

# Wisconsin's First Federation Memberships

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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 second of five lectures by the author on that topic.]

Wisconsin had not even completed its break with its original overseas benefactors in the 1860's before ties were being established with like-minded Lutherans in neighboring areas. The years 1866 and 1867 were watershed years for all American Lutheranism when old associations were broken and new fellowships came into being. So it was also for Wisconsin. In the short span of six years it would join and withdraw from one larger federation and then join and remain in another.

## I. Larger Associations

The 1866 convention of the Wisconsin Synod<sup>1</sup> heard this update of developments on the Lutheran scene in America from President Streissguth:

The latest happenings in the circle of the Lutheran General Synod justify the expectations that very shortly the withdrawal of several synods from that body will result in the better foundation of the Lutheran Confessions and Lutheran practice and our honored Synod should be urgently requested to review and renew its resolution of two years ago..., "that should somehow the attempt be made to form a new larger association of Lutheran synods on a more solid confessional basis, a delegation of our synod should be sent to the meeting paving the way to such an association."<sup>2</sup>

Wisconsin here was reacting to developments inside the General Synod. When that body in 1864 had accepted into membership the Franckean Synod, in spite of its notorious lack of Lutheranism, the Pennsylvania delegates had walked out in protest. Already then there was agitation for a new and better Lutheran federation and Wisconsin had prepared itself by passing the resolution Streissguth wanted reactivated. Pennsylvania, however, contented itself with approving the walkout of its delegates and establishing the Philadelphia seminary.

At the next General Synod convention in 1866 Chairman Sprecher refused to seat the Pennsylvania delegation without an application for re-admission and the convention upheld the chair's ruling. Again the Pennsylvania delegation walked out. In sympathy New York, Pittsburgh, English Ohio, and Minnesota protested and subsequently joined the mother synod in its undertakings. Pennsylvania shortly thereafter officially withdrew from the General Synod and called for a meeting to be held that December in Reading to which it invited "all synods which confess the Unaltered Augsburg Confession, for the purpose of organizing a new general body upon distinctively Lutheran principles."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The early Wisconsin Synod Proceedings, *Verhandlungen der Versammlung der Evangel.-Lutherischen Synode von Wisconsin*, from 1849–1857 are available in a photostatic reproduction of a printing of the original manuscripts in volume XXXIX of Northwestern College's *Black and Red* and are published in one volume with the Proceedings of 1858–1869. Translations from these records, as well as from others, are by the essayist, unless otherwise indicated. Subsequent references will be given as *Wisconsin Proceedings*, with date and location.

<sup>2</sup> *Wisconsin Proceedings*, 1866, p 9.

<sup>3</sup> *Wisconsin Proceedings*, 1866, p 32.

## The General Council Membership

Wisconsin sent President Streissguth and Professor Martin to Reading. The enabling resolution instructed them to work toward the establishment of an association “on the foundation of the Unaltered Augsburg Confession and Luther’s Small Catechism, likewise under the condition of equality of German with English.” Their generally favorable report to the next Wisconsin convention included the information that the main effort of the Wisconsin men at Reading had been to press for the publication of a German hymnal.<sup>4</sup>

The 1867 Wisconsin convention studied and in general endorsed the plan and platform proposed for the new federation. With its 12,741 communicants Wisconsin was entitled to send six delegates to the General Council’s constituent convention at Fort Wayne in the fall.<sup>5</sup> Only three, however, appeared: Acting President Bading, Professor Martin, and Professor Hoenecke, substituting for Pastor Muelhaeuser.

At Fort Wayne Wisconsin joined ten other synods in establishing the General Council as a body that should stand for confessional Lutheranism, at least in principle and on paper. It soon became apparent, however, that there were going to be serious problems in translating the principles on paper into practice in the parish.

Ohio and Iowa raised the issue in questions that became popularly known as the “Four Points,” items involving millennialism, lodge membership, pulpit fellowship, and altar fellowship. Various segments of the General Council were not willing to agree to a thoroughly Lutheran practice. This was especially true of some of the former members of the General Synod, accustomed to the loose practice that laxity in doctrine and confessionalism had produced.

Wisconsin supported the Ohio and Iowa effort, as did President Heyer of Minnesota and a few others. When a Council majority opted for indecision and postponement in the “Four Point” issue, Wisconsin’s delegation formally protested the Council’s wavering and declared that it would have to report unfavorably to the next convention of the body.<sup>6</sup>

That 1868 Racine convention heard the less than satisfactory report of its delegates and then resolved that it must have a more decisive “Four Point” declaration from the next Council meeting or it would be compelled to withdraw from the federation.<sup>7</sup> Even a reconsideration, requested by Professor Martin because of his absence at the first discussion, and his threat to withdraw from Wisconsin if it withdrew from the Council did not change the decision.

The subsequent Council meeting in the fall of 1868 at Pittsburgh did not produce the desired decisive stand. President Bading joined with President Klingmann of Michigan and Pastor Adelberg of New York in submitting a committee minority report that was rejected by the convention.<sup>8</sup>

In his next year’s presidential address Bading reported the unsatisfactory outcome to the Helenville convention. The body firmly and unhesitatingly resolved to put its withdrawal resolution into effect.<sup>9</sup> It thus became the first of the General Council bodies to withdraw for confessional reasons. The Council subsequently charged Wisconsin with “hasty withdrawal” and “uncharitable assault” on “grounds...obscure and dubious.”<sup>10</sup>

In Wisconsin’s eyes, however, the grounds for withdrawal were clear and compelling, as clear and compelling as the Bible makes its teaching on fellowship. Wisconsin did not and does not apologize for having been the first to withdraw from the Council for confessional reasons. It had just finished its own internal battle over the fellowship issue and severed its overseas connection; it was not about to endure another debate over the same issue or involve itself in an unsatisfactory fellowship even temporarily.

History bears out the fact that Wisconsin was not being overly suspicious or unduly hasty. Almost twenty years later the General Council was still sanctioning improper pulpit fellowship and wearing out

<sup>4</sup> *Wisconsin Proceedings, 1867*, p 5.

<sup>5</sup> *Wisconsin Proceedings, 1867*, p 31.

<sup>6</sup> *Gemeinde-Blatt*, III (Dec. 1 and 15, 1867), 1 in both cases.

<sup>7</sup> *Wisconsin Proceedings, 1868*, pp 19 and 31.

<sup>8</sup> *Gemeinde-Blatt*, IV (Dec. 15, 1868), 1.

<sup>9</sup> *Wisconsin Proceedings, 1869*, pp 7 and 24.

<sup>10</sup> *General Council Proceedings, 1869*, pp 32–34.

Michigan's patience in the matter. The wavering, unsatisfactory fellowship position of the General Council could not be made stationary and satisfactory by the description provided in the Akron Rule or by the Galesburg Addition or by the 105 Theses of Dr. C. Porterfield Krauth explaining the Akron-Galesburg Rule.

### Synodical Conference Formation

The Council withdrawal enabled Wisconsin to participate in the formation of the Synodical Conference that followed within a year. However, that would not have been possible, if the long-overdue *rapprochement* with Missouri had not already occurred. The same years 1867–1869 that mark the break with the overseas societies and the short-lived Council membership are also the years when Missouri-Wisconsin relations moved from opposition to fellowship.

At the 1868 Racine convention President Bading could include in his presidential report the optimistic declaration that an “opportune private discussion with pastors of the Missouri Synod, who desire peace as earnestly with us as we with them, justifies the hope that also our relations to that church body will become more and more friendly and brotherly.”<sup>11</sup> Koehler says that these discussions were a result of friendly contacts between his father at Hustisford and a Missouri neighbor, Pastor Multanowski of Town Hubbard, as well as between Missouri pastors in the Watertown area with President Bading and Professors Hoenecke and Meumann.<sup>12</sup>

On the same Racine convention agenda was the Waterford-Burlington parish conflict, a typical instance of Missouri heavy-handedness in operating with parochial boundaries and territorial claims. It claimed the proper attention of the Wisconsin men but did not discourage them from taking up in a positive and decisive way President Bading's suggestion of the possibility of a new day in Missouri relations.<sup>13</sup>

Two resolutions were passed. One instructed Bading to take the “proper steps to bring about peace so that there might be mutual recognition as Lutheran synods and brotherly relations between members of both synods in the spirit of truth on the basis of pure doctrine.” The groundwork for this enabling resolution was laid when the convention declared that in the area of Missouri-Wisconsin relations it had no knowledge of any “church-divisive differences” and that conflicts involved “practical questions, aggressions of individual members of both synods and articles in public periodicals, which often expressed more the tone of strife and scorn than sincere regret over such evils and loving correction.”<sup>14</sup>

Merely quoting convention resolutions may give the appearance that Wisconsin was proceeding very casually and quickly in this matter. But the minutes speak of “longer discussions.” Hoenecke and Lange protested, though without success, the wording, “no church-divisive differences,” actually a floor substitution in the Iowa “open question” mode. A pastor selected for the committee to deal with Missouri raised the question of his ability to function effectively if the troublesome General Council matter was not properly solved. Though the Wisconsin men earnestly desired peaceful fellowship relations with Missouri, they also wanted to act in the matter in a proper and God-pleasing way.

Wisconsin's overture was directed to Missouri's Northern District meeting in convention the day the Racine convention adjourned. Although there was some objection to the suggestion that there were some faults also on the Missouri side to be discussed, the overture was favorably received. The stipulation was made that discussion should center on doctrine and bring about a definite rejection of unionism. The committee to deal with the Wisconsin men was to represent not just the Northern District, but the whole Missouri Synod.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>11</sup> *Wisconsin Proceedings, 1868*, p 9.

<sup>12</sup> J.P. Koehler wrote *Geschichte der Allgemeinen Evangelisch-Lutherischen Synode von Wisconsin und andern Staaten* (Milwaukee, 1925). This is the first volume in German of the revised and completed English *History of the Wisconsin Synod* carried in *Faith-Life* from February 1938 to January 1944 and published by the Protestant Conference at St. Cloud, Minn., in 1970. When the latter publication is cited, the reference will be Koehler, *History*. p 118.

<sup>13</sup> *Wisconsin Proceedings, 1868*, pp 27–28.

<sup>14</sup> *Wisconsin Proceedings, 1868*, p 28. This section is heavily utilized in the next paragraphs.

<sup>15</sup> *Missouri's Northern District Proceedings, 1868*, pp 28–29.

The colloquy took place October 21 and 22, 1868, in Milwaukee at the homes of St. John's members, whose pastor Bading had just become. President Walther, Professor Brauer, Pastors Lochner, Sievers, and Strassen for Missouri, and President Bading, Professor Hoenecke, Pastors Dammams, Gausewitz, and Koehler for Wisconsin found themselves in full agreement when they discussed "open questions," other points of doctrine, and certain controversial issues. In his *Lutheraner* Walther reported, "All our reservations about...Wisconsin...have been put to shame."<sup>16</sup>

In the following May the school agreement with Missouri was worked out whereby Wisconsin would transfer its theological seminary operation to St. Louis, along with a professor, and would in turn welcome Missouri students and a Missouri professor at Watertown. Both the fellowship declaration and the school agreement were before the 1869 Helenville convention. Both were endorsed, with some few abstaining on the school question in the absence of instructions from their congregations.<sup>17</sup> The most significant development in all of Wisconsin's interchurch relations, fellowship with Missouri, was now an actuality.

Synodical Conference membership followed quickly and naturally. The Ohio Synod, which had found itself in fellowship with Missouri at that time, called for a meeting of conservative synods with the intent of forming a federation. Wisconsin joined Ohio, Missouri, and the Norwegian Synod at the first preliminary meeting in Chicago in 1871.

Missouri was the pivot synod of the group. It had previously been working with the Norwegians by training their ministerial students. It had just declared itself in fellowship with Ohio and with Wisconsin. A larger association was developing naturally and properly. Wisconsin up to this point had no special role to play.

A second preliminary meeting at Fort Wayne found Minnesota and Illinois also in attendance. Wisconsin's relations with both call for some comment.

At the time of the 1870 convention Wisconsin-Minnesota relations had reached a point that seemed to have made a declaration of fellowship almost a mere matter of formality. Doctrinal commissions, as was previously described, had at LaCrosse the previous fall found that there was agreement in doctrine. This the Wisconsin colloquists, Bading and Hoenecke, reported to the 1870 convention of their body.

The convention, which generously endorsed all the actions of its president—including his dealings with the Minnesota men at La Crosse—rejected Minnesota's request for closer ties and even refrained from passing a formal recognition of Minnesota's orthodoxy.

The committee that urged this action, or rather lack of action, gave these reasons:

1. lack of time to discuss all possible ramifications of the proposed closer ties;
2. necessity of obtaining the prior consent of a majority of the congregations of both synods;
3. desirability of getting better acquainted before becoming more closely united.<sup>18</sup>

President Sieker of Minnesota, who was present, reported to his own synod that the rebuff was motivated by scruples of three Wisconsin pastors about Minnesota's continuing General Council membership. They feared that any enlargement of ties with Minnesota would blunt and contradict the testimony Wisconsin had given in its recent withdrawal from the Council.<sup>19</sup>

One could argue, as Sieker did, that Wisconsin was acting inconsistently by approving of Bading's LaCrosse steps, but not following through in the direction those steps led. One could point to Hoenecke and comment that he was willing to regard Minnesota's Council membership as a protesting membership, proper in the circumstances.

That may be, but what stands out above all else is the care and sincerity with which the Wisconsin delegates proceeded in the matter. They risked the rebuff to Minnesota in order to be faithful to their convictions. If they were going to err, they wanted to err on the safe, the confessional side.

<sup>16</sup> C.F.W. Walther "Wieder eine Friedensbotshaft," *Lutheraner*, XXV (Nov. 1, 1868), 37.

<sup>17</sup> *Wisconsin Proceedings, 1869*, pp 21–23.

<sup>18</sup> *Wisconsin Proceedings, 1870*, p 34.

<sup>19</sup> *Minnesota Proceedings, 1870*, p 9.

To this episode, which could not but cause Minnesota great unhappiness, there is a happy ending. By the next year Minnesota had severed connections with the General Council. The way was open for Wisconsin to recognize formally Minnesota orthodoxy and to allow Minnesota to use the Watertown school and the *Gemeinde-Blatt*. In return Minnesota would contribute \$500 for the salary of a professor and an editor for the church paper, while sharing in that paper's profits.<sup>20</sup>

Through the declaration of fellowship with Wisconsin, Minnesota was brought one step nearer to the group endeavoring to form a new federation of conservative Lutheran synods. As soon as Minnesota succeeded in ironing out difficulties with Missouri, that dated back almost to the time of its founding and involved parish problems in St Paul, it could be a full partner in the Synodical Conference formation.

A rather surprising resolution was passed by the Wisconsin convention in 1872 in regard to the Illinois Synod. After lengthy debate it instructed its delegation to the July constituent Synodical Conference convention to obtain more exact information about the confessional position and the 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."<sup>21</sup>

One might think this resolution of Wisconsin was ill timed, for it was passed just six weeks before the Synodical Conference would be called into being, and already all systems for the venture were at the "go" setting. At first glance the Wisconsin resolution could strike one as being the product of an overly officious and overly suspicious spirit, for it could be assumed that the immediate neighbors of the Illinois Synod, the Missourians, would be taking care of the situation.

Speculating on the cause for the surprising resolution, Koehler writes, "A plausible explanation is that the 1858–1860 dealings with the heterogeneous Illinois bodies regarding the Illinois State University were recalled and that the original sponsors of straight confessionalism in the Wisconsin Synod stood behind the recommendation."<sup>22</sup> Wisconsin had more than this memory to go on. In the struggle for confessional practice in the General Council there is no record of any Illinois support for the cause. Wisconsin knew that Missouri had rejected an 1869 Illinois request for recognition and fellowship and had only reacted favorably in the spring of 1872, as it said, "in spite of all still existing weakness and shortcoming in its congregations and in individual pastors."<sup>23</sup>

In view of these circumstances the 1872 Wisconsin resolution regarding Illinois is not so surprising or ill-timed or officious. On the contrary, it gives evidence of a sincere concern for God's will and the neighbor's good. Instead of asking, "Am I my brother's keeper?" or saying, "Let George or Carl from Missouri do it!" the Wisconsin men were determined to do all they could that the Synodical Conference fellowship might have a God-pleasing basis and beginning. The six Wisconsin men at the first Synodical Conference convention, we can be sure, were joyful and thankful when the Illinois Synod took its place among the charter members of the new confessional body. Wisconsin, it appears, had nothing but cordial relations with Illinois from 1872 until 1879–1880 when the Illinois Synod became a part of Missouri's Illinois District.

### **The First Decade of Synodical Conference Membership**

During the first decade of the Synodical Conference from 1872–1882 there were two major concerns: the organizational problem involving the state synod proposal, and the more serious doctrinal dispute regarding conversion and election.

The state synod plan, a pet project of Dr. Walther and Missouri, supported by Ohio, went through several stages and is not easy to describe in simple terms. An excellent article by David Schmiel in the January 1966 *Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly* on "State Synods and Geographic Parishes: The Abortive Movement of the 1870's" provides a good overview. At the outset it is to be noted that the Synodical

<sup>20</sup> *Minnesota Proceedings, 1871*, pp 41–42.

<sup>21</sup> *Wisconsin Proceedings, 1872*, p 20.

<sup>22</sup> Koehler, *History*, p 142. He tells the Illinois State University story on pp 63–64.

<sup>23</sup> *Missouri Proceedings, 1872*, pp 95–96.

Conference's original constitution contained the stipulations in Article III on Purpose and Goal: "endeavor to set limits to the synods according to territorial boundaries" and "union of all Lutheran synods of America in an orthodox American Lutheran Church."<sup>24</sup>

By 1875 a continuing discussion of the theses on *Jus Parochiale* had led to the appointment of a Chicago-based committee to make practical proposals regarding opposition congregations. This occurred after President Sieker of Minnesota had begged off the assignment to carry out the task.<sup>25</sup>

With theses on *Kirchengemeinschaft* and *Jus parochiale* still pending, the committee laid several very broad and general proposals before the body in 1876 revolving around the assumption that parish rivalries could only be overcome by the creation of one general body with state, and not synod, subdivisions but that language differences should be considered.<sup>26</sup>

The convention unanimously declared that the general body should be, not a synod, but some less rigid form of association. It also voiced approval of an effort to attempt to create state synods at that time but with the proviso, "if not immediately everywhere, yet in any event there where this can be done without great difficulties, detriment and disadvantage."<sup>27</sup> In spite of the qualifications somehow most state synod agitation developed in the one state that was more likely than any other to present difficulties, Wisconsin.

Having voted unanimously for basic local control vested in state synods, the Synodical Conference went on to plan for a general theological seminary under the control of the general body with English and Norwegian seminaries attached. When discussion turned to preparatory schools and colleges which were to be under the control of the state synods and time problems were envisioned, the fateful resolution was also unanimously passed: "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 want to join."<sup>28</sup>

That resolution, much more than the general seminary plan, gave Wisconsin pause. Actually, Wisconsin was at this time carrying on its seminary work at St. Louis under the revised plan of 1874 that no longer contained any stipulations regarding professorships.<sup>29</sup> With Chicago considered to be the likely seminary site, it might have even been possible for Wisconsin to provide Hoenecke for the teaching staff of the general seminary. But Wisconsin backed off from the whole project because it became concerned about its organizational integrity and independence and chose to establish its own seminary rather than subject that independence to the risks of the state synod plan.

There is no need to question the original motivation and goal of the state synod plan. Walther was as zealous about clean practice as about pure doctrine. He regarded opposition congregations and interparish squabbles as intolerable situations that had to be dealt with as promptly and efficiently as possible. State synod structure, in his mind, became the one sure means to the good goal of God-pleasing practice throughout the Synodical Conference. The means in this case began to rival in importance the actual goal. Walther and his synod pushed hard for the means, too hard at times.

At its 1877 convention Wisconsin considered the Synodical Conference proposals and reacted with three resolutions that voiced:

1. a general approval of the original state synod plan;
2. a willingness to participate as soon as the general bodies dissolve themselves and organize as state synods;

<sup>24</sup> These are the fifth and sixth purposes mentioned in Article III of the original Synodical Conference constitution.

<sup>25</sup> *Synodical Conference Proceedings, 1875*, p 35.

<sup>26</sup> *Synodical Conference Proceedings, 1876*, p 45.

<sup>27</sup> *Synodical Conference Proceedings, 1876*, p 47.

<sup>28</sup> *Synodical Conference Proceedings, 1876*, pp 49–50.

<sup>29</sup> *Missouri Proceedings, 1874*, pp 53–57.

3. a declaration that it did not view the attachment of a state synod to any still existing general body as commanded by God, necessary for unity, and profitable for synod and congregations.<sup>30</sup>

The first two resolves passed unanimously and the third by a great majority.

The united seminary proposal was rejected by a vote of 64 to 32. Then the planning for the Wisconsin seminary was entrusted to the Pastoral Conference at which congregational opinion could be considered.<sup>31</sup>

Missouri men visiting the Wisconsin convention, notably District President Strassen and Pastor Allwardt, challenged Wisconsin's seeming about-face. Professor Ernst, an 1876 Synodical Conference delegate, had to admit—in what must be the classic instance to underscore the importance of faithful conference attendance and attention—that he had let his full attention lapse and only later caught all the implications of the resolution for which he had originally voted.

Wisconsin also had to resist the charges, at its 1877 convention and later, that it was dealing in a fashion that threatened Christian liberty, limited the Holy Spirit, and demonstrated lovelessness toward Missouri. Walther and Missouri were perturbed, for Wisconsin opposition halted developments and influenced the next Synodical Conference to determine “to break off the whole issue and to entrust further developments in the matter to individual synods.”<sup>32</sup> Missouri pressed on in the general seminary plan and Wisconsin once again took up the training of its seminary students on home ground by beginning work in Milwaukee on September 4, 1878.

In 1879 the Synodical Conference took the Wisconsin position partially into account in a modification of the original plan. The modified version called for three general groupings: eastern, where Ohio would predominate; southwestern, which would be Missouri territory; and northwestern, where Wisconsin would prevail.<sup>33</sup>

By 1881 when the election controversy was tearing the Synodical Conference apart, even the strongest advocates of the state synod plan had to admit that it was most fortunate that it had not gone into effect. The plan, however, would resurface periodically, as for example in the mid 1910's when Wisconsin was moving from a federation to a merged general synod. One wonders whether it is completely dead at this late date one hundred years after its origin, when one hears calls for a realignment of conservative Lutherans.

Lengthy attention has been given to this subject in Wisconsin's interchurch relations, not only because it is a bit of curious past history, but because what happened then has left lasting deposits, even if no tangible results were achieved. For one thing, Wisconsin acquired a not altogether deserved image of an isolationist and individualistic church body which still clings to it in the minds of many. The image was not by any means created by the Brenner presidency.

In the state synod controversy Wisconsin also first encountered a Missouri tendency to extremism in applying the doctrine of the church to practical situations. Strangely those who would become most insistent about the superiority of the local congregation and the relative inferiority of the synod went all out in this matter for their pet variety of synod. Some deemed the state synod the one method of demonstrating love in intersynodical relations. Others were ready to view the opponent of state synods as something less than Lutheran, if not Christian.

Fortunately the strife over state synods did not cause any doctrinal rupture between Missouri and Wisconsin when the second major disturbance in the first Synodical Conference decade had to be confronted. This was the election controversy.

Three points can summarize Wisconsin's limited role in the controversy, which especially involved in the Synodical Conference Missouri, Ohio, and the Norwegians. For one thing, Wisconsin was throughout the controversy on the side of Missouri, its erstwhile state synod foe. Secondly, Wisconsin's stand was not simply a

<sup>30</sup> *Wisconsin Proceedings, 1877*, pp 16–22.

<sup>31</sup> *Wisconsin Proceedings, 1877*, pp 22–30.

<sup>32</sup> *Synodical Conference Proceedings, 1877*, p 42.

<sup>33</sup> *Synodical Conference Proceedings, 1879*, pp 27–28.

matter of blind follow-the-leader policy, but a position resulting from careful investigation and personal conviction. Finally, in second and third stages of the controversy in this century which will be dealt with in a subsequent installment, Wisconsin did all in its power on the intersynodical level to foster agreement in the Bible doctrine.

As Koehler relates on the basis of information from first-hand observers, Wisconsin was already touched by the first surfacings of the conflict in the early 1870's.<sup>34</sup> A footnote to a G. Fritschel article on *Wucherlehre* had brought forth a series of articles on conversion and election and had aroused widespread interest in the subject. At a Missouri Conference in the Watertown area, Ernst and Hoenecke duelled with Stellhorn, then Missouri's Northwestern professor but soon to become a chief Ohio theological leader. The subject was conversion and Stellhorn seems to have been silenced for the time being.

After Walther's election essay for his Western District in 1877 was challenged by Schmidt, Allwardt, Stellhorn and others the conflict widened. Articles for and against and by Walther began to appear in the periodicals and parties within the synods and even the synods themselves began to take sides.

In its study of these developments Wisconsin found several instances where the controversy engendered extreme statements on the part of those espousing the Scripture teachings that the cause of election and conversion is not to be sought in man but only in the grace of God. Its 1879 Pastoral Conference called four such instances to Missouri's attention. Three involved loose statements: "If it goes back to foreknowledge who is to believe, then surely also, who is not to believe," and "grace...also overcomes the willful fighting against itself," and "the good Lord also must continue putting on the pressure." A fourth pointed out a lack of emphasis on the truth that the certainty of election is a certainty of faith. Missouri acknowledged or explained in a delayed reply, but with good grace.<sup>35</sup>

The October 1, 1881 *Gemeinde-Blatt* has an article written by "G" (Prof. A. Graebner) which clearly indicates Wisconsin's position in the controversy. The subject is the Ohio withdrawal from the fellowship of the Synodical Conference. After the *intuitu fidei* approach is rejected, the statement is made:

Thus one of the two large synods, which up to the present has been joined with us in the Synodical Conference, has withdrawn from this association. With regret we see an erstwhile older sister go her way, most especially because we are not able to call out to her in farewell: "Thou art my sister; be thou the mother of thousands of millions."<sup>36</sup>

Wisconsin at its 1881 convention instructed its list of Synodical Conference delegates to withdraw rather than bind the free hand of the whole synod in the matter. It considered its course at the Pastoral Conference later that year. It took its official action as a synod in joint session with the Minnesota Synod at LaCrosse. In the course of the convention's deliberation of the regularly assigned theses on conversion, the question of causation inevitably led to the subject of the believer's election. At this point Professor Hoenecke discussed the Bible's teaching on the cause and comfort of election and specifically rejected *intuitu fidei*. This statement the Wisconsin pastors in a nearly unanimous vote made their own. Minnesota did likewise.<sup>37</sup>

Wisconsin and Minnesota subsequently stood shoulder-to-shoulder with Missouri at the crucial Synodical Conference meeting in 1882. There the chief issue centered around the seating of Schmidt as a Norwegian delegate. The seat was denied him and his position was rejected. The Norwegian Synod left the Synodical Conference in the following year for practical and tactical reasons, not because of a doctrinal disagreement with the Synodical Conference synods with which it maintained fraternal relations.

<sup>34</sup> Koehler, *History*, pp 157–158.

<sup>35</sup> Information on Wisconsin's critical support is found in Carl Meyer ed. *Moving Frontiers* (St Louis, 1964), pp 273–274. Koehler's *History* treats this matter on pp 158–159.

<sup>36</sup> *Gemeinde-Blatt*, XVII (Oct. 1, 1881), 23.

<sup>37</sup> *Wisconsin Proceedings, 1882*, pp 33–35.



## II. The Federated Synod of 1892

With this settlement of the election controversy within the Synodical Conference and an era of comparative peace and quiet in that body in the following years, our attention can turn to another aspect in Wisconsin's interchurch relations in those years: the formation of the federated synod and the relations with Minnesota, Michigan, and Nebraska that brought them together with us in that body.

### Minnesota Relations

Minnesota relations suffered a serious setback in 1875, just four years after fellowship had been officially declared. Grasshoppers were the cause, at least in Minnesota records. The Minnesota golden anniversary history states:

Since in 1873 and 1874 the mission territories of Pastors Kentner, Hunziker, and Wolf had suffered from the grasshopper plague and had to be supported, the Minnesota Synod got into such financial difficulty that we were not able to maintain our stipulated obligations to the Wisconsin Synod and were compelled by need to cancel Point 1 of the stipulations.<sup>38</sup>

Times were hard all over in the depression that began in 1873 when Cooke's Philadelphia bank closed. They were especially bad in Minnesota where the Northern Pacific, headed by Cooke, had to halt railroad construction. They were even worse in the Renville and Redwood County area hard hit by the grasshopper plagues. By 1875 Minnesota was \$700 in debt. It called off its agreement to pay \$500 toward Watertown salaries and resolved to send any available monies to Missouri schools where the majority of its students were.<sup>39</sup>

When Wisconsin then canceled Minnesota's junior partnership in the *Gemeinde-Blatt*, although keeping its columns open to Minnesota official notices, and giving the sister synod its share of the previous year's profits, President Kuhn took Wisconsin to task. What Minnesota did, he claimed, was proper because it was done out of need; what Wisconsin did was improper because it was done by choice, and loveless choice at that. Wisconsin has been called loveless in interchurch relations frequently, but never with so little reason. It declared in its 1877 convention that it could not admit to being guilty of dealing lovelessly or unjustly to Minnesota.<sup>40</sup>

How much the state synod controversy played in this nadir in Wisconsin-Minnesota relations is difficult to ascertain. Among Minnesota men there was some inclination toward a Minnesota state synod, joining Missouri and Minnesota and perhaps affiliating with Missouri. Granting the reality of grasshopper plagues and treasury deficits, one can sense that something more was at stake in the sudden designation of Missouri schools as recipient of educational monies that had previously gone to Watertown. Was the 1870 rebuff that Wisconsin tendered Minnesota still rankling and provoking disturbances? At this late date there are difficulties in getting at the heart of the matter.

Fortunately the situation improved rapidly. When Minnesota acted officially on the state synod and united seminary plan, it was to endorse the proposals in general terms but to point out that more time was necessary for the former and not enough money was available for the latter. Consequently its stand, in effect, was not that different from Wisconsin's. In 1879 a joint committee made several proposals for improving Wisconsin-Minnesota relations: delegate exchange at conventions, some joint conventions, joint efforts in the training of pastors and teachers, but no actual merger or federation. The proposals were adopted and supplied benefits to both synods until new arrangements could be made in 1892.<sup>41</sup> The common stand on election,

<sup>38</sup> A. Kuhn, Sr. *Geschichte der Minnesota-Synode* (St. Louis, 1910), p 25. Hereafter cited as Kuhn, *Geschichte*.

<sup>39</sup> *Minnesota Proceedings, 1875*, pp 37-38.

<sup>40</sup> *Wisconsin Proceedings, 1877*, p 39.

<sup>41</sup> Kuhn, *Geschichte*, pp 32-34.

demonstrated at LaCrosse in 1882, served to cement ties between Wisconsin and Minnesota and made it an easy matter to effect federation in ten years.

### Michigan Relations

Before that 1892 development can be described, a look back to relations with Michigan is essential. It can be a relatively brief glance. As long as Michigan retained its General Council Membership, there was of course no possibility of fellowship relations between Wisconsin and that body and little need for interchurch relations of any kind.

Michigan began to work for a firmer General Council fellowship position as early as 1869. Its tendency, under the leadership of Klingmann and Eberhardt, was in the right direction. Always and again, however, Michigan viewed too optimistically the successive General Council steps: Akron Resolution, Galesburg Rule, Krauth's 105 Theses. It seemed, on paper at least, that progress was being made. In actual practice the Council's educative approach was producing, not progress, but retrogression.

This became unmistakably clear to Michigan when the Council held its 1884 convention at Monroe, Michigan, and Council members and leaders filled Presbyterian pulpits during the sessions. Michigan protests were ignored. Finally in 1888 Michigan resolved to cease playing the role of long-suffering Council conscience and withdrew.

The *Memoirs* of Jacobs provide an interesting insight into the situation as he reports regarding the 1885 Council meeting:

The Michigan Synod complained of the course of Dr. Passavant and Mr. Gerberding in preaching in a Presbyterian church at the meeting in 1884 at Monroe, Michigan. The Michigan pastor had asked Presbyterians to entertain these brethren; and then when they preached to the people among whom they were placed as guests the Synod wanted them censured... Endeavoring to settle the matter privately, I had an interview with the Michigan delegates in which I told them their complaint was out of order... If Dr. Passavant and Mr. Gerberding were worthy of censure, this was a matter pertaining to the Pittsburgh Synod to which they belonged. "You believe then in lawyer's rules," said Pastor Eberhardt, the President of the Synod. "To be sure," I answered, "there must be a mode of procedure established by law." "Well, we pay no attention to lawyer's rules," was the answer. The early withdrawal of the Synod was the consequence. It has been of little account since.<sup>42</sup>

Michigan now stood alone, a confessional synod that had just recently broken with the Council and had further demonstrated its sincerity and genuine concerns by establishing its own seminary first at Manchester and from 1887 on at Saginaw. Michigan clearly belonged in the ranks of the Synodical Conference. It was, however, not Wisconsin that played the chief role in bringing Michigan into the confessional federation. Minnesota was better qualified to fulfill that assignment.

President Albrecht of Minnesota and President Eberhardt of Michigan had been *Pilgermission* classmates. It was natural that they would be in consultation about the new Michigan situation. By 1891 they had set up a preliminary consultation of Michigan men with Albrecht and Ernst. Strangely, and perhaps unfortunately, Wisconsin's new leader, President Philip von Rohr, had little direct involvement with the developments until late in the proceedings when disciplinary action was needed. President Philip von Rohr seems to have been content to let a relative, Professor Ernst, deal in the matter, perhaps deeming it chiefly an educational problem. In any event, the preliminary meetings led to arrangements that were agreeable to the three parties and led to Michigan's entrance into the Synodical Conference and the creation of the federated synod in the fall of 1892.

<sup>42</sup> Henry E. Horn, ed., *Memoirs of Henry Eyster Jacob* (Published by ed., 1974), II, 276-277. Hereafter cited as *Memoirs of Jacobs. Memoirs of Jacobs*.

The joint work that the three still organizationally intact synods would undertake was in the fields of publication, foreign missions, and education. In the third area the agreement called for a pooling of the use of properties but with previous ownership being maintained. The theological seminary, being built in Wauwatosa, was to serve all three synods. Minnesota's all-purpose school would convert to a combination prep school and teachers' training operation. Michigan's all purpose seminary would revert to a prep school.<sup>43</sup>

That reversion was to be the cause of a bleak chapter in Wisconsin's interchurch relations dealing with the Michigan break. Major emphasis has traditionally been placed on the role of the erratic Boehner, a pastor of the Wisconsin Synod at Fond du Lac as early as 1859 and subsequently Episcopalian China missionary and Michigan president from 1894 on. He certainly played a role in the Michigan separation, but if it is exaggerated to an exclusive role, the other Michigan men have to be viewed as babes-in-the-woods and dupes, if not worse. This study prefers to stress other factors, factors that present Michigan men in a more favorable light.<sup>44</sup>

The essayist recalls trips from Saginaw to Michigan conferences with a veteran pastor in the area, Oscar Frey. Each trip was a church history lesson. As one after the other attractive Lutheran church property was passed, Frey would relate, "That congregation once belonged to us but was lost when a vacancy couldn't be filled in the 1870's or 1880's." After struggling with the problem of pastoral supply for a quarter of a century, Michigan finally established a worker training school. Just when that school was beginning to produce needed manpower, Michigan was asked to cut it back to prep school level.

It was inevitable that questions were asked: "Will students be willing to cross the lake for college and seminary study?" and "Will theological graduates return across the lake with so many plush and plum assignments on the other side?" The hasty agreement was reconsidered. Before closing down college and seminary departments, Michigan wanted time, preferably time enough to graduate all students already enrolled. The intention was to keep faith with the enrolled students and to allow for results of the new arrangement to demonstrate themselves. That much time was not granted.

The result was bitter strife in Michigan between a majority Saginaw school faction and a minority general synod group.<sup>45</sup> Here Boehner's flawed leadership wrought havoc. By 1896 the majority was standing alone and the federated synod and the Synodical Conference were recognizing the minority of about a dozen men, who became a Wisconsin district.

Soon the Michigan Synod was suffering a series of disappointments. The short-lived alliance with the Augsburg Synod fell by the wayside after a four-year experiment. Boehner was revealed more and more as time went on to be an unstable leader. The Saginaw school was so run into the ground that when enrollment stood at one student the operation closed its doors. By 1910 both Michigan groups were ready for peace. Director Otto Hoenecke reopened Saginaw as a prep school. Michigan resumed its place in the federated synod.

The Michigan Synod repented officially for its unbrotherly break, its unjustified expulsions, its regrettable practice. The Michigan District withdrew hasty charges of false doctrine. Wisconsin forgave and in time forgot or will forget, as some in Michigan would have it. Only one man has ever been called to this seminary from Michigan and he was ousted after three years. If Wisconsin is to be charged with any sins in the matter, it must be sins of omission, not commission. Hindsight suggests that a lack of leadership, deliberation, and planning at the outset contributed to the sad developments.

If this puts the finger on Professor Ernst, Wisconsin's representative at the original meetings and subsequently president of the general body, one hastens to add that he performed brilliantly in another phase of Wisconsin's interchurch developments of that era. This is the Nebraska connection.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>43</sup> Koehler's *History* traces the development of the federated synod on pp 179–180.

<sup>44</sup> Michigan's side of the story is told on the pages of the synodical publication, *Synodalfreund*, published from 1888–1910.

<sup>45</sup> Koehler's *History* supplies details for the Michigan story on pp 192–193 and 222–224.

<sup>46</sup> Koehler's *History* discusses Nebraska on pp 177–179.

## Nebraska Relations

Nebraska had a king-size aversion to synodical organizations. Its founders were people burnt twice and then some in intersynodical strife in the Lebanon area. Their leader, Heckendorf, had gone to Chicago in 1847 to set Walther and others straight about the evils of creating a synodical structure. The trek from the Watertown area to the Norfolk area was a flight from Lutheran synods and Lutheran strife as much as it was anything else.

Safe and independent in Nebraska, Heckendorf trained his own son to be his successor as shepherd of the Nebraska flock. Man proposes. Within days of the ordination ceremony the Heckendorf heir-apparent died. The heart-broken father died soon thereafter. The bereft flock turned for aid to a man they had heard was waging a heroic fight against that granddaddy of all Lutheran synods, Walther's state synod project. The Norfolk folk concluded, "Ernst must be one of us."

When Ernst appeared in Norfolk to preach, the elders examined him before permitting him to act as their pastor. Ernst submitted but had the last word in the sermon and post-service discussions through which a beginning was made in setting aside or at least softening the Nebraska inhibitions.

Then Ernst advised Norfolk to call Springfield Candidate Michael Pankow of Lebanon and son of Teacher Pankow, storm center in the original controversy. The arrangement worked beautifully. Before the people realized, they were involved with the Wisconsin Synod. At the turn of the century a Nebraska District of the Wisconsin Synod was established. Within a few more years that venture developed into what Heckendorf had consistently and insistently opposed, a Nebraska Synod that became the fourth member, the "other states" in the *Allgemeine Ev. Luth. Synode von Wisconsin, Minnesota, Michigan u. a. St.* This was completed by 1906 and completes this record of Wisconsin's first federation memberships.

It is a record that has brought a little band dedicated to the Lord's cause and truth safely through entangling alliances into the fellowship of the Synodical Conference and the federation with its neighbors that would enable it to become two bands and more. It is a record that compels one to say with special emphasis, *Soli Deo Gloria.*