

The Nebraska District's Long Struggle for an  
Academy Resulted from God-given Conditions

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The as of yet unnamed high-school of the Nebraska District of WELS has had a rather stormy and disappointing history until very recently. The purpose of this paper is to give a brief history of the efforts involved in getting such a high school off the ground.

The question that might be asked is why wasn't there any sort of secondary education in the district up to this time? The question is not all that difficult to answer. A short detour into the early history of district will pretty well clear up that question. Besides it gives me a chance to tell a little know<sup>n</sup> story about my home congregation.

The first WELS penetration is by way of the Ixonia exodus to Norfolk, NB. The story is well known so I will not repeat it. The second group to be served by a WELS pastor was located in Stanton, a town a dozen or so miles from Norfolk. The respective dates and pastors were Norfolk, 1881, served by M.H. Pankow, and Stanton 1883, served by H. Brandt. That would be the extent of the outreach in that part of Nebraska, excepting Hadar who was assigned Friedrich Koch in 1889. Very little has been said about the goings on in the S.E. corner of the state, which proved to be a more fertile area for mission expansion, at least in the number of congregations founded in that area.

The first congregation in the S.E. to be served by a WELS pastor was Clatonia. The congregation came into the fold under Julius Kaiser, but first the story of the founding of the congregation. The first Lutheran congregation in the Clatonia Township was one that had Iowa ties. Evidently this stripe of Lutheranism was satisfactory to the people who had first settled there.

My uncle related this incident to me th<sup>is</sup> informs us of the Iowa man's confessional standing. A few hundred yards South of this church my uncle's

great-grandparents lived in a dug-out. They were Catholic, and since they were very isolated, the nearest Catholic church about twenty miles away. His great-grandmother had not had communion for quite some time, and she desired it. It was too far to go to the nearest Catholic church, so she went across the section to the Lutheran church and asked for communion. The pastor told her that he was not supposed to give it to her, but he would anyway. As a result of this communion, the family became Lutheran. Disregarding the results we can see where this man stood. He would take a stand hardly any place.

Into the surrounding country a great immigration began in about 1875. My own great-great-grandparents moved from Ill. to Nebraska in 1877. They were not alone. It seems that there was quite an exodus from Ill. to this area at this time. Among these newcomers were a considerable number of Germans who were not satisfied with the Iowa Synod pastor. The result of this was the forming of a new congregation on April 15, 1883 by 14 men. This was the group that formed Zion, Clatonia.

Since they had formed their own congregation, they no longer had any place to worship. The details of what happened next are hazy. At least my great-aunt couldn't remember any more. At any rate, the new congregation took the Iowa faction to court in the Saline county seat, Wilber. The new faction won the rights to the church building. One would think that the matter was settled, but another hitch developed. The land that the Iowa church was built on had never been deeded to the church itself and it was owned by a member of the Iowa faction. When the new congregation tried to take possession, the owner of the land refused to give them permission to worship on his land. The new congregation found a way to get around the situation. One day they went up and loaded up the church and moved it two miles to the other side of the section. The new congregation had their

house of worship.

The question that now faced them was where to turn for a pastor. Naturally they would not lean too strongly to Iowa, and they chose not to call from Iowa. At this time they were served by a Rev. Tr. Haessler of the Missouri Synod. For some reason they did not call from Missouri either. Perhaps it was a middle of the road approach, so that they would not offend anyone in the congregation. The outcome of all this was the appeal to the Wisconsin Synod for a pastor. At this time WELS couldn't supply them with a man. As a result the call was extended to a different man.

The man that was called was Julius Kaiser. Why he was called is not clear to me. He was a member of the Wartburg Synod and had been ordained in 1883. When he arrived at Clatonia, he at first joined the General Synod, but in 1887 became a member of Wisconsin. It is strange that a man called to such a congregation would join an even more liberal synod than the one that his congregation had just left. Somewhere in the years between 1884 when he arrived and 1887 he had a change of heart. It is doubtful whether the details of this period can again be ascertained. In this rather strange, and yet wonderful story, Zion Evangelical Church of Clatonia became an eventual member of WELS.

The record indicates that Pastor Kaiser was very instrumental in gaining congregation<sup>s</sup> for the Wisconsin Synod. Almost all of the ordinations were performed by Pastor Kaiser in this period and area of Nebraska. Without a detailed study one can't say for sure just how much he actually did, but as the first pastor in the area who had traveled to Milwaukee (1887) for convention, one would have to say that he was the main source for knowledge about the Wisconsin Synod.

Slowly the new group of churches expanded, but many key opportunities were lost in this time because of the lack of manpower. Consequently the

infant fellowship was to miss out on the golden era of expansion and development in Nebraska. We had a foothold, but that was about the extent of it.

For years the congregations did not belong to Synod, but were only served by Wisconsin pastors. This pointed to the great lack of understanding and zeal for the work of the Synod as a whole. As the years rolled by the pastors realized that something had to be done, so in 1901 they moved to get into a closer relationship to the synod. To do so they had to get closer together themselves. The organizational meeting took place at Firth, NB August 29. (Up to this point they had pastoral conferences once or twice a year.) The eleven pastors present at the meeting voted to become a closer knit body.

At first they had belonged to Wisconsin Synod as congregations, later they became a conference of the Wisconsin Synod, whose visiting elder was Julius Kaiser. The 1901 meeting at Firth resulted in a set of proposals which were discussed in the next synod meeting. The small group did not know in which form they should enter as a group. Finally, even though they were just a small group, about a dozen churches, they decided that they should enter as the Nebraska Synod on an equivalent basis. The 1903 Synod meeting approved of the arrangement and the congregations in Nebraska became the Ev. Lutheran District Synod of Nebraska and Other States. In the 1917 re-organization of Synod, Nebraska maintained its district status.

The answer to the question of why there could be not high school for such a long time is answered in this short account. In 1904 the Nebraska district had 15 congregations: Norfolk, Plymouth, Hoskins, Milford, Winside, Gresham, Stanton, Firth, Clatonia, Shickley, Madar, Geneva, Garrison. Only Norfolk and Stanton had schools with called teachers. The numbers were just not large enough. It appears that no thought was given to any sort of higher education on the district level. What ever energies and resources the district had were channeled into a mission outreach. The high school was just

not a viable entity at this time. If there was any great interest in such a project before 1945 not mention of it was ever made in the proceedings.

The district made good strides forward in mission work in two areas. from 1905-1929. The one was in the central portion of Nebraska and the other was in the South central area of S.D. By 1929 the district lists 29 congregations. Garrison, Hoskins, Broken Bow, Naper, Winner, Rising City, Stanton, Ulysses, Witten, S.D., Geneva, White River, S.D., Colome S.D., Plymouth, Sioux City, Iowa, Clatonia, Burke S.D., Stanton, Colome S.D., Brewster, Firth, Hedar, Shickley, Martin S.D., Norfolk. Only Hedar, Norfolk, and Stanton had schools.

<sup>1927</sup> The Mousa Report had no effect on the district. There was no interest in a high school, at least not enough to have asked the synod for one, as the Dakota -- Montana district had. As a direct result of the Mousa report and their request NLA came into existence. Just when Nebraska might have had a chance at an early high school or academy, the depression struck, and all expansion was stopped until 1945 for all practical purposes.

The seed that the Mousa Report had planted was to suddenly spring up in Nebraska in 1945. The first official discussion to establish an academy in the Nebraska District is contained in a resolution of the District Pastoral Conference: "The motion regarding an Academy carried that the Visitors. . . be a committee to consider the advisability of an Academy. . . and report their findings to the Pastoral Conference in 1946." At this time the real efforts began.

The 1946 report of the four conference visitors reads: We. . . recommend to the Nebraska District Synod Convention the adopting of a resolution to establish an Academy in our District for the reasons her given:

1. In general to further Christian education.
2. In particular to aid in preparing students for the public work in the church as pastors and teachers.
3. Other institutions are too far away from our District which serves as a handicap to an enrollment from our District.
4. To get students from our District as future workers in our District.

5. To increase institution consciousness in our District."

This recommendation was adopted by the Pastoral Conference as a memorial to the District convention of the same year.

The District Convention adopted a memorial to the Synod "To establish an Academy within the bounds of the Nebraska District at the earliest possible opportunity for the following reasons: (The same 5 points as above)

The Synod Convention held at Watertown in 1947, although recognizing "That the establishment of the additional academies is very desirable," deferred action at that time. Among reasons given was the necessity to expand the overtaxed facilities at our two colleges and to "prevent an additional drain on our inadequate supply of Church workers." The Conference of Presidents was instructed "to make a survey as to the most desirable location of future academies."

What happened here in the first overture to the Synod was the beginning of a long string of promising developments, from which nothing was to happen. The failure to get a high school started can't be placed at any one's feet. It was just simply a set of circumstances that the Lord willed which did not let the prayerful dreams of the Nebraska District materialize for many years.

In 1949 the report of the Conference of Presidents to the Synod Convention at Milwaukee stated that the successful completion of the Synod Building Fund Collection and the building itself must be the present engage our entire attention. They, however, recommended that the: "Synod continue to study the relative need of the requested academies in Arizona, Nebraska, and the Pacific Northwest."

The matter of the new Synodical academies remained relatively static until the Nebraska District Convention of 1952. A resolution was again adopted to memorialize the Synod to establish an academy in the District.

The District President was also instructed to appoint a standing committee of four, representing all conferences. They were to gather pertinent information to promote the academy cause. (The number of the Academy Committee was later increased and continued to function until the Board of Regents was elected.)

The 1953 Synod Convention at Watertown adopted the following resolution: "The Synod establish an academy in the Nebraska District as soon as the Synod declares that monies for it are available." (This resolution came about not only as a result of the Nebraska District, but also as a result of the report of Synod's Institutional Survey Committee which stated: "1. Nebraska District be granted a maximum of \$500,000 for an academy." The Synod had taken the step of promising help, but the whole matter was to come to naught.)

The 1955 Synod Convention at Saginaw declared: "The time is evidently ripe for this much needed step in Synod's program" (NB Acad.) and adopted the following resolution: "That the Nebraska District be authorized to select and/or acquire . . . the definite site of the academy" and also to "prepare plans and specifications whenever the Board of Trustees indicates that the monies are available for such plans and specifications."

In 1956 the Nebraska District Convention voted by ballot and selected Grand Island (from various cities proposed) as the site of the Academy. The name "Nebraska Lutheran Academy" was also proposed as the official name. A memorial concerning this and other related items was submitted to the Synod. (Note Northwestern Lutheran Aug. 19, 1956): "As balloting began, ten cities were nominated. The slate was finally reduced to two, and on the sixth ballot Grand Island was selected over Norfolk by a vote of 58 to 35."

The 1957 Synod Convention at New Ulm stated the following: "The Floor Committee joins the Nebraska District in the cherished hope that the Board of Trustees may find it possible to carry out the Saginaw resolutions (re: Nebraska Lutheran Academy) with regard to the site and plans at the earliest

possible date." It further recommended: "The election of a Board of Regents," and also "That if the Synod authorize a major building fund collection, the Nebraska Academy project be included." These resolutions were adopted by the Convention. The following men were elected to the Board of Regents of the Nebraska Lutheran Academy: Pastors D. Grummert (Chairman, L. Grundenmann, H. Kruschel, Laymen: T. Jones (Secretary) L. Koenig, M. Ingebritson, A. Workentine.

In 1950 the Synod's Board of Trustees purchased 33 acres at Grand Island at the cost of \$21,000. Up to this point the Synod had gone along with the Nebraska District's hopes and plans. What happened at the next convention was a complete about face.

The Synod Convention at Saginaw in 1959 rejected the Academy Board of Regents' request to authorize construction at the cost of \$650,000 and to call the President for this institution. The basic plans had been made for the buildings and they were ready to go except for the money. Instead the Synod adopted the Floor Committee's recommendation: "That this entire matter of the Nebraska Lutheran Academy be placed into the long range program of the Synod for reevaluation." From now on the District and Synod would be singing a different tune than each other.

It is interesting that the commission that started the push for District level <sup>high schools</sup> was from Michigan, at least its leader. The move that <sup>was</sup> the beginning of the end also came from Michigan. A memorial that came from a Pastor-teacher conference recommended waiting on the Nebraska Academy. Its author was Norman Berg. The wording that is in the letter is the same that wound up in the quoted recommendation.

In 1960 the Nebraska District Convention resolved that our congregations conduct a spring Academy Sunday and also area Reformation services. The monies collected should be designated for the Academy fund.

The next development was perhaps the most disappointing of all the shutdowns. In 1962 Luther Junior College of Wahoo, Nebraska, (a complete and fully adequate school for 150 dormitory students), became available for the price of about \$500,000. It was appraised at \$950,000. A memorial from several conferences was sent to the special Synod Convention at New Ulm. It contained the request that, if the District could raise the purchase price, the Synod operate the school as its academy. This memorial was tabled until the next regular convention of the Synod.

In 1963 the memorial of 1962 regarding Luther Junior College was favorably submitted by the Floor Committee to the Synod Convention at Milwaukee. The delegates, however, rejected the recommendation by the vote of 77-64. The city of Grand Island purchased 1.6 acres of Academy property for new road construction. The Synod then owned 31.4 acres at the site. That rather close vote was to spell the end of the first push for and Academy. With the Synod rejection the District seems to have lost quite a bit of the steam that had been built up.

The 1964 Nebraska District Convention resolved to take the two yearly <sup>is</sup> serves in the interest of the Academy out of the sphere of official District action. It was then left to local preference. The total collected to this time was \$28,825.93. It was deposited with the Synod Treasurer and is available on demand. The site was no longer tax-exempt. The taxes assessed were \$1,240.78 per year. Liability and property damage had to be purchased.

While it seems that the issue had died at this time a pastor recently told me that it was still alive. He said that most of the time in the District Missions Board seemed to be spent on the Academy situation. Meanwhile the 1965 Convention resolved to place the matter of authorization and construction of Academy buildings on the agenda of the 1967 Synod Convention.

In 1967 the Advisory Committee on Education was asked to make a thorough study of the Nebraska Academy situation and make recommendations to the Synod in Convention. This committee urged that "The Synod rescind its resolutions of 1953, 1955, and 1957 regarding the Nebraska Lutheran Academy. It recommended too that the disposal of the present property in Grand Island, Nebraska be left to the discretion of the Board of Trustees. As far as the monies collected and deposited in the restricted Nebraska Lutheran Academy Fund are concerned, the Synod is encouraged to empower the Nebraska District to dispose of them to the extent that lies within its jurisdiction. In view of this recommendation the Synod voted "That the status quo with regard to Nebraska Lutheran Academy be maintained until the next convention of the Synod.

The result of all this was the throwing in of the towel by the district. They bowed to the will of the Synod, so that by 1969 this resolution was passed?

WHEREAS, The Board of Control for the proposed Nebraska Lutheran Academy has submitted recommendations,  
1. to rescind the 1955 and 1957 Synodical Resolutions pertaining to the proposed academy,  
2. to have the Board of Trustees sell its present property, and  
3. to dissolve itself; therefore, be it  
RESOLVED, a) That we gratefully accept the recommendations of the Board of Control, and be it further  
RESOLVED, b) That we retain the 1953 resolution ("that the Synod establish an academy in the Nebraska District as soon as the Synod declares that monies are available,")

While resolve b might appear to give the District some hope, such was not the case. By this action the Synod had placed the Nebraska Academy on the back burner, and turned the gas off. For all purposes the movement that had begun in 1945 was ended in 1969 when the Board of Control was dissolved.

We will pause now for some comments on what happened in these years. The most notable change was in the policy of the Synod toward any more schools outside of campuses that the Synod had carried through the depression.

sion. As we have seen the Synod was ready and willing to carry out the recommendation of the Moussa report until 1959. That was the tide water mark. The proposal was hanging, and then Synod hung it. A number of explanations can be given. Even in the early years when approval would have been possible if not likely, the Synod was engrossed in a massive building effort. The schools that we had took all the resources that the Synod had in its hands. In fact the Synod did deficit spend to some degree the way it was. To expect them to start a new venture would have been quite a dream. Yet, the Synod did seem to indicate that it would help us if we had the patience to wait. From the years 1945-59 it appeared that there was indeed hope for Synodical help, or even total support. ~~the~~ 1959 was the turning point. At this time the Synod became aware of its tremendous need for buildings despite the building that had been going on. The alarm, especially went off for DMLC. Practically everything was needed there. All the other Synod schools were still lacking many buildings. In this context the behavior of the Synod the the Academy is understandable. Even though it is understandable we have to ask whether it is wise. Maybe the men who handle the money know that we can't expect much more from our people, but I am just dumb enough to believe the opposite. If the Synod would have been willing to except more challenges, I believe that we could have met them.

Not to be forgotten is the age of the area high school. In the 1950's all over the Synod area high school sprung up. All of a sudden a great part of the Synod membership had additional responsibilities. When one part came along and asked for help in their effort, the rest was a little more grudging to give so freely. Without being present in 1959 or interviewing anyone who was there, I would hazard a guess that this played quite a part in the Synod's turnaround in policy.

We also have to look at the Nebraska District itself. The years between 1929 and 1945 had seen some growth, but the District was still one of the Synod's little sisters, as she will remain in all likelihood. Despite her size, the district did have several advantages in the early years. One was the Nebraska public school system. Nebraska had until the middle 1960's the most school districts of any state except Texas. Every little town had its high school of 25 or 30 students. Often the physical plant was not much to look at. All of this meant that the District would not have had to fight the battle of new school facilities, which the District will have to fight now in order to get students for the school.

The zeal of the pastors can't be questioned. They struggled against long odds. The zeal of the layman must be questioned. My home town of 230 people recently put through a ten-year bond issue for new water mains and paving. The bill for the work was around \$350,000. If that little town could spend that much, there is no question that the District could do it, if the will was really there.

Even though the will wasn't present in too strong a force, the need was certainly there. The District has always been one of the worst for providing men and women for the public ministry. One would think that a school would greatly aid in that direction. Even though many would attend such a school and not go on to become public workers of the church, the good leaven that its graduates would supply is hard to underestimate. When we look back we can only wish that the Lord would have permitted the District to be successful, but the Lord acts in His own good time.

Despite the seeming dead end facing the District, the Academy issue was not dead. In 1971 the Southern Delegate Conference of the Nebraska District met at Oklahoma City. They passed this resolution. "That a committee consisting of any number of men be chosen and appointed by the chair." This committee was to investigate the facilities of John C. Pershing College located in Beatrice, NB. Three pastors and two laymen were

appointed to this committee. At the District Pastoral Conference assembled at Colorado Springs, Colorado, the motion prevailed: "That the President of the District appoint a committee of twelve men, three from each Conference, to make a further study of Pershing College, Beatrice, NB, to draw up the necessary plans, to consult with Synodical Officials with regard to the over-all educational planning of the Synod, and with the permission of the pastors to present this matter to every congregation."

The committee reported back unfavorably to the District Convention in 1971. They were thanked for their work, and the committee was to continue to study other possible methods of providing Christian education on the secondary level begun by the JJ Pershing College Study Committee under the auspices of the Nebraska District Board for Parish Education.

On the last day of the sessions of the District Convention in 1974, the District passed this resolution that was brought from the floor. It had not seen and committee work as I remember, but a pastor stood up and placed the motion on the floor. It passed almost unanimously. "That we establish a standing committee on secondary education to study and bring recommendations to our conference and convention concerning the establishment of an area Lutheran high school in the Nebraska District," and also "that the committee consist of 3 pastors and 2 teachers and 3 laymen who are to be appointed by the Nebraska District President, who shall be an ex-officio member.

The committee met for the first time on November 24, 1974. This committee has labored hard at its job, and around Easter time this year purchased a high school in Waco, NB. for \$38,000. Waco is in about as good a location as is possible in the state of Nebraska, as far as the concentration of our congregations is concerned. May God grant many blessings to this endeavor that is finally close to fruition after 32 years.