

THE CONSOLIDATION OF LUTHER COLLEGE, WAHOO
AND MIDLAND COLLEGE, FREMONT, NEBRASKA
(A very brief history of LCA in Nebraska)

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Church History
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On March 23, 1962, the Omaha World Herald, carried the story of the 26th Convention of the Augustana Lutheran Church. It was in this convention that the delegates voted to consolidate Luther Junior College, Wahoo, Nebraska with Midland College, Fremont, Nebraska. It was the final step in the merger of the Augustana Synod Nebraska Conference and the synods of the United Lutheran Church which form today's Nebraska Synod of the Lutheran Church in America. In this paper I would like to briefly trace the history of the merger as I saw it ⁱⁿ periodicals dealing with the subject.

Early Nebraska Lutheran History

The only report of Lutherans working among the Indians of Nebraska, involves Missionary Krebs of the German Iowa Synod. In the early 1860's Krebs setup a mission in Deer Creek among the Cheyenne Indians. He translated Luther's catechism into the Cheyenne tongue. In 1863, he was proficient enough to preach in Cheyenne. When the Sioux, close relatives of the Cheyennes went on the warpath, the missionary was forced to leave. Therefore the real work of Lutherans parallels the story of ^{the} settlement of Nebraska. As the state changed from Indian country to the status of white settlements we see the arrival of missionaries.

1855 1855 there were less than 5,000 white settlers
1856 there were more than 10,000 white
1870 there were 122,000
1890 there were 1,580,000

The years of 1873-90 were the "Land Boom Years". They were years of expansion and with the coming of the people the need of the Lutheran Church.

Background of the ULCA Synods

The earliest pastor of the Lutheran Church in Nebraska, was Henry Welty Kuhns. In October 15, 1855, he was commissioned to be the missionary of the Alleghany Synod, in the area of Omaha. His commission read; "To be the Missionary of the Alleghany Synod at Omaha and adjacent parts, at a salary of five hundred dollars, in addition to what he might collect on the field."¹ He left Pittsburg and after 19 days of continuous riding arrived in Omaha. On horseback he served 26 places from Yankton, South Dakota on the north to Leavenworth and Lawrence, Kansas on the south and as far west as Laramie, Wyoming. He is said to have visited every known settlement in the territory. His elegance, and ability to get along with people placed him in high esteem. He became the chaplain of the Nebraska legislature from 1858-60.

He labored alone in Nebraska for 5 years and 9 months. The first Lutheran church in Nebraska was Emmanuel in Omaha now known as Kountze Memorial. Finally in 1864 he succeeded in persuading Rev. J. F. Kuhlman to assist in the work. He was followed by Rev. Aughey (1864), Rev. Eli Huber (1866) and Rev. J. G. Groenmiller (1867). These five men all missionaries of the Alleghany Synod were men who continued long enough in the field to accomplish something permanent. They are properly called the Lutheran Pioneer Preachers of Nebraska.

¹The Story of the Midwest Synod, p.6.

Significant is that all were native born Americans except Kuhlman. All five shared the views of S. S. Schmucker. "Hence in their practical ministry these men, in their great zeal to plant the church gathered so they said from all denominations to the higher glory of the church."² They limited themselves to so-called "Fundamental Doctrines". Everything peculiar to Lutheran doctrine was canceled out. They had animosity to Lutheran altars, Lutheran pulpits, Lutheran pulpit gowns and Lutheran liturgy. Dr. Ott in his history of the Kansas Synod states, "Nearly all the pastors of the Kansas and Nebraska field were in sympathy with the position of the General Synod which was inclined to reject a certain part of the Augsburg Confession." They rejected articles that made the Lutheran Church differ from the Reformed churches with which it was surrounded. This agreement lead them to desire the establishment of their own synod within the general council.

Establishment of the Nebraska Synod

The Nebraska Synod was organized chiefly due to the efforts of Rev. Kuhlman. A meeting was called in Omaha, April 27, 1871, which was attended by 5 pastors and one licentiate. A constitution was drawn-up based on the Constitution of the Wittenburg Synod, and accepted on September 1, 1871. It gave only lip service to the Augsburg Confession, and made signers free to practice the Definite Synodical Platform. In May 1875, they were accepted into

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the General Synod. The synod adopted the by-law stating, "That in all transaction and discussion of Synod, the English and German language shall have equal rights."

During the immigration years people were flooding into Nebraska. The congregations grew rapidly. To fill the need for pastors, working agreements were developed with German seminaries and the Chicago German Lutheran Seminary. The chief sources of men were the Pilgrim's Mission at St. Chrischoma, Switzerland and Breklem Seminary in Schleswig-Holstein, Germany.

Need of Own School

The synods of the growing west were keenly aware that expanding home missions of the Church could not be maintained by the established churches in the East. The synods of Illinois, Iowa, Kansas and Nebraska petitioned the General Synod to create a board of education for the purpose of establishing a western college. From this movement Midland College was opened in Atchison, Kansas, in Sept. 1887. The school was also required to provide theological training. The first year enrollment was 101.

The school from its outset was plagued by disputes in the synod. The year 1890 brought a split in the Nebraska Synod. Because of the foreign born pastors in the synod we see two systems of doctrine and practice being carried on in the synod. The English speaking pastors found a policy of building churches in towns and cities. The Germans built

in open country, with the church being within driving range of horse and buggy. The Germans were out of sympathy with some of the pietistic practice of the English speaking brethren and decided to organize their own synod.

Five areas of disagreement are as follows:

- (1) Puritanical piety, English pastors stand against smoking and drinking—they use grape juice instead of wine for L. S.—they opposed high-church formalism of Germans.
- (2) Methodistic revivalism, English pastors were using methods of reformed-unionism with non-Lutheran pastors
- (3) Lord's Supper, American pastors practice "open communion", Germans practice in line with Galesburg rule
- (4) Lodge Question, Many pastors were lodge members, Dr. Kuhns for example was charter member of Royal Omaha Lodge and Royal Arch Mason
- (5) Attitude towards confessions of the Church American pastors stood on Definite Platform, Germans accepted the Augsburg Confession and insisted on recognition of the whole "Book of Concord"

In 1890, 15 pastors withdraw from Nebraska Synod and form the German Synod of Nebraska. The Germans cultivate a relationship with the Wartburg Synod and begin to depend on Chicago German Lutheran Seminary for pastors. They still continued their membership in the General Synod and were accepted by the body in 1893.

So in Nebraska we had two synods working in the same area not agreeing with one another but still remaining in fellowship through ties with the General Synod.

In the field of education, the German Nebraska Synod had their seminary training ^{in German} moved to Midland College in 1898. With the support of the Texas Synod and the Wartburg Synod they were able to maintain it until 1909. In 1913, they reopened their seminary as Martin Lutheran Seminary in Lincoln, Nebraska.

Background of Augustana

The work of the Augustana Synod in Nebraska begins with the arrival of Rev. S. G. Larsen in 1868. He was called to take up mission work in Omaha and surrounding territories as far as settled. Larsen was an able man. He could preach in both Swedish and English. He had studied under Professor Esbjorn in Springfield, Illinois and when the seminary moved to Chicago he had went also. The mission work was approached with great vigor and with great stress on gathering Swedish conntrymen within the fold. By October of 1868, we see the first congregation being established in Omaha.

The early pulpits of the Augustana churches were filled with the in-flow of men trained at Augustana College in Paxton, Illinois. To keep up with the pastoral shortage local lay preachers were used. The actual pioneer pastors of Augustana were J. A. Benzon, L. P. Ahlquist, Nils Moré-ling and E. A. Fogelstrom.

Educational Needs

The idea of establishing a school in Nebraska among the Swedish Lutherans, antitates the organization of the Nebraska Conference of the Augustana Synod. While still tied with the Kansas Conference, the Nebraska pastors as early as 1881 conceived of the idea of a local school for teachers as well as preparation school for ministers.

From the very outset there was a definite interest in caring for the needy and unfortuate. A great deal has been done for those upon whom misfortune has befallen.

In addition to the actual school begun at Wahoo, Nebraska various institutions were set-up. Immanuel Deaconess Institute was founded by Pastor E. A. Fogelstrom in 1890. A hospital was established in Omaha (Immanuel) in 1890, an orphanage in 1901, and home for the aged (Nazareth) in 1901.

Early Confession of Augustana

The church early adopted the Galesburg Rule which had been adopted by the General Council at Galesburg in 1875. This attitude had been expressed by the Augustanians even before it was passed. To depart from this rule was considered to be in at least in some measure a denial of faith.

The pastors of the synod were strongly opposed to secret organizations and other irreligious societies. The polity was so markedly congregational that the synod continually stood dangerously near being an advisory body only. The individual congregations adopted their own constitution and defined their own position doctrinally and otherwise... "the Synod has no more power than the congregations uniting in synod confer when they accept the synodical constitution, the final decision resting in all cases with the congregation (Jacobs)"³

The members of the Nebraska Conference of Augustana by a great majority were affiliated with the Republican party. The state of Nebraska had two prohibition move-

³ Augustana Synod, 1860-1910, p. 50.

ments before the 18th amendment to the Constitution was adopted and the pastors and majority of lay people were involved. The Anti-Saloon League always had the loyal support of the Nebraska Conference, which had members on its board.

Observation

It would appear that in the early history of Lutheranism in Nebraska there were three synods of differing background that made their way into the present day Lutheran Church in America. First the Nebraska Synod which was pseudo-Lutheran in their stand on Scripture and confession. Secondly, the German Nebraska Synod which gave appearance of being conservative but retained their membership in the General Synod. And thirdly, the Nebraska Conference of Ausgustana, which presented themselves as very evangelical and had ties with General Council members. To bring about the merger of these three factions, we see a certain amount of giving and changing taking place.

In the case of the German Nebraska Synod we see a movement away from their conservative stand on the Scriptures. They had no real school that they were maintaining for the producing of church workers. As the youth in the congregations became of age they turned away from the German services. The congregations ^{themselves} were very slow in ^{until} having English services. It wasn't the 1920's that their

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Convention proceedings were kept in both German and English. The First World War also made mission work difficult for those who relied on German as a means of communication. Their pastoral supply in Germany was also cutoff by the war. The pastors of the synod grew tired of their stand on the Lodge and Unionism. They were influenced by the controversies on Open Questions and on Predestination. In these discussions they sided with the approach of the Iowa Synod, of Gottfried Fritschel.

In 1919, the German Synod was able to reach an understanding with the Nebraska Synod as far as new mission work was concern. When the representatives of the two synods met in Omaha, May 27th, they drew up an outline for future expansion, which included the agreement not to compete against one another or to go into a new field without the others knowledge.

A big influence on the growing closer of German Nebraska Synod and the Nebraska Synod was the constant degree of tolerance shown by both sides. They fought over seminary training, the Germans pulling their support out of Midland College in 1909 and starting a new seminary in Lincoln in 1913, but it never reached the point of causing^a lasting dispute. When Martin Lutheran Seminary closed in 1934 it took another 15 years before the Germans would accept Western Seminary of the Nebraska Synod as their school.

The Nebraska Synod grew more appreciative of being called Lutheran. They learned to at least tolerate and in some measure be associated with confessions of Lutheranism. In June of 1954 we see formal declaration of fellowship and unity being declared through the Constitution of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod in the Central States. The three synods merging are the ELS of Kansas and Adjacent States, The ELS of Midwest of the ULCA (Name of the German Nebraska Synod after uniting with German Synods of Kansas and other states), and the ELS of Nebraska of ULCA. Section Two of the constitution gives us the doctrinal basis.

1. This Synod receives and holds the canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as the inspired Word of God, and as the only infallible rule and standard of faith and practice according to which all doctrines and teachers are to be judged.

2. Acceptance of creeds

3. This Synod receives and holds the Unaltered Augsburg Confession as a correct exhibition of the faith and doctrine of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, founded upon the Word of God; and acknowledges all churches that sincerely hold and faithfully confess the doctrines of the U.A.C. to be entitled to the name of Evangelical Lutheran.

While the German Synod and the Nebraska Synod were settling their differences, we see within the Augustana an increased interest in cultivating relations with other Lutherans. The First World War brought the Augustanians into close association with the institutional missions of other Lutheran bodies. From these associations arose the formation of the National Lutheran Council (1919).

These ties are important as far as changing the views of those against cooperating in externals. From these early steps we see a direct progression into eventual fellowship with members of the ULCA.

- A brief outline of Augustana history
- 1925 Adoption of the Minneapolis Theses
- 1930 Membership in American Lutheran Conference
- 1935 Accepted the interpretation of the word "unionism" as submitted by other members of ALC.
- 1936 Synodical commission on morals and social problems
- 1939 Synodical stand on capital and labor
- 1940 Committee on Reference and Comity, "The committee is of the conviction that the WCC is much-needed gathering point for the Christian communions in the present dark hour of the world"
- 1946 Commission on Social Missions established
- 1948 Joined the Lutheran World Federation
- 1950 Membership in National Council of Churches

From the year 1910 to present we see a diverting of time, money and talents away from the carrying on of the true mission work (preaching the Gospel) to social concerns. The extensive mission activities of India, China and Africa are found to be in competition for funds with the social concerns. With the dissolving of the American Lutheran Conference in 1954, the Augustana Synod was then free to cultivate merger with the ULCA. They issued joint statements calling for all Lutherans to declare themselves in fellowship. In 1962, the merger bringing about the the LCA is completed.

The consolidation of Luther College and Midland College, schools only 25 miles apart became just a natural course of events in this day of rising costs of education and competition for students.

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