111–112.

In this necessarily brief and by no means all-inclusive overview of our interchurch relations in recent years several points stand out and deserve underscoring by way of conclusion. For one thing, developments here in America and in most of the foreign lands involved, with major splits and new alignments making news, have created a complicated, fluid situation with which it is not always easy to cope and which calls for a double share of good judgment, intense labor, and fervent prayer.

Secondly, the record shows that our representatives in this field have been very busy. The outreach for a church body generally believed to be isolationist in its tendencies is remarkable and reaches into all areas of the earth.

This outreach, furthermore, has always been marked by obedience to God's commands in the interchurch relations field. The effort has been one of carrying on in the pathway where once the Synodical Conference walked. There has been an eagerness to testify on the basis of Scripture and, at the same time, a resolution to make full doctrinal unity and a practice consistent with the doctrinal stand the only basis for a declaration of fellowship.

Finally, and most important of all, the Lord's blessing has rested on the endeavors. As He pleased, He brought forth results of use to Him in saving souls and in building His Church. The voice of confessional Lutheranism has not been stifled by the setbacks of recent memory. That Lord, we can be sure, is at work through our interchurch relations work, despite all the problems and all the disappointment of the present. What He has in mind and in store will one day also seem "marvelous in our eyes."