

# **Synods of Mission-Minded Confessional Lutherans**

*By Duane K. Tomhave*

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## **GOD'S WORD IS OUR GREAT HERITAGE TO SPREAD ITS LIGHT FROM AGE TO AGE SHALL BE OUR CHIEF ENDEAVOR**

The twofold aim of this hymn sets the tone for our presentation. We have something to treasure and to share. Various influences may swing the pendulum toward one or the other of these emphases. At the threshold of a visionary venture - a potential international fellowship of confessional Lutherans - we ask the Lord of the church to give us proper balance between our theology and our mission.

In the preface of a volume dedicated to exploring this relationship, editor David Hesselgrave observes, "Theology and mission go together. Without theology the mission of the church dissipates. Without mission the theology of the Bible stagnates. But it is one thing to believe that this is true, and quite another thing to keep the two conjoined and complementary. Pragmatism, professionalism, intellectualism and ecclesiastical and educational structures conspire to keep theologians and missiologists, and to keep sound theology and creative missiology in separate compartments."<sup>1</sup>

The ascending Lord himself ties them inseparably together when he commissioned his church: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I will be with you always, to the very end of the age." Mt. 28:18-20. Our Savior's parting words become our primary concern. The church's purpose is to gain and gather disciples and to nurture them with the powerful God-given means of Word and Sacrament.

In making this assignment, my cohort on the Program Committee directed attention to the sermon preached by C.F.W. Walther in German at the opening of the first meeting of the Synodical Conference in 1872. His text was I Tim. 4:16, "Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers," sounding the theme, **OUR COMMON TASK: THE SAVING OF SOULS.**

It was a masterpiece of work and showed how important it is that beyond all else we make the saving of souls the end and aim of our joint work in Christ's kingdom. Such an attitude keeps synods, congregations and pastors from carrying out work in a selfish manner. Just as the farmer who wants to harvest a good crop must first of all be concerned about good seed, so the church must above all be concerned about right doctrine if it would save souls. The struggle for doctrine will be a blessed one if it is based on the saving of souls. After developing thoughts such as these, Walther urges in conclusion that we want to seek souls and bring them to Christ, keep them with Christ and save them. If that was the spirit that animated the former Synodical Conference, can we in words like these find any implications and direction for a possible new federation of mission-minded confessional Lutherans? This presentation will use the word "synod," although among most churches without a European background the word is no longer in vogue.

## **SYNODS OF MISSION-MINDED CONFESSIONAL LUTHERANS**

- 1. AN EVALUATION OF THE FORMER SYNODICAL CONFERENCE**
- 2. TENSIONS INVOLVED IN FINDING A BALANCED APPROACH**
- 3. TOWARDS A NEW WORLDWIDE GATHERING**

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<sup>1</sup> David J. Hesselgrave, Editor, *Theology and Mission*, Preface (Grand Rapids, Baker, 1978).

That the Evangelical Lutheran Synodical Conference ever came into being was evidence of God's grace. The decades before and after its founding brought millions of European immigrants to America. As many as 100,000 Germans a year were included in this number. The frontier would be largely closed by 1890. Nominal and convinced Lutherans from Germany and Scandinavia joined the ranks of new citizens. The language barrier kept some together and others apart. The different backgrounds of the synods of Missouri and Wisconsin are well documented.

## **MISSOURI**

Rationalism was rampant in Germany. Most churches saw their confessional differences to be of minor importance. A number of Saxon people and pastors formed a colony and migrated to Perry County, Missouri. They formed the Missouri Synod in 1847. Their pioneer leader, Bishop Stephan, had been uncovered as a scandalous character. This threw the trusting group into shock. A young pastor named C. Walther helped to calm their consciences and led them to prize nothing more than purity of gospel doctrine. For years Missouri bore such insulting epithets from her detractors as ultra-confessional and superorthodox.

## **WISCONSIN**

Many of the pioneers eventually making up the synod of Wisconsin left Germany for less spiritual reasons. Some were gathered by charlatan preachers who were unionistic with little appreciation for confessional Lutheranism. Some even overlooked the differences with the Reformed churches as they, too, struggled against the common enemy of rationalism. Private unionistic mission societies in the homeland had become concerned about supplying their distant brothers and sisters with pastors. J. Muehlhaeuser, J. Weinmann and a candidate Wrede drifted together in Milwaukee and formed a Lutheran synod in 1850. These were the days of settlers overrunning Wisconsin. Bringing the gospel to a host of immigrants led to fervent activities which were often unionistic. Many traveling missionaries lacked theological training. Some of them regarded the rigidly orthodox Missouri Synod as a confining influence. And in 1862 the *Lutheraner*, a Missouri Synod publication, called the Wisconsin Synod "pseudo-Lutherans."

## **PRE-MEETINGS**

By 1868 the new Wisconsin Synod president, J. Bading, gave evidence of earnest zeal to meet with Missouri. Wisconsin had cut the cords of financial support with the unionistic mission societies on which she had depended. An excursion of membership in the liberal eastern group called the General Council was short-lived. Wisconsin had taken its stand and was ready to meet with Missouri over the conference table. Walther reported after the meeting in Milwaukee, "We must admit that all our suspicions against the dear Wisconsin Synod have not merely disappeared, but were also made ashamed. God be thanked for his unspeakable gift."<sup>2</sup>

The Missouri Synod was not separatistic. Wherever it noticed an interest in confessional Lutheranism, it quickly gave recognition and support. Representatives were sent to the Tennessee and Indianapolis synod meetings. Negotiations took place with the Buffalo Synod in 1856, and it regularly sent delegates to the conventions of the Norwegian Synod. Free conferences were called. Neither the General Synod nor the more conservative General Council provided a home for confessional Lutherans. It was only natural that the Missouri, Ohio, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Illinois and Norwegian synods should attempt to work toward a conference of synods. Agreements to share theological professors and reciprocal arrangements for students

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<sup>2</sup> D. Walther, *Der Lutheraner*, XXV, (1 November 1968), p. 37-38.

preceded the formal declaration. A constitution was drafted in 1871, and an essay set forth the reasons for organizing. (For backgrounds of Lutheran synods, see Appendix A.)

## FOUNDING OF THE SYNODICAL CONFERENCE

On June 10-16, 1872, in Milwaukee's St. John's Church the first convention of the Evangelical Lutheran Synodical Conference of North America was held. Walther was elected president. So began a conference association that would last for 90 years. Two essays were read at the 1872 convention, one on English mission opportunities and another on the doctrine of justification. Much more attention seemed to be given to doctrinal theology in the course of its history than to joint mission efforts. It can be assumed, however, that each founding synod also gave attention to its own internal mission enterprises.

This paper's purpose is not to recount the controversies that rocked the foundations of the conference loyalties. The Norwegian Synod bolted in 1883 partly as a result of language frustrations and partly because it wished to react to the election controversy in its own arena away from the pressures of other church affiliates. In 1917 it united with Scandinavian synods in the U.S. after which time the little Norwegian Synod (now Evangelical Lutheran Synod) rejoined the Synodical Conference. "Doctrinally, the Norwegian Synod (ELS) is the spiritual continuation of that Norwegian Synod which was organized in the year 1853. This Synod holds the Bible to be the very Word of the living God, and, as such, a Scripture which 'can not be broken.' The Lutheran Confessions presented in the Book of Concord are accepted in their entirety as the true expression of the teachings of Scripture."<sup>3</sup>

## CONFESSIONAL BASTION

The president's report to the Synodical Conference's 40<sup>th</sup> convention in 1949 could intone: "Under the fearless and courageous leadership of such consecrated men like Dr. Walther and Dr. Francis Pieper of Missouri and Dr. Adolph Hoenecke and Pastor Johannes Bading of Wisconsin and their contemporaries, Confessional Lutheranism won recognition not only in the United States but far beyond the boundaries of our own country. Their one concern was to establish and maintain a church federation that, by the grace of God, should stand solely and firmly upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets of which Christ Jesus himself is the chief cornerstone."<sup>4</sup> They took their confession to the Word of God and the symbols of the Lutheran Church seriously, yielding in no point.

Perhaps a 1955 evaluation from an outside observer might provide a different perspective. Abdel Ross Wentz wrote in his history of Lutheranism, "As its name implies, the Synodical Conference is not a merger of synods, but only an advisory body. The synods retain their full sovereignty and full control of their education, charitable and missionary work. The basis of union in the Synodical Conference is the doctrinal unity of the participating synods. They feel themselves knit together by firm ties of confession and practice. The expressed purpose of the conference is mutual assistance in the strengthening of their faith and confession.... The conference is an uncompromising foe of all forms of unionism and will not maintain fraternal relations with any who tolerate unionism or practice unionism in any form.... The conference meets biennially and busies itself primarily with the discussion of doctrinal questions."<sup>5</sup>

Is it true that doctrinal concerns are busy work? Hardly. Reliance on scripture made the voice of confessional Lutheranism authoritative and sure. Yet confessionalism for its own sake apart from mission runs a risk of becoming intellectualism. Walther's oft quoted sermon at the founding convention in 1872 tied fidelity to the Word of God together with an anxious concern for the priority of saving souls. The Synodical Conference

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<sup>3</sup> *Grace for Grace: Brief History of the Norwegian Synod*, ed. S. C. Ylvisaken (Mankato, Minnesota: Lutheran Synod Book Co., 1943), p. 210.

<sup>4</sup> *Proceeding of the Fortieth Convention*, Ev. Lutheran Synodical Conference of North America, (1949), p. 10.

<sup>5</sup> Abdel Ross Wentz, *A Basic History of Lutheranism in America* (Philadelphia: Muehlenberg Press, 1955 p. 225.

was organized to proclaim the saving Gospel of Jesus Christ. Through solid proclamation of law and gospel in its churches it carried out this aim. It also exhibited a zeal for joint mission work.

### ENGLISH MISSIONS

The setting in which history had placed this conference of churches was unique. Transplants from another country were gathering together their own kind of people. America was a frontier land; English was the official language. Germans and Scandinavian Lutherans were slow to recognize it. Professor Loy in his essay for the first convention in 1872 urged, "The Evangelical Lutheran Church unquestionably has the task of proclaiming the mighty acts of God in the English language in this country; first, because otherwise she would be disobeying the command of the Lord to preach the gospel to every creature; and secondly, because otherwise she would be neglecting her special mission in this country."<sup>6</sup>

Very little was done in reaction. It seemed a hopeless cause among those who wanted to hold on to the Muttersprache. Pressure was put on worker training schools to prepare pastors who were bilingual. Most congregations and their pastors could see no need of English preaching as long as there was not an English congregation all ready to receive it. Debates were conducted in church publications about the merits of the English District, which had developed within the confines of the Missouri Synod. It seemed that no one quite knew how to handle these young leaders who were staunch advocates of the true Lutheran faith, but in English. The Synodical Conference was encouraged to take this fledgling mission operation under its wing, but refused.

By 1911 the German Missouri Synod recognized the English Synod as a District. The English District later contributed to Missouri its hymnal, catechism, Sunday school hymnal and literature, *The Lutheran Witness* and other publications which eventually displaced the German entirely. It also maintained schools at Conover, North Carolina and Winfield, Kansas.

### HEATHEN MISSIONS

The second convention in 1873 was ready to promote mission work among the immigrant Chinese. It was a short-lived effort abandoned within two years. At the 1877 Convention of the Synodical Conference at Fort Wayne, Indiana, an overture was made by the retiring president of the Norwegian Synod, H. A. Preus, whether the time had not come to direct attention to mission work among the heathen, perhaps among the Negroes and Indians of this country. The suggestion was received with enthusiasm, and delegates were in favor of launching a mission project. Pastor J. F. Buenger of St. Louis, championed the cause of colored missions among the religiously neglected and forsaken negroes of this country. The fact that few Lutheran pastors were conversant in English was a hurdle that faced his mission committee.

An experienced pastor, J. F. Doescher, traveling missionary in Dakota Territory, was soon called and began his activities at Little Rock, Arkansas. From there he branched out through Tennessee, Georgia, Florida, Alabama, Mississippi and Louisiana, preaching wherever he had opportunity. There were over four million negroes in the United States. It was August, 1619, when the first African slaves were brought to North America. Ten years before the founding of the Synodical Conference, 1862 marked the last human cargo of slaves from Africa landing at Mobile, Alabama.

A later missionary was Norwegian Nils Bakke who, with the urging of a convert from rural Alabama, began eight mission stations in 1916. Four more were founded between 1917 and 1919. In 1920 and again in 1922 three more missions were founded. Seven were begun during 1923 and 1924, and from 1925 through 1931 eight congregations were added. Nearing its 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary, the colored mission in 1936 showed 49 pastors, 73 congregations, 8 preaching stations, 4,807 communicants and 8,943 souls. There were 1,072 voting members, 48 day schools and 75 Sunday schools. Total contributions were \$28,048. (APPENDIX B lists the station names and details in 1936 for your information.)

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<sup>6</sup> *Synodical Conference Proceedings*, (1872), p. 14.

Significant was a convention resolution from Negroes assembled at Concord, North Carolina, in 1925, suggesting the idea to carry the gospel to Africa. To show their sincerity they began to gather offerings to support such work and by 1928 had gathered more than \$3,000. The Mission Board of the Synodical Conference resolved to initiate mission work in Middle Africa. Places considered were French Equatorial Africa, Liberia, Belgian Congo and Angola. In 1930 an African Missions Committee was appointed.

## NIGERIA

Several letters from Jonathon Udo Ekong coincided with the committee's planning. He had been sent by his people, the Ibibio tribe of the Ibesikpo clan in Nigeria, to plead that the Lutheran "Church of the Pure Word" help them. He attended Immanuel Lutheran College at Greensboro, North Carolina. The great depression was casting its shadows over America. While economic difficulties caused congregations to struggle with budgets, mission-minded Lutherans of the Synodical Conference were attempting to send missionaries to Africa. At its convention in Milwaukee in 1934 it authorized the sending of a Survey Commission to visit Nigeria. Their detailed daily diary was printed serially in U.S. Lutheran publications. Missions among the Ibesikpos had been maintained for 40 years by the Qua Iboe Society of Belfast, Ireland. Thus questions were raised on the basis of scripture passages that advised against building on foundations laid by others. (Ro 15:20; II Cor. 10:16)

Repeated appeals led to action in 1936 that the Synodical Conference take over this African Mission and that the Missionary Board be augmented up to 15 members -- Missouri Synod, ten members; Wisconsin Synod three members; Norwegian Synod, one member; Slovak Synod, one member. First reports from the mission team in Nigeria were reviewed in detail. "The work in Nigeria cannot really be described at all.... Thousands of souls are already under the care of our missionaries.... The Lord has placed an open door of opportunity before us.... Our missionaries do not have to go into the bush to look for people. They come to them and ask them to go to the villages with the Word.... Over thirty churches are under their care at the present time. Some of these have a membership of several hundred, even a thousand.... Most of the churches existed before we came to Nigeria, but there was practically no Christian understanding. People were simply herded together, very superficially evangelized, and then left to shift for themselves.... The great task at the present time is to teach and instruct and thus to lead the people into scripture.... The other missions utterly failed to provide for a permanent church and made no arrangements whatever for a trained and capable ministry. When a person understands these conditions, it is not so difficult to see why the Lord in such a remarkable way led our church to Nigeria."<sup>7</sup>

Jonathon Udo Ekong graduated from Immanuel Lutheran College in June, 1938, and received a call to serve his people in Africa. A long train of mission workers served faithfully in the rigorous tropical rain forest of Nigeria. In 1941 the fifth anniversary celebration showed 7,073 baptized members, and 2,576 communicants in 45 churches. A native ministry was being trained in a seminary program. A secondary school and a founding home were opened. In 1948 the membership of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Nigeria had reached 13,295 souls and 4,682 communicants. There were 10 American and two native pastors serving 108 churches.

## MISSION PUBLICATIONS

*Die Missionstaube (The Mission Dove)* was born in 1878 when the Conference resolved to publish a missionary monthly in the interest of missions. Two years later the eight-page publication had a circulation of 13,000 at 25¢ per issue. Also in 1878 it was resolved to publish a church paper in the English language for the benefit of the colored people. It's editor pledged himself to purity of doctrine. It also appeared until 1933 when both of these tabloids were discontinued to make way for other official publications. Another non-official missive called *Missionsbriefe* was issued from St. Paul, Minnesota, by a Professor E. L. Arndt from 1911 to 1916. He enlisted officers and supporters from the Synodical Conference to send missionaries to China, since

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<sup>7</sup> *Proceeding of the Synodical Conference*, (1938), p. 114.

the Missouri Synod's Board of Foreign Missions had turned down the opportunity since it wanted to concentrate on India. Names of the chairman, Pastor C. J. Albrecht and Prof. J. Meyer of DMLC are included in the roster of active supporters. This private mission society had grown to 725 pastors and teachers that could have supported five missionaries. In 1916 it attempted to turn over its growing field to the Synodical Conference, not so much for funding, but so workers could be supplied. The matter was deferred until individual synods and districts could react. In 1917 the Missouri Synod took responsibility for the China Mission.

### **MISSION SUPPORT**

This domestic and foreign mission program was supported by the four synods composing the Synodical Conference in accord with their proportionate communicant membership. The Synodical Conference demonstrated that the voice of true Lutheran confessionalism can and must be a voice that witnesses to Christ the Savior of blood-bought souls. It was a voice that was faithful to the Lord's command to make disciples and to teach the observance of all things he commanded. At the junction of 1938 it maintained fraternal relations with the free churches of Saxony and other states in Germany, of Alsace in France, of Finland, of Poland, and with the Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Australia.

In addition the component synods maintained mission work of their own. Missouri helped to support the work of the Leipzig Missionary Society in India for years, and in 1895 began her own mission in that country. Only two of her more than 20 mission fields date back to the 1890's, India and Brazil. The rest were begun since 1936. Work among the Apache Indians of Arizona was carried out by Wisconsin since 1893, but all of her 11 world missions on other continents were started since 1936. The same was true of the other two synods of the Synodical Conference, for it was then that the joint effort in Nigeria was begun. Individuals within all these synods did become involved from time to time in overseas assignments.

### **DISSOLUTION**

An era began in 1938 which is familiar to those who lived through the turmoil and studied as history by those of more recent vintage. Unresolved differences in doctrine and practice finally led the ELS and WELS in 1963 to withdraw from the Synodical Conference. The intervening years of unrest and continued corrosion of the stalwart confessional position of the LC-MS swung the pendulum from mission toward theological concern. New missions were not on the agendas. Doctrinal issues prevailed. It was a time of tension.

In 1962 WELS contributed over \$66,000 to joint mission work. In its resolutions which parted ways with the Synodical Conference, it expressed a deep-felt responsibility for the souls which the Lord entrusted also to its care in this work. The dissolution of the conference precluded further joint mission work. Immanuel Lutheran College and Seminary of Greensboro, NC, was closed since its work could be assumed by Missouri Synod's worker training schools. The same-synod's Southern District absorbed all black congregations. Missouri also accepted full responsibility for Nigeria.

Valiant efforts had been made to keep bleak winter from descending on the once fruitful Synodical Conference. I recall a conclave of worldwide theologians taking place during my days at the WELS Mequon seminary near Thiensville in 1960. It wrestled with the doctrine of church fellowship. The Overseas Brethren, representing Australia, England, Germany and Brazil worked frantically to save the Synodical Conference and sent a delegation to the United States again in 1961.

In 1967 the Missouri Synod, previously the staunch champion of confessional Lutheranism, finally voted to discontinue the Synodical Conference declaring that it now served no useful purpose. The scope of this paper is not to delve further into the issues of that bygone era. Instead we wish to examine a related set of tensions.

## **2. TENSIONS INVOLVED IN FINDING A BALANCED APPROACH**

One of the WELS world missionaries present at the September 1988 World Mission Conference summarized the tension. “It is my opinion that evangelism work has received less emphasis in our field than it does now. Our emphasis has been on establishing a confessional church to this time. We are strong on preserving the truth, but struggling in the area of sharing the truth.”

Edgar Hoenecke, Board for World Missions Chairman of the Wisconsin Synod, was an essayist at the 1960 Conclave of Theologians assembled at Thiensville, Wisconsin. He asserted that inclusion of an essay titled *Extension of the Mission Endeavor* on the agenda of an assembly of theologians studying the doctrine of the church is very much in place. He adds that a conference of faithful Bible theologians will therefore not treat this topic as an interesting, but less important, digression from the real purpose of its gathering, but as a matter of vitally urgent, first importance... that is, they will conscientiously study “whatever I have commanded you” so that we may go out better equipped and more highly inspired to “make disciples of all nations ....”

Furthermore, he stresses that it is important that the learned leaders of the church recognize the full impact of this fact upon their deliberations. Otherwise the dispute over dogma may degenerate into the sterile activity of a debating society, and the church would merit the slur that her meticulous definition of doctrine is a mere quibbling over phrases. Reminding participants of their responsibility, he asks whether we are satisfied with a mere study, and no more? Will we shine and polish the jewels and treasure of our doctrinal hoard, remove the tarnish and blemish, and then store our wealth away in learned words and heavy tomes? Will we be like the miser who opens his treasure to gloat over his possession and then hide it from the eyes of men? His conclusion urged those having the precious heritage of sound doctrine to put it to work as a valuable trust in which others can share and rejoice.

Let it be clearly stated here that sound doctrine is not in antithesis to mission outreach. It is just as dangerous to build a mission strategy without a concern for the content of the message. Mission never takes place in a vacuum; it is always rooted in theology.

## PROCLAMATION AND NURTURE

Making disciples is the primary mission of the church. In an article by Waldo Werning, he states “The purpose of the church is to glorify God by discipling all Christians (Mt. 28:18-20, Eph. 4:11-16) and to evangelize all non-Christians (II Cor. 5:18-20).”<sup>8</sup> God has committed his mission in the world to his church, centering in the proclamation of the gospel and the right administration of the Sacraments through which the Holy Spirit continually works to bring men to faith and obedience. The mission is kept Christ-centered and true to God’s Word by effective nurture and education. The church will contend for the faith.”<sup>9</sup>

“Added to the proclamation as the primary task of the church is nurture for Christians that helps them experience the joy of God’s love, forgiveness and power, helps them discover how daily victory can be gained through the power of the Holy Spirit, how to know and experience God’s will for their lives, how to love others with God’s love, how to grow continually toward Christian maturity, how to share effectively their faith, and how they can help fulfill the Great Commission in this generation.”<sup>10</sup>

## DEFINITIONS

In an essay delivered to the 1988 ELS Convention, M. Teigen states, “New Testament Christianity possesses a missionary character. In other words, mission is not something that the Christian Church does if she can, but rather, mission is something that she does because it is her very nature to do so. If she is not

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<sup>8</sup> *Book of Concord*, Tappert, 506:14; Preface pages 12-13; 504:4-10; II Tim. 1:13; John 8:31-32 as quoted by W. Werning, *The Mission of the Lutheran Church*, Christian News Encyclopedia, p. 1327 - New Haven, MO: 1983.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

missionary, she is not Christian.”<sup>11</sup> This mission characteristic reveals itself in Lutheran churches. The term “confessional” does not designate a church disinterested in mission work. This qualifying name means something special to us who wish to emphasize that we are genuine, original Lutherans. We practice what we preach. We preach the inspired, infallible Scriptures. We attach not merely historical value, but living, essential importance to the confessions or doctrinal statements collected in the Lutheran *Book of Concord* of 1580 (Norma Normata). We need to constantly remind ourselves that fresh study of the cardinal truths of Scripture will keep “confessional” from being synonymous only with intellectual contemplation of dogmatic formulations.

A description of confessionalism is given by F. E. Mayer: “... an unqualified submission to the divine truth as it is revealed in the sacred records of Holy Scripture; acceptance of the Word of God as the absolute and final standard and rule of all Christian proclamation; the conviction that the Lutheran confessions are a full and correct witness of this divinely revealed truth; a deep concern to preserve and cultivate the true ecumenical spirit, which recognizes the spiritual unity of all Christians through faith in Christ, transcending all denominational lines, but which at the same time is conscious of the obligation to censure and to correct every doctrinal trend which threatens to undermine or destroy the unity of faith.”<sup>12</sup>

Carl Meyer in a 1956 essay, *The Synodical Conference -- The Voice of Lutheran Confessionalism*, translates a memorial from May 15, 1872, that summarized the purpose envisioned by its founders: “First of all, thank God, we are now perfectly agreed, as orthodox Lutheran synods, in aiming at holding fast both as a whole and in its several parts, the rich treasure of pure doctrine, derived from the Word of God and laid up in the Symbols of our church, as our best gift and precious jewel. It is our common purpose steadfastly and faithfully to preserve this treasure and, by the help of God, honestly to bear witness and earnestly to contend against every adulteration of it.”<sup>13</sup> He comments, “They surveyed the religious scene and found rationalism, unionism, indifferentism and enthusiasm rampant; these they must combat, as also they must oppose materialism and secularism, the spirit of worldliness, and the spread of lodgery and a disregard for Christian education. The magnitude of the task compelled them to unite. God’s grace to them in the past was for them a pledge of God’s grace in the future. Their united testimony would become a wholesome leaven in the Lutheranism of America.”<sup>14</sup> Many Lutherans of the day disagreed with this assessment, as they do today. Ultra-orthodox, theological smugness, purists and other hostile badges are still pinned on confessional Lutherans.

## OUR HERITAGE

Our church bodies have this blessed heritage of sound confessionalism. To what extent does it effect our function as a church in the world of the 1980s. Is it just something we’ve studied as historical baggage? Or is it a vibrant treasure of truth to be prized and shared? What obligation does it place upon us to our children, our church, to our community, to our country, to all creatures? Proclaiming the Gospel in its pure and undiluted form is our evangelical heritage at home, in the family of faith, at church and school, in home and world missions. A mainstream confessional church does not let the pendulum swing too far toward either mainly conserving or mainly outreach. A danger for us also exists if we make proclaiming only preaching to the gathered and nurture only education for the children. Upholding the truth for ourselves is essential; sharing with those outside the present congregation of believers is also essential.

## TENSIONS ADDRESSED

In a 1958 Synodical Conference essay Dr. Elmer Kiessling addressed *The Relation of the Church’s Doctrine to the Church’s Worldwide Task*. Rather than quoting lengthily, we will attempt a brief summary. He

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> *Current Issues in mission from a Lutheran Perspective*, Martin Teigen, *ELS Proceedings*, p. 41, (Mankato, MN: 1988)

<sup>13</sup> F. E. Mayer, *The Religious Bodies of America* (St. Louis, CPH, 1954) p. 141.

<sup>14</sup> “Memorial,” *The Lutheran Standard*, XXX (May 15, 1872), 74.



called the study of theology the contemplative mode of life. Immersion in God's Word and the confessional statements is an essential preparation for life and work in the church. What a utilitarian activist might call hairsplitting of doctrine, Kiessling calls enlargement of the mind. Echoing Walther, he warns against cherishing dogma and orthodoxy as ends in themselves, rather than means toward the end which supersedes all others, that of winning souls for Christ.

He calls the active mode of life America's specialty. Personal, congregational, missionary and charitable work can easily become only furious involvement in shallow activity. Activism or pragmatism is impatient, overoptimistic, thrives on statistics and high pressure methods. Such Christians, he adds, become hollow men who repeat the formulas and go through the motions, perhaps relying on the pure Word and doctrine that they have been taught but doing little to make it a power in their lives.

Quoting Augustine, "No man has a right to be so immersed in active life as to neglect the contemplation of God," he suggests a noble blend, the composite mode of life. He notes that the mission activity among us has grown more complex and many-sided without losing its anchorage in the Word of truth. He urges continuation of what we are doing -- laying the solid groundwork of doctrinal knowledge, working with individual souls, preparing an indigenous ministry, teaching, preaching, edifying, doing the acts of mercy, removing the tensions. He urges that we preserve the purity of the church's doctrine while performing the church's worldwide task.

### **ELS/WELS**

The 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary history of the ELS documents, "It is the doctrine rather than the historical connection, which is the great Lutheran heritage..."<sup>15</sup> The last 70 years have seen the ELS not only involved in Synodical Conference missions. G. Lillegard, present at the 1918 reorganization, was serving in China. Anena Christensen was sent to India in 1926. A missionary Tjernagel worked among Eskimos and Wisconsin Indians. C. V. Faye had served at Zululand, South Africa prior to his ELS membership. Strengthening the home base has continued, especially in the 50s and 60s. If my memory serves well, I believe recent history of ELS missions includes starts in England, Central America and Australia. This year marks the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of work in Peru, South America, through the Mision del Synodo Evangelico Luterano. The president's counsel to the ELS in 1952 was "to be on guard against the persisting temptation to give up the truth through unionistic practices or tendencies; and at the same time ... to consider that it is also our God-given mission to make use of every opportunity to publish and spread the truth of the Word, -- to use the trowel as well as the sword."<sup>16</sup>

Besides supporting those mission endeavors espoused by the former Synodical Conference, the WELS has supported work among Arizona's Apaches since 1893. At the upcoming centennial it hopes to begin work among another unreached people group in commemoration of that milestone. German refugees and church workers have and still do receive minimal assistance. Small churches in Nigeria and Cameroon, West Africa, are visited by WELS teaching teams twice a year. Since 1971 a sister church in Sweden has been building the bond of faith with our two synods. WELS began overseas work in 1953 in Central Africa, now Zambia and Malawi, and in Japan a year earlier. In 1964 Puerto Rico, after years of Hispanic work in Tucson, Az, became the stepping stone to Latin America followed by Mexico in the same year, El Paso in 1966, Colombia in 1974 and Brazil in 1985. Meanwhile in the Pacific Basin mission fields were begun in 1964 in Hong Kong, 1968 in Taiwan and in 1969 in Indonesia. A small amount of aid has been directed to contacts in India through the years. Almost 50 expatriate missionary families are sustained.

### **DIFFERENT OR THE SAME**

A foreign missionary faces new pressures. Not only the divisions of Christendom confront him on the mission field, but he is often a tiny minority in a society dominated by pagan religion. The scenario is well put

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> T. Aaberg, *A History of the ELS, 1918-1968* (Lake Mills, IA, 1968) p.4

by Harry R. Boer who writes, “On the mission field denominationalism tends to lose its urgency and even the creedal *raison de’etre* of denominationalism loses some of its cogency. The reason for this is ... in the loneliness of a foreign land, in the face of common problems and difficulties, missionaries from different ecclesiastical backgrounds tend to be drawn together.... Their supreme concern is to find openings for proclaiming the elemental realities of the Christian faith. The theological and historical backgrounds that were factors in bringing the sending churches into being are, therefore, not invested with the primary importance that is associated with them at home. But especially is the desire for Christian ... unity on the mission field understandable from the viewpoint of the younger churches. They nearly invariably constitute a very small minority in an overwhelmingly pagan environment. Confronted by a colossal mass of non-Christian religion and mores, by the power of age-old cultures, by indifference and not infrequently by hostility, they are more aware ... of the faith that unites them than the differences that divide them.... Being drawn to each other is born of a sort of Christian instinct. The divisions that exist between them, on the other hand, are often regarded as things that may have been imposed, the rightness of which may live deeply in the sending churches, but which may appear as something less than essential to the men and women who are not the product of the theological and historical factors that brought the differences into being.”<sup>17</sup>

We may assure ourselves that such is not the case among us. In 1973 Missouri Synod Pastor Waldo Werning observed, “It is astounding to hear the argument within the LC-MS about world missions that the situation is different, so standards must be lowered.” The tendency to overlook doctrinal agreement is fostered by the pressures of desirable mutual fellowship, a common mission audience and distant home country loyalty. False teachings may be tolerated for the sake of “more important” immediate goals. Add to that the availability of reformed literature on church growth and evangelism methodology that often compromises confessional Lutheran Scriptural theology. Justification and sanctification, law and gospel, may be hopelessly confused in Armenian and Calvinistic churches. Terminology, very comfortable in the mother church, may not be easily translated into the new culture and language. Symbolical books and Lutheran literature teaching and worship material may not be available in the heart language.

If anyplace there ought to be an intense interest in pure doctrine, it ought to be on the church’s front lines of gospel outreach. There is no such thing as undogmatic Christianity, nor are there any doctrines unrelated to the Gospel. Our mission and our theology are one and the same. Hear Paul, the master missionary, combining them as he speaks to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20:27-37, “For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God. Guard yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard: Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you day and night with tears. Now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified.”

“Good missiology grows out of good biblical theology; bad missiology grows out of bad, extra-biblical theology. Sound and deep theology is essential for the true growth of the church.”<sup>18</sup>

In a 1973 essay evaluating Key 73 former LC-MS, now WELS Pastor Curtis Peterson, to whom I am indebted for some pithy quotes, the author concludes, “If we fail to form our methods and strategies by our theology, our methods may indeed form our theology. Confessional Lutheran evangelistic and missiological practice is established on the bedrock of Biblical and confessional doctrine.” As we look at the world scene in our era, it is not as simple as it was in 1872. It includes more than Europeans, Lutherans, Reformed, Roman Catholic, Baptists, Methodists, Western civilization. We live in an international arena where Jesus Christ is new to many and unheard among the traditions of Buddhists/Shintoists, Hindus, Moslems and Animists, just to mention a few. To consider a “new synodical conference” will not be more of the same that once was.

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<sup>17</sup> (Report... ELS, 1952, p. 18)

<sup>18</sup> Harry R. Boer, *Pentecost and Missions* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Erdmann Publishing Co., 1961), pp. 186-187.

### 3. TOWARDS A NEW WORLDWIDE GATHERING

Already in 1962, voices within the old Synodical Conference were calling for a new International Lutheran Synodical Conference. A memorial called for sister churches worldwide to form an organization at the lead of the LC-MS. To my knowledge nothing official ever came of this overture. Instead it led into an era of confessional disintegration, although the LC-MS today does randomly sponsor worldwide regional conferences of partner churches.

In the Proceedings of the 1972 WELS convention, the report of President O. J. Naumann acknowledged the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the former Synodical Conference. He suggested, "1972 might be the year during which our Synod together with the Evangelical Lutheran Synod, the two synods who still uphold the confessional platform of the former Synodical Conference, should initiate consultations with orthodox Lutheran synods around the world aimed at the formation of a world-wide synodical conference...." The convention resolved to encourage the commission on Doctrinal Matters to arrange such a meeting as favorable conditions permit.

#### PROPOSAL FOR A NEW SYNODICAL CONFERENCE

The years just before 1986 gave rebirth to this idea among the members of WELS Commission on Inter-Church Relations. We print the entire document for review.

A number of factors have led the Commission on Inter-Church Relations to conclude that the time has come for those who continue to uphold the confessional positions in doctrine and practice of the former Synodical Conference of North America to again establish such a federation. It would, however, be international in scope. The position taken by the Evangelical Lutheran Free Church in the DDR, the isolation of the Lutheran Confessional Church (Scandinavia), and the needs of other churches that are concerned about upholding the sound confessional position of the former Synodical Conference are among these factors. The Board for World Missions of our Synod likewise has been advocating for some time the formation of such a conference which could include in its membership the more organized of the WELS mission churches. We present here some thoughts on how we conceive of such an organization, especially in regard to its purpose, confessional basis, membership and activity.

**PURPOSE:** The purpose of such a conference would be predominately confessional. It would aim to bring together churches or synods so that they might strengthen one another in their confession to Scripture and to the Lutheran Confessions and present to the world (religious and otherwise) a united confession of faith on a sound scriptural basis.

**CONFESSONAL BASIS:** The confessional basis would in essence be the same as that of the former Synodical Conference. This basis would include a clear confession to the Bible as the inspired and inerrant Word of God, to all Scripture doctrine, and to the Lutheran Confessions as a true exposition of Scripture in the doctrines therein confessed. It would call for doctrinal discipline to be practiced in accordance with this doctrinal basis.

**MEMBERSHIP:** Those synods or churches, including WELS mission churches, would be eligible for membership who are in full agreement on the confessional basis of the conference and are not involved in fellowship with churches that in any way deviate from the confessional standard of the conference. This would eliminate the problem of triangular fellowship relations that has arisen since the demise of the former Synodical Conference. It should be noted that this will also require action on the part of our own Synod terminating triangular fellowships in which we are still involved.

**ACTIVITY:** At periodic intervals representatives of the member synods would meet to consider matters of doctrine and practice. In the interest of its united doctrinal position the

conference could set up the procedure for jointly producing doctrinal statements that address those issues that have arisen and troubled the church in recent years and that are not treated specifically or adequately for our time in the Book of Concord. Examples would be a statement on Scripture, on its proper interpretation (hermeneutics), and on fellowship.

We present this proposal to the districts for their reaction with the intention of presenting it to our synodical convention in August 1987. We will also present it to the Evangelical Lutheran Synod in the hope that it will join us in implementing this proposal.

We would hope that under God's gracious blessing such a conference could be a means of drawing closer together for mutual strength and encouragement confessional Lutheran churches which are already united in doctrine and practice.

Adopted by the Commission on Inter-Church Relations, April 19, 1986.

Both the ELS and the WELS Districts reacted favorably to the proposal and three members have been appointed to represent each synod on a planning committee to report recommendations to the 1989 conventions.

Subsequently the Mission Coordinating Committee of WELS, which semi-annually brings together the executive personnel of its home and world mission boards, drew up the following resolution:

WHEREAS The Synod in convention gave approval to the CI-CR for the appointment of a committee to begin preliminary planning for a new Synodical Conference; and

WHEREAS The Synod resolution did not define the objectives of the proposed Synodical Conference; and

WHEREAS The proposal of the CI-CR emphasizes the fact that the primary purpose of the conference is envisioned as the preservation and promotion of the true confessional position of the constituent church bodies; and

WHEREAS There is a minor emphasis on an objective of the conference to strengthen constituent bodies in extending the Gospel message; therefore be it

Resolved, That the Mission Coordinating Committee encourages the CI-CR planning committee to include as a major concern and objective of the proposed new Synodical Conference the cooperation in and coordination of Gospel outreach by the constituent church bodies.

On September 7-11, 1988, over 100 persons assembled in Oconomowoc, Wisconsin, as participants in a WELS Administration Seminar Workshop. Upfront was an evaluation of the synod's purpose and objectives by Pastor Theodore Sauer, retired administrator of the WELS Board for World Missions. He directed us to ARTICLE IV of the synod's Constitution which states, "The object and purpose of the synod shall be to extend and conserve the true doctrine and practice of the Evangelical Lutheran Church." In explanation he stated, "Our mission as a church is to reach out to people everywhere with God's Word so that through its power they may be brought to faith in Jesus Christ as their Savior from sin and by that same power live a life of sanctification and be kept in faith. Essential to that mission is that we hold fast to the true doctrine and practice of God's Word." WELS also adopted six objectives in 1969. To those who might think that sharing and upholding the truth are two separate activities, Sauer explains that Objective #1 "to share the Gospel of Jesus Christ with all people," and Objective #2 "to uphold the truth of God as fully revealed in the inspired, inerrant, infallible Holy Scriptures and set forth in the Lutheran Confessions" are central and lie at the heart of our synod's mission. He added, "They are inseparably tied to one another. Neither can be said to be complete without the other."

World mission concerns led to this/assignment which might broaden our perspective at this early stage. Your essayist speaks especially on behalf of emerging world mission churches founded by WELS. There is an expressed need on the part of these daughter churches to be affiliated officially in an equal partnership with the sending church and other sister churches around the world. This is exhibited in a number of ways. Witness a few:

- Professor S. Hachibamba of Zambia teaches in Nigeria and travels to serve on seminary curriculum committee in Hong Kong, his first trip outside of Africa.
- ELS church subsidizes costs of a Mexican student at WELS El Paso Hispanic seminary.
- Representative workers from Nigeria and Cameroon in West Africa study at Zambia seminary.
- Laymen from WELS Latin American fields hold second conference in Mexico and plan next one in Puerto Rico.
- Japan church accepts doctrinal statements of faith and apply for membership as WELS sister church and has remitted gifts for Nigeria and Brazil.
- ELS missionary attends WELS Latin American Missionary Conference in South America.
- Sweden church gathers \$3,500 for WELS relief program in Malawi and has sent as much as \$10,000 in offerings for Central Africa seminary and Bible institute.
- Puerto Rico Christians regularly send periodic gifts for new work in progress, most recently \$350 for Indonesia. Other fields it has supported are: Brazil, Taiwan, Japan, Hong Kong, Apache, Cameroon, Colombia, India.
- The Lutheran Church in Central Africa has sent gifts for Nigeria.

There is currently a strong encouragement for mission fields to organize a national entity as soon as feasible. While it can be disastrous to pull out and reduce help too soon, it is equally detrimental to continue to treat young missions as dependents for decades. History teaches that isolation can also drive a fledgling church into the arms of another wooing Christian fellowship simply for the desire of belonging to a larger union. There may be some touchy areas of the world where affiliation with an agency from the West is not politically expedient. But ponder a list of:

### **POTENTIAL MEMBER CHURCHES**

Evangelical Lutheran Synod – USA  
 Mission del Synodo Evangelico Luterano – Peru  
 Lutheran Confessional Church – Sweden  
 Evangelical Lutheran Free Church -- East Germany  
 Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod – USA  
 Christ the King Lutheran Syno -- Nigeria, Africa  
 Lutheran Church of Cameroon – Africa  
 Lutheran Church of Central Africa - Malawi/Zambia  
 Lutheran Evangelical Christian Church – Japan  
 Southeast Asia Lutheran Evangelical Mission -- Hong Kong  
 Chinese Lutheran Evangelical Church – Taiwan  
 Gereja Lutheran – Indonesia  
 Confessional Evangelical Lutheran Church – Mexico  
 Christian Missioner Corps -- Puerto Rico  
 Confessional Evangelical Lutheran Church – Colombia  
 Brazil Lutheran Orthodox Church

It would be easy to think small and point out the pitfalls of including minuscule church bodies. If we were a member of one of those sister churches, we would feel differently about size. Listen to a letter dated August 16, 1988, “Puerto Rico’s four delegates to the Latin American Delegate Conference did very well. I believe all of them found ample opportunity to grow in their faith. All of them worked very hard and through several drafts of their seventeen-page paper on *The Pastor According to the Bible*. Their maturity, zeal for the truth of God’s Word is very heartwarming. It was a privilege to be with them and help guide them. Because the delegates wanted their Puerto Rican brethren to share in a spiritually uplifting experience they had, an invitation

was given to have the next conference in Puerto Rico. Realizing that many Mexican pastors and delegates cannot afford the trip, the offer was again made to help those who will need it. With God's help they feel they can come up with the possible \$3,000-\$4,000 Mexican air tickets."

## STRUCTURE

What kind of structure would serve a worldwide Federation of Lutheran Confessional Churches? How often and where would they meet? Would an inordinate amount of the cost fall to those who are blessed with the largest numbers and healthiest economies? What process would best serve to select delegates? How would joint projects be financed, supervised and coordinated? Could the larger units cooperate in a mission project towards which the smaller units could contribute? Who will initiate the founding documents and serve as a pioneer steering committee? How much sharing could be done by instant communication media instead of face-to-face meetings? Would a universal language such as English be valuable or detrimental? Can regional assemblies be an adequate vehicle for achieving its purpose? Will it be primarily a ministerium, a laity or a mix? Questions such as these and others must be faced. Only God holds answers at this stage. They will be revealed to us as our vision gradually becomes a reality.

True Lutheran churches have a message the world needs so desperately. We proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ, the doctrine of justification by faith, the consoling message of full and free forgiveness of all sin. In his introduction to the *Concordia Triglotta*, F. Bente states, "The Lutheran Church differs from all other churches in being essentially the church of the pure Word and unadulterated sacraments. Not the great number of her adherents, not her charitable and other institutions, not her beautiful customs and liturgical forms, but the precious truth confessed by her symbols in perfect agreement with the Holy Scriptures constitute the true beauty and rich treasures of our church as well as the never-failing source of her vitality and power."

In the mid-nineteenth century, our forerunners were faced with a wave of immigrants in a sparsely populated frontier. They molded a ministry and mission to meet the challenges of their time. Near the close of the twentieth century we face an international movement of tribes and nations of over five billion people on six continents of earth's green globe. God's Word is still our great heritage. To spread its light is still our chief endeavor. The Spirit's abundant wisdom will also help us to chart a course for our generation of Lutheran confessional churches. Such an international federation that makes its end and aim the saving of souls will always exhibit both a deep concern for doctrine and a world embracing love.

THE LUTHERAN WORLD ALMANAC FOR 1933



