

Wisconsin's Interchurch Relations in the First Third of This Century

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

The dawn of this century brought with it bright hopes for new and better things here on this old earth of ours. Men were certain that progress in technology, in politics, in international affairs was certain to usher in the grander day. Peace and prosperity would surely and swiftly be achieved.

I. The Larger Lutheran Scene

There were hopes for the Lutheran church in America also, hopes that the Lord's sundered Zion would be made whole. Looking back from the vantage point of three-fourths of a century we are generally agreed that the chapter in American Lutheran church history describing the years from 1900 until 1975 has earned the title, "The Time of Lutheran Union." That is just what many back in 1900 were hoping and working for.

Intersynodical Discussions in the First Decade

In the Midwest at the turn of the century a new generation of Lutheran leaders were speculating: "Did the fathers somehow miss the mark twenty years or so earlier when they created new rifts and widened older ones among Lutherans in a battle over conversion and election? Shouldn't a new effort be made with new faces and forces aiding the veterans, now twenty years older and perhaps wiser?" Walther was gone and would have to be replaced by Franz Pieper, a Walther pupil and protégé plucked from Wisconsin's ranks. The Fritschels were gone. But the trio of *intuitu fidei* champions, Allwardt, Stellhorn, and Schmidt, were still around and were not at all loathe to do battle once more, given a battlefield. This was provided by a series of quite informal and unofficial intersynodical conferences held to discuss conversion and election.

The role that Wisconsin men played in this effort was considerable. A strong case could be made for the proposition that their contribution was as large as that of the men from any other synod. A notable endeavor from those generally regarded as isolationists and individualists! A description of their specific efforts in those intersynodical discussions in the first decade of this century certainly deserves space in this study.

The Iowa Synod journal points to a pivot role Wisconsin could fill and a special contribution it could make when it commends a *Gemeinde-Blatt* description of the developments in this way:

Furthermore we rejoice over the manner in which the writer of the quoted lines writes about that which separates the Synodical Conference from other Lutheran synods. We have become accustomed, when there is a discussion of this point in the Missouri camp, for this to be carried on in a rude, juridical, condemnatory manner, that it is noteworthy when this for once is done differently and we are glad to take notice of it.¹

The main promoter of the series of conferences, at least in the matter of getting them off the ground, was a Wisconsin man, but just barely. This was Pastor M. Bunge, formerly of Iowa, who joined Wisconsin in 1902 and held membership in our body until 1910. Bunge sponsored the poorly attended Beloit intersynodical conference. Undaunted by the poor attendance and chalking it up to "too little and too late" publicity, Bunge willingly served as chairman of a committee to arrange for another meeting. This was set for Watertown in the spring of 1903 in the format of a free conference.

¹ *Kirchliche Zeitschrift*, XXVI,5, pp 237-238.

Joint Wisconsin had more men in attendance at Watertown than any other synod, 85 to Missouri's 65, as the *Gemeinde-Blatt* reports.² The same situation prevailed in the fall Milwaukee meeting, with Wisconsin providing about 200 to Missouri's 172 and Ohio's 64.

Franz Pieper's paper set down the Synodical Conference position in the doctrines of conversion and election. Ohio men contested the paper. The discussion was not channeled by any agenda and tended to drift from one point to another. Toward the close the familiar charge was raised that the Synodical Conference stand clashed with the "analogy of faith." Refutation indicated that there was no agreement on just what the "analogy" was.³

With 700 in attendance, the Milwaukee meeting in the fall of 1903 reached a high as far as interest goes. Discussions of Allwardt's exegetical treatment of the main election passages kept involving themselves in "analogy of faith," and disagreement on that matter hopelessly frustrated efforts to achieve unity in the disputed doctrines. Participants agreed that a committee, chaired by Hoenecke, should get together over the Christmas holidays in Chicago and prepare an agenda for the next conference in Detroit, featuring "analogy of faith."

Hoenecke's committee had not been able to reach an agreement on the definition of the concept under discussion and simply asked the Detroit meeting to discuss what the "analogy" is and how it is to be used. No agreement was reached, but those in attendance resolved to have another meeting in 1905 and that in turn was followed by another in 1906, both at Ft. Wayne. In 1905 election was the topic, in 1906 conversion.

At the 1905 conference Hoenecke and Koehler joined other Synodical Conference men in insisting on the proper exegesis of the key Ephesians 1:3–4 passage. Stelhorn wanted the passage read, "chosen us who are in Him." He eventually yielded, if not at Ft. Wayne in 1905 then in a 1912 book of his, *Der Schriftbeweis des lutherischen Katechismus*.⁴

The Ft. Wayne 1906 discussion of conversion found each side standing firm in its stated positions. The Synodical Conference men rejected all attempts to find in man some contributing cause to his conversion. Their opponents clung to their distinction between natural and willful resistance. Ft. Wayne in 1906 was a far cry from the enthusiastic Milwaukee 1903 conference. Attendance had dropped considerably and enthusiasm even more. Actually, the Synodical Conference men had agreed at the previous Synodical Conference meeting to make this the last of the meetings. They were forced to this decision by the kind of coverage the unity effort was given in the periodicals of the opponents.

This reference to periodicals calls to mind the fact that the *Quartalschrift* was begun in the years of the intersynodical conferences. It appeared first in 1904, just in time to contain in the first issues Koehler's extensive treatment of a burning question of the day, *Die Analogie des Glaubens*. As Volume I explains, our theological journal was not merely a response to the intersynodical conferences, though it was grateful that it could bring reports on them to its readers. For years there had been talk of a Wisconsin theological journal, especially after the federation of 1892 that had as one of its purposes joint efforts in publication. The opportune time to launch the journal came in 1904.

The *Quartalschrift* is mentioned in this paper, not just incidentally, but deliberately. In the case of a church body that for various reasons had limited contacts with other Lutheran synods over the years, the theological journal could serve well in bringing to those on the outside the voice of Wisconsin and be an effective tool in interchurch relations.

One other point about the 1902–1906 intersynodical conferences that is appropriate to the topic at hand should be treated. This is the Detroit prayer debate. While that conference was trying to evaluate past performances and plan future get-togethers, an Ohio man suggested that the cause of the lack of accomplishments was the lack of joint prayer. The ensuing discussion at the conference and the writing on the subject in the periodicals demonstrate what the Synodical Conference position on prayer fellowship was.

² This detail is from the May 15, 1903, *Gemeinde-Blatt*.

³ *Der Lutherische Herold* of those days contains a series of articles on the 1903–1904 conferences by Dr. Nicum that supply the most thorough coverage the conferences received. This section of the paper leans heavily on Nicum, especially in the matter of the Detroit prayer debate.

⁴ F.W. Stelhorn, *Der Schriftbeweis des lutherischen Katechismus* (Columbus, 1912) p 415.

Missouri and Wisconsin men joined in rejecting the suggestion that there be joint prayer. In a *Lehre und Wehre* article *Warum koennen wir keine gemeinsamen Gottesdienste mir Ohioern und Iowaern veranstalten und abhalten?* Bente stands for the unit concept of fellowship even if he does not use the term. Bente declared, “If we can become one with the Ohio men in prayer, we will also have to invite them to our altars.”⁵

Some fifty years later a departure on the part of Missouri from the stand of Pieper and Stoeckhardt and Bente would be the prime cause for a most serious development in Wisconsin’s interchurch relations, its break from Missouri and withdrawal from the Synodical Conference.

The Chicago Theses Endeavor

Less than a decade after the final Ft. Wayne gathering drew to its dismal close, there was another major unity effort among the Lutherans in the Midwest. Again Wisconsin was extensively involved. This endeavor rates little more than a footnote in historical surveys but for a dozen years from 1917 to 1929 commanded considerable attention.

All but forgotten now, it must for a Lutheran with conservative leanings rank high on the list of most interesting church history “might-have-beens.” This is the movement that produced the “Chicago Theses” in the 1920’s. It actually was the last major effort with any chance of success, humanly speaking, to extend the reach of the Synodical Conference position.

A word about terminology is in place. “Chicago Theses” is the name generally used in Synodical Conference circles that were not involved in the post-World War I discussions on Lutheran co-operation which also produced a set of “Chicago Theses” in 1919. Those for whom this 1919 document has significance understandably reserve the name “Chicago Theses” for it and refer to the later theses as “Intersynodical Theses.”

There is a most interesting beginning and background to this episode in Wisconsin’s interchurch relations. The best place to read about it is in the first-hand account of Pastor Schlemmer in his essay for the 1920 convention of the Minnesota District of the Wisconsin Synod. *Die jetzigen Einigungsbestrebungen in der lutherischen Kirche*.⁶ By 1920 Pastor Schlemmer had moved to Flasher in North Dakota but earlier had served in the Sibley County, Minnesota, area.

In the mid 1910’s Lutheran unity was in the air. Before that decade would end a large merged Norwegian Lutheran Church would be created; a reunion of General Synod, General Council, and the Southern segment of Lutheranism would result in the United Lutheran Church in America; and the federated Wisconsin body would take the merger plunge. The approaching special 1917 anniversary of the Reformation was engendering a drive for bringing Lutherans together.

On May 11, 1915, the Sibley County mixed conference, meeting at Ft. Ridgely, where a half century before Little Crow’s braves had been halted on their rampage, sought to anticipate the Reformation anniversary by a discussion of the prospects for Lutheran *unity*. The term *unity* is used deliberately in contradistinction to *union* in testimony to the fact that in the whole endeavor being described the motives of the participants, in so far as they can be discerned, seemed bent on arriving at a declaration of unity and not on creating a man-made, jerry-built union.

The discussion prompted the conference’s senior, Missouri’s Gaylord pastor, August Hertwig, to invite non-Synodical Conference Lutheran pastors in the area, specifically Ohio men, to intersynodical discussions. The response was so unenthusiastic that the actual count of the slim attendance is not divulged, but the endeavor survived. A second meeting brought together 17, 8 from Ohio, 6 from Missouri, and 3 from Minnesota.

For agenda purposes at the series of summer meetings the decision was to embark on a study and recension of the recently developed “Madison Settlement,” the eventual basis for Norwegian union. On September 15, 1915, at Arlington the assembled pastors declared that they found themselves one in the

⁵ *Lehre und Wehre*, LI (March 1905) 110–111.

⁶ P. Schlemmer, *Die jetzigen Einigungsbestrebungen in der lutherischen Kirche in Minnesota District Proceedings, 1920*, pp 18–62. In subsequent pages this article will be drawn on heavily and will be cited simply as *Schlemmer*.

previously divisive doctrines. They closed the session by joining to sing *Nun danket alle Gott* and pray a *Vater Unser*. The participant and describer hastens to add:

In subsequent gatherings that was to be sure not repeated; but not for the reason that we feared that we had thereby made ourselves guilty of religious unionism but rather in order to give no offense to such who did not sufficiently understand the situation.⁷

At Arlington a revision of the “Madison Settlement,” to be known as “Sibley County Theses,” was signed by all but one of the pastors there. One thousand copies of this document were distributed. They were then discussed and slightly revised in a series of meetings in St. Paul that stretched from late 1915 to early 1917.

At these enlarged meetings the rule of order prevailed that professors, although welcomed to attend, would not be granted the floor. The obvious reasoning was that professors had been those most deeply involved in the 1870’s and when the division had arisen and again in 1903–1906 when the rift had not been narrowed but widened. This time the pastors would have their try. Obviously the professors in the Twin Cities, New Ulm, and even Wauwatosa were not thrilled about the rule. One could speculate that a New Ulm professor was so frustrated thereby that in reaction he went on an energetic and extensive speaking tour denouncing Wilson’s war and draft, with disastrous results for himself, not Wilson.

Without benefit of professors, a brief statement on conversion and election, known as the “St. Paul Theses,” was produced and eventually signed by 555 pastors: 170 from Iowa, 165 from Missouri, 150 from Joint Wisconsin, and 70 from Ohio. The matter was placed before synodical conventions with the request that a committee be set up including representatives of the four synods whose pastors had been involved.

The four synods responded favorably and were later joined by Buffalo. Joint Wisconsin selected as its representatives W. Bodamer of Michigan, A.C. Haase of Minnesota, M. Lehninger of Nebraska, and H. Meyer and J. Schaller of Wauwatosa, the latter being replaced by J.P. Koehler and J. Meyer soon thereafter. Minnesota, deeply concerned in the development from the beginning, continued to send representatives, such as Albrecht, Boettcher, and Sauer, even after transforming itself into a district. This hard-working committee that held six meetings covering 17 days within a span of 16 months presented a statement on conversion to the sponsoring synods. Wisconsin’s 1919 convention accepted a report on these developments.⁸ The other synods expressed appreciation and urged the committee to continue its work.

The work did not move forward so rapidly after that. Buffalo joined the venture. The subject turned to the difficult election doctrine. The scope of the committee assignment was enlarged to include other matters in addition to conversion and election. A preliminary draft was sent out by 1925. Committee work and study of its reports continued. In 1928 a final draft of the “Chicago Theses” appeared.

The 1929 Wisconsin convention passed two resolves on the subject: 1) that Wisconsin was ready to deal with other synods in further discussions and 2) that conferences study the document produced so that the results of a ten-year effort in which Wisconsin had participated might be of benefit to many and not just to a few.⁹

Wisconsin could not do more. Its partner, Missouri, had definitely rejected the “Theses” because of objecting to the wording of some theses and because the exact point of controversy and the pertinent history had not been sufficiently taken into account. Buffalo could accept the “Theses.” Iowa was lukewarm because the Scripture section was too strong for its tastes. Ohio preferred to wait for an English translation. What actually did the “Chicago Theses” in, however, was Missouri’s rejection.

Less than a half century ago Wisconsin was ready to call Missouri reactionary in interchurch affairs, while Missouri no doubt assumed that Wisconsin was overly liberal in its treatment of the “Theses.” Missouri should not be blamed in the matter excessively. It had three good reasons for rejecting the “Theses”: 1) there were flaws in the wording; 2) two Ohio men at the last minute insisted on footnoting the election paragraph with some tolerance for the *intuitu fidei* approach; 3) Ohio’s Hein had been able to agree in conversion and

⁷ Schlemmer, p 34.

⁸ *Wisconsin Proceedings, 1919*, p 159.

⁹ *Wisconsin Proceedings, 1929*, pp 86–87.

election with both the Synodical Conference and also the merged Norwegian Lutheran Church that differed with the Conference on the matter.

More than anything else, that dubious “middle-of-the-road” policy of Ohio and Iowa that the ALC inherited, coupled with an almost messianic complex about a mediating role that could enlarge Lutheranism’s middle by drawing toward it the left and the right, was the factor that caused the rejection of the “Chicago Theses.” The document was not first rendered ineffectual at River Forest, June 19–28, 1929; it had been torpedoed already in Minneapolis on November 18, 1925, when Hein began to agree with the Norwegians.

Wisconsin’s reaction to the whole “Chicago Theses” venture is adequately stated by one of its representatives in the discussions, John Meyer. Reviewing T. Hanssen’s attack on the “Theses” in a book titled, *The Historical Open Question among American Lutherans*, Meyer readily admits:

The undersigned, as stated before, shares the responsibility for the formulation of the Chicago Theses, and it is not a pleasant thing to admit that they are unsatisfactory, or worse. But on rereading them after eight years since the last meeting has lapsed, I am forced in the interest of the truth to express my agreement with the above verdict of Rev. Hanssen [“Ambiguous and hazy...it is possible to read into their wording either the doctrinal conception of the Synodical Conference or the opposing conception of the ALC. And just for that reason they were and still are unacceptable to the synods of the Synodical Conference.”] The subject matter of these theses having been thoroughly discussed in several meetings of the committee and the Scripture truths having been established in the discussions, the representatives of the Synodical Conference found these very truths expressed in the proposed theses. In the light of the satisfactory oral discussions they seemed to be plain statements of the truth and entirely universal. To an outsider, who did not take part in the discussions, however, the ambiguities that nevertheless crept into the phraseology are naturally more easy to detect.¹⁰

To his classes Meyer would say, while admitting inadequacies, that it was too bad that the “Chicago Theses” could not have been used as the first step of a continuing effort to bring about God-pleasing agreement.

As was indicated previously, the most unfortunate aspect of the whole matter is that this was, so far as the human and historical eye can see, the last viable effort to enlarge the sway of the Synodical Conference position. After 1929 the efforts at merger of Lutherans on the part of Missouri just didn’t represent the conservative and confessional position of the Synodical Conference—but more on that matter in the next installment. Also, after 1929 the “so-called” middle of the American Lutheran Church and the American Lutheran Conference leaned so far left it ceased being middle and actually joined forces with the camp to its left and even succeeded in drawing the majority in the Synodical Conference in that direction.

To conclude the matter, a tribute is due the generation that on behalf of our church body labored at the “Chicago Theses” effort. Those were good days and good men. A few years back the essayist used to travel every two weeks between New Ulm and Arlington. He never passed through Winthrop and Gaylord, little among the thousands of the North Star state, without granting the commendation of a grateful thought to some dozen men who one summer afternoon back in the pre-World War I era pledged their unity in hymn and prayer but retained a consideration for the conscience’ scruples of their brethren.

One admires such grassroots concern for the larger cause. One can also admire the spirit, even if it led to a denial of free speech for synodical professors. Somehow I have become one of those professors, but I can’t disapprove of a desire of pastors to carry on a doctrinal discussion of their own without having it dominated by professors of dogmatics or other branches. In fact, I would like to think I’m playing some small part in equipping today’s students of theology to be able to play a role tomorrow in serious and significant discussions of Lutheran unity at the grassroots level without benefit of professorial domination.

¹⁰ *Wisconsin Theological Quarterly* XXXIII (July 1936), p 219.

Union Discussions in the 1930's

A return from the digression just concluded confronts one with the surprising fact that hardly had the “Chicago Theses” been buried when suddenly roles reversed. Missouri had seemingly stated its case in the *Brief Statement*, one we approved of spontaneously, if not officially. Within a few years, however, it was deeply involved in new interchurch deliberations. This time Wisconsin played down the endeavor. In fact, it never even got to the conference table.

Actually the rules of the game were undergoing serious revisions. The United Lutheran Church in a series of position papers—“Washington Declaration” of 1920, “Savannah Declaration” of 1934, and “Baltimore Declaration” of 1938—spelled out what would be its consistent position. This viewed acceptance of the Lutheran Confessions as a sufficient basis for union and called for a distinction between Scripture and the Word of God. In 1934 a ULCA invitation went out to other Lutheran churches to discuss closer relationships.

The Wisconsin reply declining that ULCA overture merits close scrutiny because it too is a clear position paper that has charted a consistent course in interchurch relations for four decades. The overture and the need for a reply was also the occasion for the first step in the establishment of a Wisconsin standing church union or doctrinal or interchurch relations committee.

When the overture arrived in January 1935 President Brenner, advised by the Conference of Presidents, judged that the reply should not be perfunctory, but in the nature of a confession. He appointed for the task of drafting the reply an Oshkosh-area committee of Kleinhans, Reim, and J. Schultz. Since novel and important steps had to be taken and since a new era in interchurch relations seemed to be underway, President Brenner asked Reim to rework and present to the synod convention an unused Northern District paper on the implications of fellowship.¹¹

Missouri incidentally was also influenced at this time to adjust to the new situation in which Lutheran union became a major theme. In his autobiography President Behnken recalls that when he assumed the Missouri presidency in 1935 that body's convention floor committee to review intersynodical and doctrinal matters was known as Committee 21. Within six years and two conventions that committee had been promoted to the third spot, outranked only by those dealing with missions and worker-training schools.¹²

The Wisconsin reply to the ULCA first of all joined in the desire for true unity among Lutheran church bodies. Then it pointed to two flaws in the ULCA view that there is no need for church bodies seeking union with one another to issue doctrinal statements “if the parties concerned accept the Lutheran Confessions.” The first problem with such a position, the Wisconsin reply said, is that “doctrinal issues may arise which did not exist and were not even foreseen at the time these Confessions came into being.” The second problem is that “confessional writings, even as Scripture itself, may meet with varying and often contrary interpretations.”¹³

Next Wisconsin pointed to “practical considerations which preclude any approach” between the two bodies and which only the ULCA could remove: its doctrinal tolerance that contradicted its “Savannah Resolutions,” its lodge practice, and its tendency to unionism.

Finally the Wisconsin reply emphasized that practice is also involved in the matter. The paragraph deserves full quotation and reads:

While some of these questions are often relegated to the realm of church practice, we hold that it is dangerous thus to segregate practice from doctrine. On the contrary, the practice of a church in such matters is the clearest manifestation of the doctrine which it holds. Tolerance here becomes synonymous with liberalism, indifference and denial. “A little leaven leaveneth the whole lump.” I Corinthians 5:6; Galatians 5:9.¹⁴

¹¹ *Wisconsin Proceedings, 1935*, p 16.

¹² J. Behnken, *This I Recall* (St. Louis 1964) p 167.

¹³ *Wisconsin Proceedings, 1935*, pp 107–108. This also locates the other quotation in the paragraph.

¹⁴ *Wisconsin Proceedings 1935*, p 108.

Since 1935 these principles have guided Wisconsin's interchurch relations. Always and again there has been insistence that for union between two church bodies to be declared there is needed a discussion and dissolution of all doctrinal differences and a confidence that practice will be in harmony with doctrine. The ULCA did not take our 1935 reply to its overture to heart. It has followed, also in its new LCA fellowship, an equally consistent policy, as Dr. Marshall's recent declaration about Missouri's difficulties indicates. Marshall stated that his LCA would regard as brothers both segments if a new body would emerge from Missouri.

In the mid 1930's Missouri and the American Lutheran Church of that era, consisting of Ohio, Iowa, and Buffalo, began the discussions that would produce the "1938 Resolutions" of Missouri. Since Wisconsin was quick to object to these "1938 Resolutions," as will be described in greater detail in the next installment, the accusation was soon raised that we should have joined the effort if we were that concerned. The accusation often led to the generalization that Wisconsin was very good at complaining about what others were doing in the interests of Lutheran union but was very slow at making any contribution of its own. How much is there to this view?

As regards the ALC-Missouri discussions of the 1930's, the simple but surprising fact is that we were never invited to participate. President Behnken in his autobiography says that he was "definitely under the impression during the 1935-1938 round of talks that such an invitation had been issued."¹⁵ When he found out otherwise and pressed for such an invitation, it was obviously too late for Wisconsin to accept.

Dr. Reu clarified the situation when he explained in an October 1941 *Kirchliche Zeitschrift* article that it had been a deliberate policy of the ALC committee not to invite Missouri's partners in the Synodical Conference to the discussions. Reu's own words were: "In addition people neglect to ask whether our church may not have had good reasons in the earlier discussions to decide not to invite Missouri's sister synod."¹⁶

Wisconsin didn't expect the invitation and understood that inviting Missouri's partners would involve the difficulty of including also the ALC's partners in the American Lutheran Conference. Wisconsin only desires to set the record straight. It doesn't like to be blamed for failing to attend church union discussions to which it was not invited and at which it was for some *persona non grata*. So much for the treatment of the interchurch discussions in the 1930's.

II. Closer to Home

In the first third of this century the major development in Wisconsin's interchurch relations with its near neighbors is the 1917-1918 development of the merged Joint Synod. This is the step that structured our church body in the form in which we now know the Wisconsin Synod. Back in 1917 and 1918 this was, however, definitely an interchurch matter.

The 1917-1918 Merger

It is not necessary to search deeply and write voluminously about causation. Basically it was a matter of the limited pooling of efforts in publication, education, and heathen missions proving so useful and successful that inevitably more cooperation would be sought. An added incentive was the general climate of the Reformation anniversary which stressed Lutheran togetherness. The unity of doctrine that existed among Wisconsin, Michigan, Minnesota, and Nebraska found further expression in a merger of these synods whereby Wisconsin divided itself into the familiar three districts and Minnesota, Michigan, and Nebraska became districts covering the old synodical areas.

Such a merger was proposed already in a 1903 overture. In 1907 the Eastern Conference of the Wisconsin Synod urged merger. The lay delegates to the general synod in 1911 expressed themselves in similar fashion. A committee was appointed in that year to explore merger possibilities. In 1913 it offered a four-point

¹⁵ Behnken, *Recall*, p 169. This is an abbreviated citation that appears in full in note 12.

¹⁶ Dr. M. Reu, *Muessen die Verhandlungen mit Missouri nun Aufhoeren?*, *Kirchliche Zeit-schrift*, LXV (October 1941), 596.

plan: creation of a merged general body; division into districts without consideration for synodical boundaries; transfer of properties to the general synod; and retention of debts by the body that incurred them.¹⁷

The only difficulties encountered in the development of the merger arose out of efforts to enlarge the project. This enlargement sought to include the component synods of the Synodical Conference along the lines of the old state-synod plan of the 1870's. Laymen of both Missouri and Wisconsin, chiefly from Milwaukee and surrounding areas, mounted a spirited effort early in 1913 to achieve such an end.

The drive lost its steam when the general synod approved the merger plan previously mentioned. There were similar efforts within the Synodical Conference, and they found some support in the Minnesota Synod. When, however, the Joint Wisconsin merger proposal moved appreciably nearer to realization, these efforts dwindled and soon disappeared.

With this diversion no longer a factor and with the last legal hurdles in the process of being surmounted, the merger was developed step by step. In 1913, as previously mentioned, the committee proposal was adopted. In 1915 a constitution based on this proposal was accepted. In 1917 this constitution became operative. In 1919 some last difficulties were cleared up and final ratification of the constitution could be achieved.

A fitting summary can be supplied by quoting the formal notification the Synodical Conference received in 1920. It reads:

The undersigned take the opportunity to give notice that the amalgamation of the Synods of Wisconsin, Minnesota, Michigan, and Nebraska into a corporate body, which for many years had been cultivated, was, in the course of time, realized and out of this it has transpired that now there exists a Joint Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Wisconsin and Other States, including within itself...eight Districts...

In the name of and at the instruction of the Joint Synod.

Most respectfully,
G.E. Bergemann, President
G. Hinnenthal, Secretary

Goodhue, Minn.
August 17, 1920.¹⁸

The post-war transition from federated to merged body seemingly created less stir within Wisconsin Synod circles than another transition taking place at the same time, the change from a German-speaking to a bilingual church body. The organizational switch proceeded smoothly. At least that was the general impression. Even formerly big Wisconsin grew used to district division and operation.

Protes'tants

The sudden emergence of a number of rather untrained administrators and the rapid development of new synodical machinery, however, did cause some ill will that needed only some immediate and specific problem to transform it into a full-fledged anti-establishment drive.

The question might be raised whether the Protes'tant Controversy has a place in a treatment of Wisconsin's interchurch relations. Those protesting were, to be sure, all of the Wisconsin Synod itself and even after severance of fellowship considered and called themselves the Protes'tant Conference, suggesting they wanted no formation of a new body but rather a house-cleaning in their old spiritual home. Such considerations almost persuade the essayist to follow synodical protocol and simply ignore this perplexing subject.

He has, however, some historical concerns and faces the actual fact that from 1927 on, if not before, there was a group outside the synodical fellowship and that there were dealings with it in the nature of interchurch relations. These relations will be treated, while the whole subject of the Protes'tant Controversy

¹⁷ *Joint Synod Proceedings, 1913*, pp 48-49.

¹⁸ *Synodical Conference Proceedings, 1920*, p 47.

origins at Watertown, Fort Atkinson, and Schofield can be viewed as an internal matter and passed over in this discussion.

Late in the year after next will occur a golden anniversary, unlikely to be celebrated with joy or by many, the fiftieth year since the beginning of the Protestant Conference. In November 1927 the special Western Wisconsin District session at Watertown ruled that subscribers to the Beitz paper would be considered as such who had broken the bond of fellowship. Those so considered began to hold meetings of their own in the following months which evolved into the Protestant Conference. At that time they issued their “Elroy Declaration” and launched their periodical *Faith-Life*. Some forty pastors and teachers were involved.

One can speak from that time on of Wisconsin’s interchurch relations with the Protestants. While the Western Wisconsin District conducted the efforts at reconciliation in the first instance, the dealings as a whole have primarily a synodical interchurch look.

The Western Wisconsin District’s review session in February 1928 was not attended by Protestants and simply approved previous actions. The Protestants, as had been the case with Beitz and his paper, were standing firm on a “take us and like us or leave us” policy. They would not discuss unless actions against them were rescinded in advance. On this question of procedure reconciliation efforts foundered. If there were substantive issues regarding obduracy or use of the Law or sanctification, they could not be threshed out in dealings or discussions. The ploy of “withdrawing documents from discussion” but not disavowing their content had not yet been developed in Synodical Conference interchurch controversies. Had it been standard procedure in the late 1920’s and early 1930’s, the Protestants would have, as honorable and sincere men, shunned it like the plague. It is true, the 1929 Wisconsin Synod resolutions speak of a “withdrawing” of the Beitz paper, but the obvious sense is that repudiation is implied in the withdrawal.¹⁹

As has just been indicated, by 1929 the Protestant matter was before the whole synod. A so-called “Big Committee” prevailed upon the convention to avoid any blanket resolutions and rather appoint two committees, one to deal with the vexing Koehler-Seminary development and the other to deal more broadly in seeking *Verstaendigung*.

In 1931 the latter committee submitted a report that could not be conclusively dealt with.²⁰ Findings of the committee in two specific cases, Pastor Zimmermann and Oconomowoc, were upheld. For want of time the rest of the report was put back in the lap of the Western Wisconsin District for consideration. It had become obvious, however, that the committee had serious doubts about the correctness of all Western Wisconsin District procedures, as well as about the usefulness of appealing to “human” documents in a controversy and about trying to settle the issue on a synodical instead of a district level.

In 1933 the special committee’s report centered especially on the 1927 Watertown resolutions and the Ft. Atkinson disciplinary action.²¹ No agreement could be reached. The “Peace Committee” was granted its request for dismissal but made a less than “peaceful” withdrawal when it insisted it could no longer approve of the action taken in the two issues mentioned. The whole matter was put back into the hands of a proposed special session of the Western Wisconsin District, which would stand by its 1927 actions.

Somewhere in the course of the frustrating dealings with the Protestants a change of tone and approach set in. *Faith-Life* columns and Protestant intransigencies wore down the drive to effect reconciliation. As an example one could refer to the marked change in Minnesota District resolutions in 1928–1930 and in 1932.²² In 1930 Minnesota resolutions seek to grapple with the issues and evaluate writings on both sides with much soul-searching and exhortation. In 1932 the action is businesslike, the tone blunt, and the emphasis on protocol.

A similar stance is revealed in 1935 synodical action.²³ A Gerda Koch appeal is denied on the basis of the committee proposal. The general president’s report of dealings with Missouri in regard to the status of suspended Protestants is simply filed. This would be the place to add that Missouri, except for some hasty and

¹⁹ *Wisconsin Proceedings, 1929*, p 35.

²⁰ *Wisconsin Proceedings, 1931*, pp 85–89.

²¹ *Wisconsin Proceedings, 1933*, pp 111–114.

²² *Minnesota District Proceedings, 1930 and 1932*, pp 32–35 and 66–73 respectively.

²³ *Wisconsin Proceedings, 1935*, pp 109–110.

ill-advised actions in the earliest years of the conflict, generally conducted itself in ways that would not increase the difficulty Wisconsin was having.

Two observations can conclude the subject at this time. A thesis was developed, among others by Carl Meyer who was one of the most knowledgeable observers of the Synodical Conference scene, that Wisconsin's regrettable troubles in the Protestant Controversy brought about in it a mood of introspection and self-examination and, along with this, a strong tendency to isolationism in interchurch affairs. A comparison of Wisconsin's intersynodical involvement before and after 1930 is drawn to prove the point.

This is an exaggeration of the effects of the conflict. True, much time and energy had to be given to the matter. True also, President Brenner and Wisconsin approved of the maxim that urges putting one's own house in order before cleaning up the whole neighborhood. But to say the internal conflict caused a Wisconsin withdrawal in the interchurch relations field is to misread into a situation of simultaneity a cause-effect relationship.

As noted previously, in the 1930's the interchurch relations involving Lutheranism in America changed drastically. To some of the changes, Wisconsin would not for conscience' sake accommodate itself. In other instances its participation was not desired. If Wisconsin developed a distaste for external ecclesiastical affairs, it was much less because of Protestants than because of what could be called the "politics of the middle." Finally, within a decade Wisconsin had to devote itself to another area of interchurch relations, the effort to keep the Synodical Conference on its foundations.

A second concluding observation is of a bibliographical nature. The literature of a conflict can have its effect in interchurch relations. The Protestants have the shelf-long collection of *Faith-Life* issues to bring to others their side of the story. Little has been published by the other side. This should not be taken as a tacit admission of guilt. It was rather a deliberate and purposeful policy. The Wisconsin Synod always hoped that the controversy could be resolved and did not want to put up any additional barriers to reunion by extensive polemical writing.

However wise and useful this policy may have been in the past, it may not be so serviceable in the present. The result has been that in other church bodies only the Protestant pleading is known. The prevailing view, espoused especially by an American Church History professor at Gettysburg, is that in rejecting the Protestants and Koehler Wisconsin turned its back on the gospel, specifically the Wauwatosa Gospel, and lost whatever respect it ever had as a church body.²⁴ We are not doing ourselves a service by letting that view go unchallenged, especially in outlying areas where our young graduates are given the task of gathering people who do not know us at first hand and have to rely on the opinions of others. Perhaps the time has come for some semblance of bibliographical balance and for printing the other side of the story.

Church and Ministry

A final item for consideration is the church-ministry discussions with Missouri that developed early in this century and were still going on when the Synodical Conference ruptured. The so-called "Cincinnati Case" was the ideal vehicle to bring the two stands into focus. There a Missouri congregation's excommunication was thrown into conflict with its subsequent suspension by Missouri officials. Wisconsin became involved when the suspended congregation and pastors sought membership in our body. In the confrontations that developed the Wauwatosa men sided with the Missouri officials, while many Wisconsinites favored admitting the congregation. In a short time there was a reversal of sorts. Koehler and August Pieper began to convince Wisconsin pastors that the local congregation and its pastors were not supreme forms of church and ministry that had a divine institution other forms lacked. Now they were opposed by the Missouri officials and teachers who came down hard for the divinely instituted supremacy of the local congregation and its pastor.

²⁴ Professor Jordahl edited and supplied the introduction to Koehler's *History of the Wisconsin Synod*. The introduction describes Protestant development on pp XXIV-XXIX.

From the start the division was not strictly according to synodical lines. Some Missourians, especially among its teachers, held the Wisconsin position. Some Wisconsin men, notable among them being Ernst, never agreed with August Pieper on the point.

This explains in part why the difference did not lead to a break and why it was still being debated when Missouri and Wisconsin split over another issue. Another reason was the assumption that the matter was more practical than doctrinal in view of the fact that Missouri's well-oiled synodical machinery and Wisconsin's individualism on the local level seemed to belie the basic synodical positions. It was hoped that discussion would clarify the situation and reveal basic doctrinal agreement.

The discussions culminated in the well-known "Thiensville Theses" of 1932.²⁵ Were they a compromise, unworthy of church bodies claiming to be confessional and standing for full doctrinal agreement? The "Thiensville Theses" represent an agreement but it is reached only by substituting the term "God's will and order" for the actually disputed point of "divine institution."

If the effort was viewed as the final word on the subject, it is open to valid criticism. On the other hand, if it was to be a first step of establishing areas of agreement before getting at the core issues, then a more favorable judgment is in place. A strong case can be made for the second alternative. It is true no immediate follow-up meetings were held but this was because attention was diverted to Missouri's involvement in ALC and ULCA discussions and not because of doctrinal indifference.

In the course of dealing with this Missouri involvement and its ramifications, the church-ministry debate was resurrected. In 1946 the Synodical Conference appointed a special "Interim Committee" which was to deal with the problem but without notable success.²⁶ It was hoped that much of the Missouri-Wisconsin problem might be solved if church-ministry agreement could be reached. Present day evaluation suggests that this hope rested mainly on an oversimplification. It is a fact that the Synodical Conference split over other issues, specifically fellowship. How much indirect effect the church-ministry difference had in the splitting process is an interesting question that at this early date perhaps cannot be adequately answered and perhaps will never be conclusively answered. The long range view may eventually suggest that the church-ministry conflict tended to add to the climate of conflict and controversy and thus may have helped in preventing the return of better weather. It will also underscore the difficulties of exercising intersynodical admonition, and for that matter intrasynodical discipline, when the church body toward whom the admonition is directed is committed to a policy of making the local congregation a necessary first step in the disciplinary process.

There will be a return to this church-ministry subject when our interchurch relations of recent years are under discussion. At this point the matter can be concluded with the encouragement to study also the complete exegetical-dogmatical treatment by Prof. Vogel which appeared in the January 1976 issue of the *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*.

²⁵ Koehler's unenthusiastic discussion of the document along with a reproduction is found in his *History*, pp 238–239. Interesting background material is found in *The Faithful Word* under "Basic Documents in the Church and Ministry Discussions," VII,1 (pp 23–31) and 2 (pp 10–21).

²⁶ Reports of this "Interim Committee" are found in *Synodical Conference Proceedings, 1948* (pp 135–144), *1950* (pp 105–106) and *1952* (pp 142–145).