

# Two Forgotten Wisconsin Presidents: Reim and Streissguth

By Edward C. Fredrich

When during the recent anniversary year attention was given in several *Quarterly* articles to the early presidents of the Wisconsin Synod, the series on Muehlhaeuser, Bading, von Rohr, and Bergemann was selective rather than inclusive.<sup>i</sup> Planning at the time called for only four articles and consequently certain intentional, but regrettable omissions had to be made.

Whether President Brenner should have been included among “early” presidents is debatable. It is true that his administration is but one generation removed from the present, terminating in 1953. That generation, however, includes some three-fourths of the active Wisconsin pastors. For them Brenner is a historical personage who can only be known by biographical study. Efforts by others might well be made soon to provide the materials.

It is the purpose of this writing to fill in two other gaps, gaps that are not broad but deep. Gottlieb Reim and William Streissguth are the presidents under consideration. The term *forgotten* in the title does not especially point to the fact that they were overlooked in the biographical series of 1975, but rather is to underscore the almost complete oblivion into which they have fallen, even among those to whom Wisconsin Synod annals are not books sealed with seven seals.<sup>ii</sup> If the names of G. Reim and Streissguth are known at all, the men are not given their due as full-fledged synod presidents, each elected as such in his own right.

They merit better than that. Their leadership years fall into that turbulent, crucial decade in Wisconsin Synod history, 1860–1869, that saw the infant church body take its significant confessional and doctrinal turn to the right. Knowing the two men will make for a better understanding of that all-important decade.

## *Simillimae Vitae*

There is good reason to bracket Reim and Streissguth in one article, apart from the fact that they served in the presidency consecutively in acting or elected capacity from 1863–1867. Their lives abound in striking parallels. One would think them twin brothers.

They were in fact brothers-in-law, marrying three Bruin der girls, whose brother George was the well-known Milwaukee publisher.<sup>iii</sup> When Streissguth’s first wife, Marie nee Brumder, died in childbirth after five years of marriage, he returned to Germany a year later and married Marie’s younger sister, Magdalena. Meantime Gottlieb Reim had come to America and had been married to a third sister, Anna, with Streissguth the officiant at the ceremony. The young Wisconsin Synod obviously had no *Schwagerehe* scruples, but years later the 1915 *Gemeinde-Blatt* obituary would circumspectly skirt the issue.<sup>iv</sup>

Both Streissguth and Reim were trained at the *Baseler Missionshaus*. Streissguth’s studies there were completed in 1850, the year Gottlieb Reim entered. There is no indication that their pathways crossed at this time. Streissguth came to Basel with academic credentials formidable enough to allow for admission to the university there. Reim, on the other hand, had been plying the cobbler trade before preparing for mission work.

Both Streissguth and Reim were formally received into the synodical circle in the 1856 Manitowoc meeting to become the tenth and eleventh names on the membership list. Streissguth was by this time a six-year veteran in the ministry and had attended the two previous synod meetings. His first assignment had been given him by the Reformed Church of Canton Glarus in Switzerland to be missionary for the poor colonies of New Glarus and New Bilten in Green County, Wisconsin.<sup>v</sup> When the opportunity presented itself, he made contact with the newly born Wisconsin Synod and with President Muehlhaeuser. Lutheran convictions, implanted early by home study of Luther’s *Small Catechism*, prevailed over the unionistic approach of the times.<sup>vi</sup> Already in 1855 he was placed in charge of the congregation at Newton and Liberty. A year later he was called to St. John’s, Milwaukee.

Gottlieb Reim reached America in 1855, after serving briefly under the *Protestantische Hilfsverein*, the same society that had been instrumental in arranging Streissguth's first call. President Muehlhaeuser assigned him to the vacant pastorate at Ashford, Dodge County.<sup>vii</sup>

Both Streissguth and Reim were almost immediately accepted by their synodical brethren as reliable and able co-workers and were given their share of responsibilities. Already in 1856 Reim was placed on the committee that was to draft a statement outlining synod-congregation relationships, while Streissguth became chairman of the Mission Committee and a member of the committee overseeing the treasury for pastors' widows. A year later Streissguth became synodical treasurer and in 1858 secretary. In those pre-seminary days Reim frequently served as "bishop" for ministerial candidates. In 1860 he was elected secretary. In 1861 he served as convention essayist, reading a paper on the confessional stand of the Wisconsin Synod. That essay can be regarded as a major milestone on Wisconsin's way to a firm confessional position.<sup>viii</sup>

Both Reim and Streissguth in the mid 1860's filled the presidential post, each for one year as acting president and for another as elected president. The 1863 convention delegated President Bading to go overseas and gather funds for the proposed worker-training school. Since the Wisconsin Synod had been operating without a vice-president, a special election was held to fill the new office that circumstances had called into being. Gottlieb Reim, stationed at Helenville since 1858, was chosen. When Bading extended the European collection beyond the time of the 1864 convention, the Wisconsin Synod in the regular biennial election chose Reim president, Streissguth vice-president, and Hoenecke secretary.<sup>ix</sup>

Streissguth was soon following in the footsteps of his brother-in-law. The sudden resignation of Reim in 1865 thrust Streissguth into the role of acting president for the final year of Reim's term. At the 1866 convention the regular election gave Streissguth the presidency and Bading the vice-presidency. After serving one year of the two-year term, Streissguth abruptly resigned.

Both Streissguth and Reim served at one more Wisconsin station before transferring to the Minnesota Synod in the early 1870's. Reim was at Beaver Dam from 1865–1870. Then he accepted the New Ulm call, where he served until 1882 when he died from a fall from a wagon while hurrying to a parishioner's sickbed.<sup>x</sup> Streissguth moved from Milwaukee to Fond du Lac in 1868. In 1872 he was called to St. John's in the Twin Cities. Illness forced him to resign in 1880. He had in the meantime become the Minnesota Synod's vice-president and worked energetically in promoting its missions.<sup>xi</sup>

Here the similarities end. Streissguth recovered sufficiently after a year of rest and recuperation to serve at Kenosha for five years. In 1886 he returned to Milwaukee but even in retirement he continued to assist his brethren. For a time he was an assistant pastor at St. John's, Wauwatosa. Discussing the retirement years, Streissguth writes of himself in the third person: "He served his colleagues and many congregations within and without the city until after 1912 even this mission work, always so dear to him, had, because of much illness, become impossible for him to do."<sup>xii</sup> By the time of his death in 1915 Streissguth had become the senior pastor of the synod.

### **The Presidencies**

A survey of the annals of the Wisconsin Synod for the years 1863–1867, when Reim and Streissguth were chief administrative officers, clearly indicates that these were important years and that significant leadership was provided.<sup>xiii</sup> While the Wisconsin Synod would certainly not have become what it is today without the establishment of its own worker-training school made possible by Bading's overseas efforts, somebody had to stay at home to tend the store and mend the fences. This is what Reim and then Streissguth did.

In his report to the 1864 convention Reim could point to six new workers, a goodly number for a synod with less than 50 pastors. Among the six were such men as J. Brockmann, long-time Watertown pastor, and G. Thiele, one of the six seminary professors of the previous century.

These gains were offset by several losses. The report indicates that painful disciplinary action on the part of the acting president was required. The convention voted approval and ratification, citing especially the three disciplinary instances as examples of “conscientious and capable official action.”<sup>xiv</sup>

The 1864 presidential report in the section on “Implementing Last Year’s Synodical Resolutions” refers to other matters of major importance.<sup>xv</sup> The incorporation of the church body may have been a mere business affair, but it was indication that the infant synod was growing and maturing enough to acquire property of its own. The seminary had opened its doors. That too was a big step forward, even if only an enrollment of one could be reported. The effort to publish an agenda had led to friendly contacts with the Ohio Synod that was engaged in a similar venture.

Official correspondence indicates that the biggest task for Reim in his two-year tour of duty was to keep the peace between the two segments or parties developing in the church body.<sup>xvi</sup> The point of conflict was relations with the parent mission societies. The Wisconsin Synod was becoming more confessional than the parent bodies. The Synod rejected unionism but it didn’t want to offend its overseas friends, especially not while the European collection was in progress. It was more a question of style than substance, with Koehler and like-minded brethren plugging for a hard line and others inclined to tread more softly. Reim was caught in the middle; he actually was in the middle. The combination of strong personal views and a mild disposition made him a good leader in this time of controversy.

In the 1864–1865 synodical year the biggest new venture was the building project at Watertown. As Reim reported to the 1865 convention: “In a few weeks it will be possible to occupy the building begun last year. As soon as that happens, the college could and should be opened.”<sup>xvii</sup> Eight new pastors had joined the ranks. One had moved to Missouri and Pastor Boehner had deserted to the Episcopalians in the interest of a Chinese mission venture.

The Reim presidency may have been brief but the two years were marked by enough important activity to rank them with the most significant in Wisconsin Synod history. Much the same can be said of the Streissguth years that followed.

Notable “firsts” of that time include the launching of Synod’s first periodical, the *Gemeinde-Blatt*, which began to appear September 1, 1865. At the 1866 Fond du Lac convention Streissguth reported that congregational interest, circulation, and benefits exceeded anticipation.<sup>xviii</sup> At the same time he requested that the convention clarify the relationship between periodical and church body. The result was the resolution that “the periodical by and large represents the confessional position of the Synod, but that the Synod does not subscribe to every single expression.”<sup>xix</sup> With the gradual elimination of the first qualification and a deemphasis of the second, this has been synodical policy regarding its periodicals ever since.

Streissguth was instrumental in leading the Wisconsin Synod into its first intersynodical association, the short-lived membership in the General Council. He attended the planning meeting at Reading and served on the German Hymn Book Committee that was “to prepare a German Hymn Book, having reference to the work already done by the Wisconsin and Ohio Synods...”<sup>xx</sup> His favorable report to the 1867 Wisconsin Synod paved the way for a charter membership in the General Council that had to be terminated in 1869.

In his brief tenure Streissguth showed himself to be an advocate of a strong praesidium and a centralization of power. Almost a century before it happened, he advocated the establishment of the office of president-visitor without congregational responsibility.<sup>xxi</sup> He emphatically objected to a general disregard of the presidential office in the matter of reporting significant congregational activities and especially in the matter of pastoral calling and moving.<sup>xxii</sup> He regretted not being able to push energetically the overseas preparatory school venture because others in the church body would misunderstand such activity as a power grab. Streissguth’s thinking on this point led to an 1867 convention report that spelled out specific rights and duties of the president.<sup>xxiii</sup>

The agenda for the 1867 convention at Streissguth’s St. John’s, Milwaukee, congregation, the last prepared by him, indicates how the growing synod and its praesidium were being confronted by growing problems. A delegation of 10 Iowa men were there to participate in a discussion of “open questions” and chiliasm and other subjects that loomed large in Iowa theology. Committees were to deal with two major

problems, secret societies and union. There were seminary and college and preparatory school matters to be discussed. The hymn book was being readied for publication. The General Council membership had to be considered.

Even this cursory and incomplete overview of synodical and presidential activity from fall 1863 to midyear 1867 makes the point that administrative leadership in those years ought not be written off as an exercise in futility, meet for obscurity and fated for oblivion. What tended to downgrade the effort from the outset were the sudden resignations that abruptly terminated the Reim and Streissguth presidencies.

## Two Resignations

To the 1865 convention Vice-President Streissguth, reading the presidential report, appended the terse note:

On June 4 of this year I received from our esteemed President, Pastor G. Reim, the written notice that he was resigning the presidency and was transferring it according to the constitution to me as the Vice-President.

On June 9 of this year Pastor G. Reim transmitted to me the written request for a temporary release from membership in the Synod, which I granted him on June 10.

At Reim's own request the subject of the resignations was brought to the convention floor. From the *Proceedings* and from the records of the Helenville congregation that Reim had been serving up to his April 1869 call to Beaver Dam, limited insight can be gained regarding this *dunkle Sache*, as the convention report calls it.<sup>xxiv</sup>

For one thing, although resignations from presidency and synod resulted, the difficulty was a parish problem and not a synodical disturbance. A woman of the Helenville congregation had slandered Pastor Reim to the school children. The matter became a congregational concern and the church council, after a lengthy investigation, declared Pastor Reim to be innocent in the matter.<sup>xxv</sup> The false charges, however, so bothered Reim that he promptly accepted a call to Beaver Dam, resigned the presidency, and withdrew from synodical membership.

The convention resolution leaves some unanswered problems. It refers to thorough investigation of the case. It points to Reim's own declaration of innocence before the synodical ministerium and to the declaration of the Helenville church council. Then, strangely, it resorts to a Scotch verdict, declaring that the Synod "could not convince itself of the guilt of Pastor Reim, instead left it to the omniscient God to bring light to this clouded matter."<sup>xxvi</sup>

Reim did not rejoin the Wisconsin Synod. The five-year pastorate at Beaver Dam was disturbed by lodge problems. Several Wisconsin convention reports refer to the Beaver Dam problem.<sup>xxvii</sup>

One could do much speculating about this whole matter, wondering how unfounded parish gossip could lead to such far-reaching consequences. Such speculation should, however, be guided by a desire to put the best construction on everything. This the student paper, referred to in an earlier footnote, does as it sums up the problem of Reim's resignations in this way:

Concern for tender consciences, a sincere desire that the ministry be not blamed, and a hope that time would heal and that distance would soothe may have led Pastor Reim to ask for this temporary dismissal from the presidency and from synodical membership.... Pastor Reim was more concerned with the souls and consciences of people than with the right and fame of his name. He sacrificed a promising career in the Wisconsin Synod and left a congregation that he loved so that the ministry and his Savior would not be blamed.<sup>xxviii</sup>

The resignation of Streissguth as president at the 1867 synodical convention was similar to Reim's in its unexpectedness but in not much else. Cause and consequence were much less complicated. Concluding his presidential address, Streissguth informed the church body:

The experiences of both my years in office and my health, which has declined more and more, place upon me the duty of requesting in a most friendly but also most determined manner the esteemed Synod to relieve me of my office, since I could not carry it out without the greatest disadvantage to my health, my family, my congregation, and the Synod itself. The esteemed Synod is asked to grant this request without delay, for I have determined under all circumstances to carry out what I deem to be my irrefutable obligation.<sup>xxix</sup>

The fact that Streissguth served actively in the ministry for almost another 20 years at Fond du Lac, St. Paul, and Kenosha and that he lived almost another 50 and kept somewhat active most of that time need not undermine the validity of the plea of ill health as the basic reason for his resignation from the presidency. Streissguth was not a well man. Let a quotation from another student paper supply the detail:

He was easily taken ill. The first mention of his illness is in his own autobiographical sketch. Throughout his life he was plagued by headaches. Koehler attributes these headaches to sinus, but in a recent conversation with Streissguth's granddaughter, Mrs. Meta Hass, she relates that early in his youth, Wilhelm had been struck in the temple with a stone, resulting in a life of frequent headaches. In pictures he appears as a frail man, a man who had suffered much pain and illness in his life.<sup>xxx</sup>

This is not to deny that Streissguth's headaches may have been of the kind that were aggravated by frustrations inevitable for a president serving a synod of maverick pastors and himself harboring dreams of centralizing power or by tensions caused in the body ecclesiastical as it neared a doctrinal and confessional crisis. But the health problem was there before 1865 and continued long after 1867. It motivated the move from Liberty to the fragmented St. John's of Milwaukee in 1856. When he built that congregation from 28 to 350 members, the press of the work influenced him to move to Fond du Lac. His next pastorate at St. Paul was terminated by illness and he could only resume work at Kenosha after a year of convalescence. That post he resigned in 1886 because of illness.

There is one other aspect in which the Reim and the Streissguth resignations are similar. In each case the man resigning could have the confidence that the office was being entrusted to a man of no less ability. Reim would naturally have this feeling about his own brother-in-law. Streissguth turned the presidency over to a vice-president whom the body itself had elected to the highest office in 1860, John Bading.

### **Twin Evaluation**

If the first point of this evaluation has not yet asserted itself in the readers' mind, then the writing is an abject failure. This point is that Reim and Streissguth should be rescued from the oblivion to which they have previously been consigned. Like Camelot, they had their moment which should not be forgotten. The list of Wisconsin presidents should always read: Muehlhaeuser, Bading, Reim, Streissguth, Bading, von Rohr, Bergemann, Brenner, Naumann.

The Synod did not suffer during the presidencies of Reim and Streissguth. Growth continued. Progress was made. A seminary, a college, and a prep school were established. The march to increased confessionalism was not slowed at home. The stage was set for the showdown at the confessional crossroads.

Are the resignations to be regretted? Previously the view has been expressed that the resignations did not transfer the presidency to an inferior. That is one answer to the paragraph question. The other is that both Reim

and Streissguth, able and useful as they may have been in their brief tenure as synod presidents, may not have been suited for the long haul.

The Synod was moving toward the rigorous confessional position that would make it eligible for Missouri fellowship and Synodical Conference membership. Both Reim and Streissguth served well in the years of doctrinal development. Their early training and their natural inclinations made them well suited to serve as synodical leaders when they did. After 1867 is another story.

Streissguth left no doubt about his dissatisfaction with certain aspects of Wisconsin's development in the late 1860's. To Bading he wrote in 1870: "*This* Lutheranism that you have helped establish will *never* become my own, though I be made out a worse heretic than I long since have been considered. Now you have purged the Synod of all unionism and put it on a pure (?) Lutheran basis. What have you improved thereby? or gained? Nothing, yes, harmed and lost. But I must remember that I have decided to keep quiet and let things take their course; where they are headed, I see clearly enough."<sup>xxxix</sup>

The writer of the letter goes on to assure Bading that he "need not be provoked or feel offended by these or earlier expressions" since they are "simply differences of opinion." His own opinions must have become different in time, for he was still in the church body in the present century. Back in 1868 and 1872 his views at that time might have prevented him from providing the leadership the situation required.

Streissguth-Reim comparison on this point is suggested by the record. When Reim's successor at New Ulm, C. J. Albrecht, arrived there, he found that it was customary to celebrate the Lord's Supper with both bread and host on the altar.<sup>xxxix</sup> That Albrecht would not continue this custom is understandable. That Reim would permit it is to be explained by his early training at Basel and by his mild disposition. It is quite apparent, however, that Reim, like Streissguth, may not have been the best synodical president in the late 1860's and early 1870's. The point is not to minify two able synodical leaders but to magnify the Lord of the Church who does all things well.

In the process of that magnification there is room for an appreciation of the labors of the Synod Presidents Reim and Streissguth. Streissguth in his brief tenure strove above all else, and perhaps to a fault, for synodical *esprit de corps*, for enough centralization of power to enable things to be done decently and in order. His efforts and example are worthy of consideration over a century later by a church body that has too often distinguished itself by an excess of "rugged individualism."

Reim in his presidential years distinguished himself above all else, and perhaps to a fault, by his deep concern that the ministry be not blamed. A century later, when the public ministry is under attack from without and within as never before, the concern that Reim demonstrated for that ministry is also certainly worthy of emulation.

<sup>i</sup> See A. Schuetze, "Muehlhaeuser, Founding Father of the Wisconsin Synod," *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, LXXII (July 1975), 194–210; E. C. Fredrich, "Bading and the Formative Presidency of the Wisconsin Synod," *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, LXXII (April 1975), 110–128; R. Balge, "Von Rohr: A Beloved Brother and Faithful Minister," LXXII (July 1975), 211–234; and A. Engel, "The Bergemann Era—1908–1933," LXXII (October 1975), 294–308.

<sup>ii</sup> The May 2, 1976 *Northwestern Lutheran*, for example, on p 138 carries the erroneous note: "As a separate synod the Wisconsin Ev. Lutheran Synod had four presidents: J. Muehlhaeuser, 1850–1860; J. Bading, 1860–1889; Ph. von Rohr, 1889–1908; and G. E. Bergemann, 1908–17."

<sup>iii</sup> Much of the family history is recounted in Herbert P. Brumder's *The Life Story of George and Henrietta Brumder* (Milwaukee: North American Press, 1960). This book contains Streissguth-Reim family material on pp 4–8. The book is hereafter cited as *Brumder*.

<sup>iv</sup> *Gemeinde-Blatt*, L (June 15, 1915), p 185. Apart from the name similarity, the obituary gives the reader no hint that the first and second wife were sisters.

<sup>v</sup> *Brumder*, p 4 and p 2 of an unpublished autobiographical sketch, written in 1913 and translated by a granddaughter, Meta Hass. The autobiography is to be found in the vertical file of the Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary library.

<sup>vi</sup> The unpublished Streissguth autobiography relates, p 1, that his maternal grandfather, Johann Geiger, founder and editor of the *Lahrer Hinkender Bote*, printed a special Luther's Catechism for family use in place of the rationalistic books of the state church.

<sup>vii</sup> These details are supplied by J.P. Koehler's, *The History of the Wisconsin Synod* (St. Cloud, Minn.: Sentinel Publishing Co. for the Protestant Conference) p 50. Hereafter cited as Koehler, *History*.

<sup>viii</sup> The *Wisconsin Synod Proceedings* supply the details found in the paragraph. The *1861 Proceedings*, pp 14–19, carry Reim's essay verbatim and on pp 23–24 report on the discussion.

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- <sup>ix</sup> *Wisconsin Proceedings, 1864*, p 8.
- <sup>x</sup> The July 15, 1882, *Gemeinde-Blatt*, on p 174 supplies details in the obituary.
- <sup>xi</sup> See the Streissguth autobiography, p 3.
- <sup>xii</sup> This is quoted from the unpublished autobiographical sketch, p 3.
- <sup>xiii</sup> The material for this section is drawn from the *Wisconsin Synod Proceedings* for the four years in question and in Koehler's extensive treatment on pp 91–111.
- <sup>xiv</sup> *Wisconsin Proceedings, 1864*, p 12.
- <sup>xv</sup> *Wisconsin Proceedings, 1864*, p 6.
- <sup>xvi</sup> This involved subject is illumined by the correspondence of Reim and others that is extensively reproduced by Koehler on pp 91–111.
- <sup>xvii</sup> *Wisconsin Proceedings, 1865*, p 7. The following membership information is supplied on the preceding page.
- <sup>xviii</sup> *Wisconsin Proceedings, 1866*, p 8.
- <sup>xix</sup> *Wisconsin Proceedings, 1866*, p 20.
- <sup>xx</sup> *General Council Proceedings, 1866*, p 19.
- <sup>xxi</sup> *Wisconsin Proceedings, 1867*, p 6.
- <sup>xxii</sup> See *Wisconsin Proceedings, 1866*, p 8, as an instance.
- <sup>xxiii</sup> *Wisconsin Proceedings, 1867*, p 7.
- <sup>xxiv</sup> *Wisconsin Proceedings, 1865*, p 16.
- <sup>xxv</sup> The documentation is a strange story in itself. A former student, Pastor Lynn Wiedmann, researching this bit of history, could find no record of any congregational action, although the synodical minutes expressly refer to such congregational testimony to Reim's innocence. Frustrated, he suspected historical error, heavy-handed tampering with the record, or even worse. With the deadline for the paper approaching and a dead end in his research looming large, Wiedmann luckily jostled the book of minutes. From an unfilled section of the book a single loose sheet popped. It was the record of the special Helenville church council meeting that had exonerated Reim.
- <sup>xxvi</sup> *Wisconsin Proceedings, 1865*, p 16.
- <sup>xxvii</sup> See, for example, *Wisconsin Proceedings, 1868*, p 34.
- <sup>xxviii</sup> Lynn Wiedmann's 1976 term paper, "The Helenville Problem."
- <sup>xxix</sup> *Wisconsin Proceedings, 1867*, p 10.
- <sup>xxx</sup> August Ristow's 1976 term paper, "Wilhelm Streissguth." One of the main points of this paper was that the course instructor tended to overrate Bading at the expense of Streissguth.
- <sup>xxxi</sup> Koehler, *History*, p 152.
- <sup>xxxii</sup> A. Kuhn, *Geschichte der Minnesota Synode und ihrer einzelnen Gemeinden* (St. Louis: Louis Lange Publishing Co., 1910), pp 167–168. Pastor Albrecht obviously supplied this information for the publication and also recorded it in a history of the New Ulm congregation he wrote.