

Trumpet with a Certain Sound: The Synodical Conferences Confessional Commitment

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Six score years ago the Evangelical Lutheran Synodical Conference of North America came into being. Twenty-five years have passed since its end. There is a whole generation and more that knows nothing of the Conference from personal experience. It is certainly time for looking back, either to discover or to recollect.¹

There is a special reason to give some attention to the Synodical Conference these days. This April a new church body will be formed that might well be called a reborn Synodical Conference. It consists of two former Conference members, the Evangelical Lutheran Synod and the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, and a number of their sister churches overseas.

There are differences, to be sure. The "North America" scope of the Synodical Conference has given way to the worldwide reach of the new church body. The increase in geographical extent is counterbalanced by a decrease in communicant membership count. In the new federation, the member churches are all relatively small. In the old federation The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod swelled the totals with its two million and more members. These differences, however, lie on the external and quite unimportant side.

What is of greater importance is the similarity in doctrinal stance between the new and the old federations. The new body wants to follow the pathways of biblical doctrine and practice that the Synodical Conference once walked, as it committed itself to a fully inspired and inerrant Bible, to the summary of Bible doctrine in the Lutheran Confessions, and to a church life and practice that conformed to both. The commitment was clearly and consistently demonstrated at the emergence of the Conference, by the founding meetings and documents in its division over the doctrine of election, through its outreach efforts to Blacks at home and abroad, and finally during the fellowship debates that marked the Conference's end.

I.

The Synodical Conference came into being in 1872 at the close of a turbulent decade of Lutheran division and realignment. At the beginning of those ten years, there was just one larger, general federation of United States Lutheran church bodies, the General Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the United States of America. At its close there were three more: a Southern grouping formed in 1862 because of the Civil War, the General Council of the Lutheran Church in North America separating in 1866-1867 over confessional issues, and the Synodical Conference that could not find a spiritual home in any of the other federations.

To understand what was at stake in the formation of the Synodical Conference, one must give some attention to the conflict within the General Synod that led to the creation of the General Council. The 1862 grouping of Lutheran synods in the South is more a civic than an ecclesiastical development and need not overly concern us in this writing.

¹ The bibliography for the Synodical Conference is on the slim side. At the time of the golden anniversary, 1922, both J.P. Koehler and August Pieper supplied appraisals for the *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*. Koehler's "*Die Synodalkonferenz in der Geschichte der amerikanischlutherischen Kirche*" appears in XTX (July 1922), Pieper's "*Jubilaumsgedanken*" in XX (January 1923) and XXI (April 1924). Among other writings mention could be made of J. T. Mueller's pamphlet published at St. Louis in 1948 with the title, *A Brief History of the Origin, Development, and Work of the Evangelical Lutheran Synodical Conference of North America, Prepared for the Diamond Jubilee* and Carl S. Meyer's "The Synodical Conference—the Voice of Lutheran Confessionalism" in the Conference's *Proceedings* of 1956. John Meyer wrote a series of articles on the Conference for *The Northwestern Lutheran*, XXXIV and XXXV.

By the midpoint of the previous century two theological viewpoints were contending with one another within the General Synod.² One group sought to maintain the General Synod's original position that liked the Lutheran name but did not like all the Lutheran Confessions. Another group, sympathetic to the general confessional revival among Lutherans at that time, sought to stiffen the theological backbone of their church grouping. In 1853 the large and more conservative Pennsylvania Synod rejoined the General Synod it had left thirty years before for reasons not at all related to strong confessionalism.

The more liberal party realized that time was not on their side. Under the leadership of S. S. Schmucker, the longtime head of the theological seminary at Gettysburg, they took the offensive. Their 1855 *Definite Platform* openly rejected doctrines in the Augsburg Confession and repudiated other symbolical writings. This so-called "American Lutheranism" was such a barefaced catering to the Reformed position and a denial of basic Lutheranism that all but a few small synods in the General Synod turned thumbs down on the proposal.³

Unfortunately, no disciplinary action was taken, and Schmucker and his party continued the effort. In Maryland a Melancthon Synod was formed. When it gained membership in the General Synod in 1859, an exodus from that body began with the Swedish Lutherans in the Northern Illinois Synod in the vanguard on the way to forming the Augustana Synod. When the very radical Franckean Synod achieved membership in 1864, that exodus accelerated. With Pennsylvania taking the lead, five General Synod members withdrew in protest. The five, among them the young and small Minnesota Synod, invited like-minded independent synods to join them in creating a new and more confessional federation. The result was the General Council, formed by meetings at Reading in 1866 and Fort Wayne in 1867.

Synods that would in five years federate in the Synodical Conference reacted to the General Council development in two different ways. Three—Minnesota, Illinois, and Wisconsin—became charter members. The other three—Ohio, Missouri, and the latter's Norwegian allies—after testing the water, stood aside. There was merit in both the differing reactions.

For one thing, the General Council rested on a sound confessional basis which declared:

Pre-eminent among such accordant, pure and scriptural statements of doctrine, by their intrinsic excellence, by the great and necessary ends for which they were prepared, by their historical position, and by the general judgment of the church are these: the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, the Smalcald Articles, the Catechisms of Luther, and the Formula of Concord, all of which are, with the Unaltered Augsburg Confession, in the perfect harmony of one and the same scriptural faith.⁴

Preceding this quotation is the unmistakable declaration: "That confessions may be such a testimony of unity and band of union, they must be accepted in every statement of doctrine, in their own true, native, original, and only sense. Those who set them forth and use them, must not only agree to use the same words, but must use and understand these words in one and the same sense."

It is not surprising that such declarations would cause the Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Illinois Synods to become members of the General Council. Nor is it surprising that others had reservations, not about the

² There is an extensive treatment of this conflict in Vergilius Ferro's *The Crisis in American Lutheran Theology* (New York: Century Co., 1927).

³ So did the Wisconsin Synod. See *Wisconsin Proceedings, 1856*, p 3.

⁴ *Proceedings of the General Council, 1867*, p 21.

founding documents themselves, but about the willingness of former General Synod groups to follow them consistently.

The Missouri Synod called for free conferences to discuss fully the issues, the kind of conferences that had been convened a decade earlier to examine the commitment to the Augsburg Confession in view of the *Definite Platform* challenge. In these conferences men from the Missouri and the Ohio Synods gained a better understanding and opinion of the theological stance of each other. The best the Missouri Synod could gain from its call for free conferences was an invitation to attend a General Council convention, hardly a "free" conference.

Ohio's reaction was to make its membership contingent on satisfactory answers to questions it addressed to the Council's 1867 constituting convention. These questions, when combined with a quite similar set from the Iowa Synod, became the "Four Points." They involved the issues of millennialism, pulpit and altar fellowship, and lodge membership.

The Council temporized, unwilling to risk splitting the infant federation over such a sensitive issue. Ohio did not join, while Iowa opted for a nonvoting membership. Subsequent action on the Four Points revealed that the General Council would be willing to accept some millennialism, some lodge membership, and some fellowship with the Reformed at the altar and in the pulpit. The Wisconsin Synod withdrew in 1868-1869.⁵ In 1871 both the Minnesota and the Illinois Synods were convinced that General Council's wavering on the fellowship issue made continuing membership impossible.

We have centered attention on six midwestern Lutheran synods standing aloof from the General Council: the Ohio, the Missouri, and the Norwegian Synods who never joined and the Wisconsin, the Minnesota, and the Illinois Synods who more or less promptly withdrew. How the six formed a fellowship is in itself a demonstration of their commitment to Scripture, to the Lutheran Confessions, and to a confessional church practice. The story is so large that it will have to be given selective treatment.

The Norwegian Synod's decision to use the St. Louis Concordia Seminary for training its pastors led naturally to a closer relationship between the church bodies, which was strengthened by repeated doctrinal discussions. Ohio and Missouri held doctrinal colloquies in the late 1860s which led to a mutual recognition of orthodoxy.

Missouri and Wisconsin declared fellowship at their 1869 conventions at Fort Wayne and Helenville. This action was preceded by doctrinal discussions during the previous year. The Wisconsin Synod had initiated dealings by calling for a discussion of parish problems in several Wisconsin towns where the synods had rival congregations. Missouri, quite correctly, insisted on full discussions of all doctrines in contention among United States Lutherans.⁶

The Wisconsin and Minnesota Synods had been enjoying fraternal relations from 1863 on. Because an even closer association was desired, doctrinal commissions of both synods met in 1869 and found that full doctrine unity existed between the synods. The next convention of the Wisconsin Synod, however, judged that no such closer ties should be established while Minnesota's membership in the General Council continued. When it ended the next year, the ties were established.

⁵ At the 1868 convention Wisconsin made its continuing membership contingent of a satisfactory reply by the Council on the Four Points. When this was not forthcoming at the Council's 1868 convention, Wisconsin in 1869 automatically severed ties.

⁶ These intersynodical dealings, as well as those described in the next paragraph, receive fuller treatment in "A Few, Faithful in Few Things: Our Synod's Fathers and the Formation of the Synodical Conference," *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, LXIX (July 1972), pp 154-174.

Minnesota also sought to improve its relations with the Missouri Synod. One of the problems was the parish strife in the Twin cities between Trinity, the Minnesota Synod's original church there, and the offshoot, Missouri's Zion. Joint meetings between representatives of Zion and Trinity and mixed conferences of Missouri and Minnesota pastors were held. Finally, a Missouri colloquy team of two pastors and two laymen visited the 1872 Minnesota Synod convention and was pleased to report that they found all things in order.⁷

A word remains to be said about the Illinois Synod. In general, it could be assumed that Missouri pastors in that state would vouch for the orthodoxy of the Illinois Synod. Early dealings with Illinois representatives, however, gave Wisconsin some concerns. It therefore instructed its delegation to the first and founding Synodical Conference convention to obtain more exact information about the confessional position and practice of the Illinois Synod and, "provided they are satisfied by the declaration of the delegates of that synod, to give their hearty approval to its admission to the Synodical Conference."⁸ The instructions were satisfactorily carried out.

This instance and others like it, previously described, demonstrate that the fathers who founded the Synodical Conference were leaving no stone unturned in the zealous and relentless pursuit of a unity of faith and a united commitment to Scripture, the Lutheran Confessions, and orthodox practice. The same zeal is evidenced in the final meetings and founding documents that led to the creation of the Synodical Conference.

II.

At its October 1870 convention at Dayton the Ohio Synod created a sort of correspondence committee that was to discuss a possible union of midwestern synods not in the General Synod or General Council. This set in motion the chain of events that culminated less than two years later in the formation of the Synodical Conference. Ohio's committee carried out its assignment with dispatch. It contacted the Illinois, Missouri, Norwegian, and Wisconsin Synods.⁹ What resulted was a January 11-13, 1871, meeting in Chicago at which representatives of the Missouri, Norwegian, Ohio, and Wisconsin Synods drafted a form for a federation. President Kroll of the Illinois Synod participated, but not as a representative of his church body, which still held membership in the General Council. The Synodical Conference's fathers drew clear lines of demarcation in fellowship practices.¹⁰

An additional meeting at Fort Wayne, November 14-16, welcomed at the discussions representatives of the Illinois and Minnesota Synods, which by then had severed all ties to the General Council. The proposed form of organization was given fine tuning. The *Denkschrift*, ordered by the previous meeting and prepared by Professor F. A. Schmidt, was discussed and adopted. This declaration of the reasons for creating a fourth general Lutheran grouping was ordered to be distributed in both German and English versions.

The stage was set for the meeting to create the Synodical Conference, This occurred at the St. John Church in Milwaukee from June 10 to June 16, 1872. The federation elected C. F. W. Walther as its first president, and he in turn set the tone for the first convention and for those that followed in the sermon he preached in the opening service.¹¹ On the basis of 1 Timothy 4:16 Walther declared that the Conference's aim to save souls would insure a concern for life, for doctrine, and for perseverance in them.

⁷ Detail is supplied by *Minnesota Proceedings, 1872*, pp 11-26.

⁸ *Wisconsin Proceedings, 1872*, p 20.

⁹ Minnesota was not included, even though Illinois—still a Council member—was Ohio may simply have known less about Minnesota than about Illinois.

¹⁰ This description rests on material found in a Foreword to *Denkschrift* (Columbus: Schulze and Gassmann, 1871).

¹¹ "The sermon is printed in *Synodical Conference Proceedings, 1872*, pp 4-11.

The Synodical Conference's constitution pledged the body "to the canonical Scriptures of the Old and the New Testament as the Word of God, and to the 1580 Confession of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, called the Book of Concord."¹² It listed six purposes: outward expression of the inner unity of the member synods; mutual strengthening in faith and confession; advancing the unity in doctrine and practice and stemming actual or threatening disturbances to that unity; mutual efforts to achieve the common goals; efforts to assign territorial boundaries to the synods, assuming there are no language barriers; and uniting all Lutheran synods in America into one orthodox American Lutheran Church. The desire to commit itself and stay committed to Scripture and the Confessions is clearly in evidence.

When the constituting convention of the Synodical Conference was hearing reports on the action of the member synods regarding the proposed constitution, especially the confessional paragraph, it found that acceptance was unanimous. The minutes, however, add an explanation that clearly demonstrates a most serious desire to make the confessional pledge real and living. The minutes state:

Since the esteemed Norwegian Lutheran Synod, however, has attached to its complete assent to the constitution the question whether it could enter the Synodical Conference as a member, even though as an individual synod it pledged itself, as is well known, only to the Unaltered Augsburg Confession and Luther's Small Catechism, the explanation was given by the Synodical Conference that the Scandinavian Lutherans had always been regarded as orthodox, even though not all symbolical books had achieved official ecclesiastical recognition among them. Nevertheless, the Synodical Conference naturally demands that the esteemed Norwegian Lutheran Synod, in so far as it is a part of the Synodical Conference, pledge itself to all the confessional writings of the Evangelical Lutheran Church and in the event of a doctrinal controversy to be guided and judged thereby. Since this was agreed to by the representatives of the esteemed Norwegian Synod, the Conference found no impediment to its acceptance.¹³

The Synodical Conference's theological stance is also and even more explicitly set down in the previously mentioned *Denkschrift*. On the positive side, the document states: "We are now, thank God, as confessional Lutheran synods above all else fully united in the endeavor to hold fast the precious treasure of pure doctrine, set down in the Confessions of our Lutheran Church on the basis of God's Word, our highest good and dearest treasure, in whole and in its parts, unalterable and unbreakable and faithfully to testify and battle against every adulteration of this prized possession with the help of God."¹⁴

In its negative evaluation of existing Lutheran federations the *Denkschrift* is equally emphatic in pointing out why the Synodical Conference founders were bypassing the other federations and founding one of their own. Granting that the General Synod had upgraded its commitment to the Augsburg Confession in the previous decade, the *Denkschrift* author points out that the commitment was to "fundamental doctrines" in the Augustana and that did not necessarily include all doctrines in the Confessions and in Scripture, especially those that drew lines between Lutherans and Reformed.¹⁵ The federation in the South is given some good marks for having within it some who testify to what is truly Lutheran but, as a whole, the body must be reckoned as having much of the weakness of the General Synod, from which it parted for purely civil reasons.¹⁶ The good

¹² The proposed constitution is found in *Denkschrift*, pp 6-7.

¹³ *Synodical Conference Proceedings, 1872*, p 13. The Norwegian Synod quickly undertook a grassroots study of the Formula of Concord and was able to join enthusiastically in the celebration of its tercentenary just five years later.

¹⁴ *Denkschrift*, p 10.

¹⁵ *Denkschrift*, p 13.

¹⁶ *Denkschrift*, pp 17,18.

confession of the General Council is acknowledged and praised, but its unwillingness to carry through that confession into the church's life and practice is rebuked.¹⁷

As the General Council was tempted to bend its confession to avoid breaking up the brotherhood, so the Synodical Conference would soon face the same temptation. In the very first decade of its existence the Synodical Conference had to risk dismemberment to maintain its doctrinal position.

III.

The issue was the doctrine of election. The eventual result was the loss of two charter members, the Norwegian and the Ohio Synods. The time was just before and after 1880.

Back in 1878 it might well have seemed that the greater threat to Synodical Conference unity was another controversy, this one over the creation of state synods. This was, in brief, the effort to carry out the fifth purpose stated in Paragraph III of the constitution: "attempt to demarcate the synods according to territorial boundaries, provided that there are no language problems."

In its early conventions the Synodical Conference considered—along with the project of developing English textbooks for parochial schools, obviously to avoid the Reformed influence in available primers and readers—the matter of conflicts between parishes, especially if these belonged to different synods. By 1875 a continuing discussion of *Jus Parochiale* had led to the appointment of a Chicago-based committee to make practical proposals regarding opposition congregations.¹⁸ The next year the committee's report laid before the body broad and general proposals revolving around the assumption that parish conflicts could best be overcome by the creation of one general body with state, not synod, subdivision, but that language differences would have to be considered.

The convention unanimously voted that the general body should be, not a synod, but some less rigid form of association. It voiced approval of an effort to attempt to create state synods but with the proviso, "if not immediately everywhere, yet in any event there where this can be done without great difficulties, detriment, and disadvantage."¹⁹ For practical reasons the convention also chose to resolve unanimously: "Until the larger synodical bodies have been dissolved, it is left to the respective state synods whether they want to join one of the existing general synods and which one they might wish to join."

It was this resolution that made Wisconsin uneasy. For some reason there was a hasty and strong push to develop a state synod in Wisconsin, where the most "difficulties, detriment, and disadvantage" were likely to be caused. When the Wisconsin Synod reacted to the Synodical Conference proposals at its 1877 convention, it passed resolutions that demonstrate its concern that its identity might be lost in the shuffle of creating state synods.²⁰

Two of the resolutions, passed unanimously, express approval of the state synod plan and willingness to participate as soon as the general bodies dissolve themselves. A third resolution, strongly supported, declared that it did not view the attachment of a state synod to any still-existing general body as commanded by God, necessary for unity, or profitable for synod and congregations. Additional resolutions rejected a joint seminary proposal and outlined the relocation of Wisconsin Synod pastoral training from St. Louis to Milwaukee.

¹⁷ Denkschrift, pp 18-32.

¹⁸ *Synodical Conference Proceedings, 1875*, p 35.

¹⁹ *Synodical Conference Proceedings, 1876*, p 47. The next resolve is on pp 49-50.

²⁰ *Wisconsin Proceedings, 1877*, pp 16-30.

A bitter controversy ensued, especially over the third resolution. Wisconsin was accused of dealing in a way that threatened Christian liberty, limited the Holy Spirit, and demonstrated lovelessness toward the Missouri Synod.²¹ Wisconsin stood by its resolves. There was a real threat to the Synodical Conference brotherhood, even though the basic issue was organizational, not doctrinal. That is, no doubt, why the conflict subsided, after some final efforts of the 1879 Synodical Conference to adjust the original plan by proposing the creation of three general groupings: eastern, where Ohio would predominate, southwestern, which would be Missouri territory, and northwestern, where Wisconsin would be strong.²²

By the time any attention could be given to this variation of the original theme, another conflict, more threatening because it was doctrinal, was looming on the Synodical Conference horizon. This was the election controversy that also involved the related doctrine of conversion. The conflict surfaced in the early 1870s when articles on the issue appeared in issues of S. K Bropst's *Theologische Monatshefte*, an intersynodical periodical of the time. Attention for a time shifted to justification, a subject treated at the first Synodical Conference convention. By the end of the decade, however, election had once again become a burning issue.

In 1877 Professor C. F. W. Walther had delivered a paper on election to Missouri's Western District that espoused a dual cause for election, God's mercy and Christ's merits, and rejected an *intuitu fidei* approach. The paper was challenged by men in the Missouri Synod. Soon the controversy reached beyond Missouri circles and involved the Synodical Conference.

In 1880 F.A. Schmidt, a Synodical Conference founder and writer of its *Denkschrift* who in 1876 moved from Concordia Seminary to Luther Seminary of the Norwegian Synod, began to publish the periodical, *Altes and Neues*, in which Walther's election position was pictured as an innovation. All efforts to end or contain the controversy were to no avail. In the fall of 1880 a specially summoned Missouri pastoral conference brought together over 500 pastors with *Concordia* in hand to thresh out the issue on the basis of Article XI of the Formula of Concord. Almost to a man the conference stood with Walther against an "in view of faith" election. The regular Missouri Synod convention the next spring accepted the Thirteen Theses as its doctrine. The Ohio Synod in that same year held to an *intuitu fidei* view and recognized that it was thereby breaking with Missouri and the Synodical Conference.

Strangely enough, the Conference had not up to this point taken any direct action in the controversy, even though one of its purposes was promoting unity and putting aside actual or threatening disturbances to the unity. The explanation is to be found in the chronology.

At the time of the 1879 convention the matter was regarded as mainly a Missouri Synod concern. That convention also changed the timetable by going from annual to biennial meetings. Before 1881, the time for the ninth convention, President Lehmann became fatally ill. Vice President Larsen did not set the wheels in motion for any regular or special convention, although colloquies were held in July 1879 and January 1880. Consequently, the ninth convention was not held until 1882. That is when the Conference officially took action on the election controversy.

It was a stormy and dramatic meeting, held in Chicago from October 4 to October 10. The election dispute surfaced before the roll call could be completed. Professor F.A. Schmidt was on hand as a delegate of the Norwegian Synod. When his name was called, Pastor O. Hansler of the Missouri Synod protested Schmidt's seating and offered a written protest of over twenty pages on behalf of his synod's delegation to be acted on later. Pastor Tirmenstein protested the seating on behalf of his Minnesota Synod and submitted a brief written

²¹ *Synodical Conference Proceedings, 1877*, p 42.

²² *Synodical Conference Proceedings, 1878*, pp 27-28.

document. The equally brief Wisconsin protest was submitted by President Bading, who in the course of the convention was elected president of the Conference and who would fill that role for thirty years until 1912.

The three protests agreed on two basic points: Professor Schmidt had identified the election position of the three protesting synods as Calvinism and had also as a troublemaker invaded their congregations. A key exhibit for the latter point was, as the Wisconsin Synod's protest pointed out, Oshkosh. There Schmidt had "personally," as the document states, invaded Pastor Dowidat's congregation, won over a majority of the members, and forced the minority to found Grace congregation.²³

The protests were thoroughly debated, always against the backdrop of the election teaching, from the first session on Wednesday afternoon into Saturday. The upshot was that Schmidt was not seated. The point was that false doctrine could not be tolerated and that fellowship presumed agreement in doctrine. There was the risk of offending the Norwegian Synod, whose delegate Schmidt was, but it was a risk that had to be taken.

Some necessary Conference business had to be dealt with, such as the mission to the Blacks, the acceptance of a Concordia Synod made up of former Ohio Synod pastors, and the customary reports of committees to review the doctrinal content of district and synod proceedings. The bulk of the last two days of the meeting, however, was given over to a discussion of the doctrine of election. Attention was given to the statements that the Wisconsin and Minnesota Synods had set down at their conventions in La Crosse earlier in the year. They agreed that God's mercy and Christ's merits alone were causes for our eternal election and that an *intuitu fidei* view should be rejected.

These statements thus were in complete harmony with Walther's Thirteen Theses that the Missouri Synod had made its own at the 1881 convention. With only one negative vote the Conference passed the resolution: "The Synodical Conference endorses the Thirteen Theses of the esteemed Synod of Missouri, Ohio, and other States dealing with election as they were drawn up and accepted at last year's delegate convention."²⁴

The Synodical Conference's stand for the doctrine of election revealed in the Scriptures and set down in the Lutheran Confessions had bitter consequences. The withdrawal of the Ohio Synod the previous year was now, humanly speaking, rendered irrevocable. The next year, 1883, the Norwegian Synod also withdrew from the Synodical Conference, but with a difference. The Norwegians took the step in the hope that by standing aside they would be able to settle their own election controversy with Schmidt and his followers. They did not, however, want to break spiritual ties with the Synodical Conference and often sent brotherly advisors to the Conference's conventions.

The Norwegian Synod's hope for a peaceful settlement of differences did not materialize. Schmidt and those who stood with him withdrew in 1887 to form an Antimissouri Brotherhood that soon became a part of the United Norwegian Lutheran Church. When the big Norwegian merger joined this church to the Norwegian and Hauge Synods, it found a way to hold to both election and conversion positions. Some few would not participate in this doctrinal compromise, withdrew from the Norwegian Synod, and created what we now call the Evangelical Lutheran Synod. That church body in 1920 joined, in a sense rejoined, the Synodical Conference and is now our partner in the endeavor to call into being a "new Synodical Conference."

Back in 1872 there must have been Conference founders who hoped that their goal of a union of all Lutheran synods in America into an orthodox American Lutheran Church could be achieved by 1880, the tercentenary of the Book of Concord. It just did not work out that way. A compromise on the election doctrine

²³ *Synodical Conference Proceedings, 1882*, p 30.

²⁴ *Synodical Conference Proceedings, 1882*, p 79.

might have outwardly kept the dream alive. The Synodical Conference, however, was not interested in doctrinal compromises. It wanted its trumpet to produce a certain sound, not some discordant duet.

It was mentioned previously that the 1882 Synodical Conference, despite the press of the election controversy, gave time to a few other agenda items, among them the regular report on the mission to the Blacks that had been undertaken five years earlier. That mission, an outgrowth and a demonstration of the Conference's confessional commitment, will now receive attention.

IV.

While the Synodical Conference was forced to face membership losses in the election controversy, it was beginning a venture to win new adherents that would share its commitment to Scripture and the Confessions. This venture was a kind of confessionalism by practice. Cherishing the saving gospel meant spreading it. Paragraph V of the constitution, dealing with Conference activities, specifically mentioned concerns for what we would call world missions and special ministries and outreach to immigrants.²⁵

At its sixth convention in 1877 the Conference was called to mission activity when President Preus of the Norwegian Synod, almost echoing William Carey's pleas nearly two centuries before, raised the point, "Whether this is not the time for the Synodical Conference to direct its attention to heathen missions and bring into being a mission, perhaps among the Blacks or the Indians of this land."²⁶ The convention reacted promptly and favorably. It opted for mission efforts in the southern states and set up a mission board of Pastors J. F. Banger and C. F. W. Sapper and Mr. J. Umbach.

A word about the date is in place. The year 1877 is generally viewed in secular history as the end of the Reconstruction era. This is when Hayes entered the White House and United States' troops were withdrawn from the South. In effect, the federal government was giving the former Confederacy a free hand, under the Constitution and its amendments, in dealing with its Black population. The result was a general decrease in northern concern for those freed from slavery and the development of the policy of "separate but equal." It was just at that time that the Synodical Conference began its mission to the Blacks.

Among the first missionaries were John F. Doescher, who explored the field and began Sunday schools in Little Rock and New Orleans; Frederick Berg, who organized in Little Rock the first Synodical Conference congregation in the mission field; and Nils Bakke, who in 1880 began a service on the field that stretched to 1921. Sunday schools soon grew into day schools, especially in the larger cities, and the effort reached from the young to their parents. Growth in knowledge of the truth was the goal of the confessional effort.

The work spread into such areas as the Carolinas and Virginia and in 1915 came to Alabama in response to an appeal of Rosa Young. Greensboro and Selma became important centers for training the young, among them those who would minister as pastors and teachers.

After gathering funds to build chapels in India and China, the congregations in the mission field naturally asked, "Why not in Africa?" About that time, the mid 1920s, over in Africa Jonathan Ekong was beginning a long, long journey. His Nigerian tribe was rightly disturbed when the interdenominational mission society that worked there put up barriers to infant baptism and to the kind of worker training the tribe desired. The upshot was that the tribe decided to send their best evangelist, Jonathan Ekong, to the United States for further training.

²⁵ The original wording is "*aeusserer and innerer, sowie Emigranten=Mission.*"

²⁶ *Synodical Conference Proceedings, 1877*, p 41.

After long delays in reaching his destination and after false starts at Howard and Livingston, Jonathan Ekong established contact with the Synodical Conference, after hearing that it had in 1930 resolved on African Mission explorations.

Jonathan Ekong enrolled at the Greensboro worker-training school. He was graduated and ordained in the spring of 1938, eleven years after embarking on his journey. Meantime, the Synodical Conference's desire for an African mission field was nearing fulfillment. The 1934 convention ordered an on-the-spot study of the Nigerian field from which Jonathan Ekong had come. The report of the visiting team, offered in 1935, was favorable.

Before the Synodical Conference could act on the matter at its 1936 convention, individual synods were able to give their opinions. The Evangelical Lutheran Synod had held its convention before the report of the study team was available. Conventions of the Missouri, Slovak, and Wisconsin Synods endorsed the enterprise. Missouri, in fact, voted to begin the work on a temporary basis with as many of the other synods as were willing to join in the venture. In 1936 the Synodical Conference resolved: "That the Synodical Conference take over the African Mission."²⁷

The first permanent worker called from the United States into the Nigerian field was William Scheppe. He was an African Missionary from then on until his death in an automobile accident in 1968, serving the Nigerian field until 1961 and the Wisconsin Synod's Northern Rhodesia (Zambia) mission after that. Other workers soon arrived in Nigeria as the mission grew. The effort to enlist other Nigerians besides Jonathan Ekong as full-time workers resulted in the establishment of worker-training schools. At the seminary Nigerian students even learned enough Greek to read the New Testament in its original language.

In its mission endeavor abroad, as well as at home, the Synodical Conference sought to live up to its confessional commitment. It aimed at a preaching and teaching of the saving gospel in all truth and purity to save souls.

To round out the story, the Nigerian field became a Missouri Synod enterprise after the Synodical Conference break-up in 1963. How, even in that tragic break-up, the Conference's confessional stand was defended and maintained will now be briefly described.

V.

For a long time after the election controversy the Synodical Conference's conventions were relatively peaceful, at least as far as doctrinal disputes were concerned. In the 1920s a "Chinese Term Question" became an agenda item and proved as difficult for the Synodical Conference to settle as it had been for Rome two centuries earlier. A decade later there was a single vs. individual communion cup debate.

"Endeavor to Keep the Unity of the Spirit" was treated by J. P. Koehler at the 1906 convention in Chicago. Two years later essayist Franz Pieper discussed "The Wonderful Treasure of the Fellowship of Brothers in the Faith." In 1940 Adelbert Schaller treated "The Brotherhood of Faith." Martin Franzmann in 1952 had as his topic, "The Forgiveness of Sins and the Unity of the Spirit."

Threats to the Synodical Conference's unity, however, surfaced at the Conference's 1940 convention. An eight-man Committee on Lutheran Church Union submitted a ten-page report including the Missouri Synod's 1938 union resolutions, the American Lutheran Church's Sandusky resolutions, the Wisconsin Synod's

²⁷ *Synodical Conference Proceedings, 1936*, p 112.

objections to the 1938 union resolutions, and the concerns of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod as reported by Professor S. C. Ylvisaker.²⁸ It is no wonder that, as the minutes state, "the convention spent much time on a thorough discussion of this committee report." The Missouri Synod's pathway was taking it away from the Conference's old commitment to right doctrine and practice. Over twenty years later the Conference would split over the development.

The issue was usually joined on an intersynodical level, but the contending synods were all members of the Synodical Conference and the Conference could not help being involved, as was indicated already in 1940. In this writing the Synodical Conference's role will be in the foreground.

Because the scheduled 1942 Synodical Conference convention became a WW II casualty, there was a four-year wait before the Synodical Conference could take any further action in the intersynodical disputes that were expanding and intensifying. Among other overtures, it had before it a letter from President John Brenner noting that a single document of LCMS-ALC agreement, *The Doctrinal Affirmation*, had been placed before Missouri's sister synods "as an accomplished fact."²⁹ The letter also stated: "We feel constrained to state at this time that we have been seriously perturbed by numerous instances of an anticipation of a union not yet existing...."

The convention finally resolved that:

Two men from each constituent synod be appointed by the respective synodical presidents who together with the presidents are to form a standing committee, which shall be called Committee on Intersynodical Relations and whose duty it shall be to discuss these overtures and the matters contained therein, as well as similar questions that may arise, and to report at the next convention, the first meeting to be called by the president of the Synodical Conference.

The Intersynodical Relations Committee, with E. Reim and A. Voss serving with President Brenner, met six times between the 1944 and 1946 conventions. To the 1946 Milwaukee convention the committee reported on the distinction between prayer fellowship and joint prayer that the Missouri 1944 Saginaw convention had tried to make and indicated that it was still debating the issue.³⁰ At that same Saginaw convention the Missouri Synod gave its congregations the right to have Boy Scout troops in their midst, thus removing old Synodical Conference objections to Scouting and its type of morality. Another divisive issue had been created.

And still another. Responding to an overture from the Twin Cities Mixed Pastoral Conference for a study of the military chaplaincy, in which the Missouri Synod was involved and from which Wisconsin held aloof, the convention resolved: "That an Interim Committee of eight men . . . be chosen by this convention; that this committee study, in the light of God's Word, the Army and Navy Chaplaincy question and all other matters relating to the doctrine of the call, the ministry, and the church, where there has been disagreement, with the aim of achieving complete agreement"

The feeling was that the differences between synods in the Synodical Conference might all have their roots in the long standing rift in church-ministry positions, with Missouri holding that the local congregations and their pastors are the divinely instituted forms of church and ministry and Wisconsin espousing the position that there is a divine institution of church and gospel ministry but not of certain forms above other forms.

²⁸ *Synodical Conference Proceedings, 1940*, pp 81-92.

²⁹ *Synodical Conference Proceedings, 1944*, p 102. The whole report of the Committee on Lutheran Church Union Matters and Intersynodical Relations covers pp 99-106.

³⁰ *Synodical Conference Proceedings, 1946*, pp 57-60.

At the next convention in 1948 the Interim Committee reported on its study of church and ministry. It submitted a seven-man majority and a one-man minority report along the lines suggested in the previous paragraph. The Intersynodical Relations Committee at that convention called for more restudy of the Boy Scout question and cautioned that in the cooperation in externals issue "such things only as actually are externals be regarded as externals."³¹ Disunity was by now much in evidence. It would reach new lows at the next two Synodical Conference conventions, Fort Wayne in 1950 and St. Paul in 1952. Meantime, the rejected *Doctrinal Affirmation* had been replaced by a *Common Confession* that for a time became the major bone of contention.

At Fort Wayne, the Intersynodical Relations Committee reported on its discussions of unionism and offense but indicated that no agreement had been reached on the attempted distinction between prayer fellowship and joint prayer. The Interim Committee reported that attempts "to arrive at complete agreement on the major points at issue . . . have, to the present, been unsuccessful."³²

At St. Paul, the continuing disagreement was so marked that the Wisconsin delegation resorted to an *in statu confessionis* declaration: "Because the confessional basis on which the synods of the Synodical Conference have jointly stood so far has been seriously impaired by the *Common Confession*, we continue to uphold our protest and to declare that the Missouri Synod by retaining the *Common Confession* and using it for further steps toward union with the ALC is disrupting the Synodical Conference."³³

In this serious situation the Synodical Conference heeded a request of the Wisconsin Synod that all of its 1954 convention be devoted to a discussion of the difference. That convention recessed from East Detroit in August to Chicago in November to complete the assignment. There were three presentations on the Common Confession, two on Scouting and the military agreement, and two on remaining differences.³⁴ The 50,000 printed and the untold spoken words delivered at the convention clearly demonstrated that the Conference was a house divided.

The 1956 Synodical Conference convention authorized its president, John S. Bradac, to call together the various union committees in order to determine the significance of synodical convention actions and to develop a program of future discussions on the basis of these findings. A suggested outline of procedure prompted the resolve: "That as the Union Committees reach agreement on the controversial issues, they draw up a common doctrinal statement to serve the Synodical Conference."³⁵

What resulted was a study of pertinent doctrines and issues in conflict. The agenda for this large study is worthy of note:

1. Atonement, Justification, and the dynamic, or motivating power for the Christian life, with practical application to the question of Scouting.
2. Scripture (Revelation, Principles of Interpretation, Open Questions) and the practical application to the question of fulfillment of Biblical prophecy in history, as, for example, in the doctrine of Antichrist.
3. Grace, Conversion, Election, and Church and Ministry, with practical application to questions of fellowship, unionism, separation, church discipline, and the military chaplaincy.³⁶

³¹ Both committee reports can be found in *Synodical Conference Proceedings, 1948*, pp 135-147.

³² Both reports are found in *Synodical Conference Reports and Memorials, 1950*, pp 99-106.

³³ *Wisconsin Synod Proceedings, 1953*, p 104, note.

³⁴ *Synodical Conference Proceedings, 1954*.

³⁵ *Synodical Conference Proceedings, 1956*, p 145.

³⁶ *Synodical Conference Proceedings, 1958*, p 41.

By the time of the 1958 convention an excellent statement on Scripture was ready for discussion and adoption. It was eventually adopted also by the four member synods. It was fitting that this confession on the Scriptures be a sort of swan song for the Synodical Conference that had for so long trumpeted for the Holy Scriptures.

Unfortunately, this was the only statement of the study to receive unanimous adoption. A serious problem developed in the study of the third category. A fateful impasse was reached over fellowship. The 1960 *Synodical Conference Proceedings* have attached to them declarations of the four synods on fellowship. Wisconsin and the Evangelical Lutheran Synod set down statements that voiced the old Synodical Conference position of no fellowship without full doctrinal unity. It was termed a "unit concept" of fellowship that included not only pulpit and altar fellowship, but also prayer fellowship. The Missouri declaration, to which the Slovaks basically adhered, acknowledged the appropriateness of including pulpit and altar fellowship, but they took a position which allowed prayer fellowship beyond the bounds of confessional fellowship. In fact, they felt an obligation, in a limited way, to express a "growing edge" of fellowship towards those outside the fellowship group when that seemed warranted. Without using the term, Missouri was calling for "levels of fellowship." The impasse was reported to the Synodical Conference of 1960.

Neither that gathering nor a recessed session the following year was able to find a solution to the fellowship disagreement, even though overseas theologians tried to aid the effort. In fact, doubts about the Missouri Synod's stand on Scripture were read into the record.³⁷

The Wisconsin Synod broke fellowship with the Missouri Synod in 1961 and with the Evangelical Lutheran Synod requested that the Synodical Conference dissolve itself at its next convention. When this did not happen, Wisconsin and the ELS withdrew from the Conference that had left the old Synodical Conference pathways and commitments.

Hoping against hope that there might be some change of position on the part of the withdrawers, the Synodical Conference struggled on for a few more years. It ceased existing when the Slovaks became a Missouri Synod district. The dissolution came in 1967.

Even the Conference's end is, in a way, a sounding of the certain trumpet. The Synodical Conference, based on the confessional position of full doctrinal unity before the hand of fellowship can be extended, died when such unity no longer prevailed within it. The death, however, does not prove that there is anything wrong with the position. The position deserves to live on.

³⁷ *Synodical Conference Proceedings, 1958*, p 15.