

The CLC & Its Effect in Fond du Lac

Senior Church History

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Anytime a rift or a split arises in a congregation, then disillusion and hard feelings are sure to follow. Such was the case with St. Peter Lutheran Church of Fond Du Lac, Wi. when exactly twenty years ago a controversy arose in its midst over the Wisconsin Synod's continued relations with the Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod. This same controversy had rocked many congregations in our Wisconsin Synod with the result that some congregations actually terminated their membership in and fellowship with the Wisconsin Synod.

A little background information is helpful in understanding how this controversy infiltrated and affected St. Peter Lutheran Church. Starting in the late 1930's, through the 1940's and into the 1950's, the indications became increasingly evident that the Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod was departing from its previous confessional, orthodox Scriptural position, particularly with reference to the doctrine of church fellowship. During this period our own Synod made repeated efforts to alert and to admonish our brethren in the Missouri Synod regarding the course it was starting to follow.

As it gradually became apparent to more and more of our own members that these efforts were not succeeding in diverting the Missouri Synod from unionistic policies and practices, a difference of opinion arose in our own midst as to and when the Scriptures required a separation on our part from the Missouri Synod as a church body. Discussions and debates became more and more frequent on such matters as protesting fellowship, the difference in dealing with individuals and church bodies, when an individual or a church body had to be labeled as a "persistent errorist," studies

of Romans 16:17 and its exegesis, the significance of Walther's Open Theses where reference was also made regarding church bodies that were experiencing an "intrusion" of error over against such church bodies which had to be labeled as "persistent errorists."

Eventually certain individuals and congregations felt conscience-bound to label our own Synod as erroristic on the grounds that the Wisconsin Synod itself was no longer observing the Scriptural injunction of avoiding errorists, particularly in accordance with Romans 16:17. This then led to an exodus of individuals and congregations from our Synod who eventually affiliated with like-minded members of the Wisconsin Synod and the Evangelical Lutheran Synod (ELS) and later called themselves the Confessional Lutheran Church (CLC). Thus this controversy that arose in our Synod was later called the CLC controversy.

Although the Wisconsin Synod also eventually separated itself from the Missouri Synod, the CLC expressed the judgment that the Wisconsin Synod in the process had adopted an unscriptural position concerning its definition of "persistent errorists" and its handling of "persistent errorists." In subsequent years attempts were made to resolve the differences between the Wisconsin Synod and the CLC. It became increasingly apparent to some that the CLC gradually shifted from our former stress on the present participle (poiountas) and its significance in Romans 16:17 and adopted the position that anyone in a teaching position such as a pastor, teacher, a congregation, a conference, or a synod that taught a false doctrine automatically by their teaching position fell under the "causing divisions" label of Rom. 16:17 and had to be dealt with according to the "avoid" injunction of the same passage.

St. Peter Lutheran Church of Fond Du Lac, Wis. was one of many churches that wrestled with this controversy. The Rev. Gerhard Pieper had been the pastor of this congregation for over 31 years and the Rev. Waldemar Schuetze joined him as assistant pastor in 1958. Both were men of enormous talents and abilities. Both had accomplished much in their years of service to the Lord. But both gradually adopted the stand that the Wisconsin Synod was erring by continuing its relations with the Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod.

Pastor Schuetze was actually more vocal in expressing his beliefs, but Pastor Pieper held the same sentiments. Eventually they found themselves committed to a position from which they could not turn back and had no other choice than to ask St. Peter Lutheran Church to terminate its fellowship relations with the Wisconsin Synod. Indications that they were not satisfied with the way the Wisconsin Synod was dealing with the Missouri Synod are evident as far back as January 1958 when a motion was made, seconded and passed to send a letter of protest to Synod.

Pastors Pieper and Schuetze continued to voice their discontent with the Wisconsin Synod until things came to a head in January of 1960. A letter was sent out by the Church Council urging all eligible voting members to be present on Sunday, February 7th, at 1:00 P.M. for an important voters meeting in which St. Peter's status with the Wisconsin Synod would be decided. It stated:

The order of business of our annual congregational meeting of January 10th was changed by a motion from the floor. A motion was then made regarding our relations in the Wisconsin

Synod, but no action was taken on that date.
It was decided to hear the committee from
Synod before voting on this motion. 1

That set the stage for the following events and actions that took place within St. Peter Lutheran Church that resulted in a split in the congregation with both Pastors and two of its teachers terminating their duties. I shall list the events and actions in the chronological order in which they occurred.

Although there many members in the congregation who followed their pastors in their beliefs and convictions, the congregation as a whole wisely elected to hear both sides of the story and decided to hear a committee from Synod on this matter. That meeting was held and a subsequent letter from the Church Council (mentioned above) was sent out urging all voting members to be present at the meeting on Feb. 7th that would decide the fate of St. Peter - whether it would remain in the Wisconsin Synod - or whether it would terminate its fellowship with Synod.

Apparently Pastors Pieper and Schuetze were not satisfied with the letter the Church Council sent out and consequently issued a letter to every member of the congregation at their own expense. The following are excerpts from this letter:

A real crisis has developed. St. Peter's will go one way--or the other; with synod--or without it. It depends on YOU and the way the Lord directs us.

Your pastors, called by the congregation in the fear of God, are sending you this message at their personal expense, pleading with you to come to this Sunday's meeting at all costs.

As a voting member you must be ready to declare whether you wish to continue with synod in its errant course---or you will follow the course that God's Word in Rom. 16:17-18 demands to terminate fellowship

relations with synod until such time when synod, by returning to the path of righteousness and truth, again makes it possible for us to resume such relations.

You heard synod's speakers last Sunday. Now that they have spoken, has their testimony made the whole issue so clear that you can now conscientiously support their position and answer for your stand before God? "We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ." 2 Cor.5:1.

The testimony of the three leading men of synod showed that they were not in full agreement among themselves. Can a committee which is divided bring about harmony in synod's congregations? Or in St. Peter's? Only the Lord can do that through His Spirit. For this we fervently pray.

Have your pastors proclaimed the Truth of God's Word all these years, or have they twisted and distorted it? Have they brought you the comfort of the Lord in days of trial and at your sickbed, or didn't they care?

Your vote this Sunday will not only decide whether the congregation will remain with synod or not, but also whether you want your called servants to continue their ministry here. They have received a divine call from St. Peter's. The responsibility for terminating their services will have to be assumed by YOU through your vote.

Please consider also this: Synod is not ABOVE the congregation, as many seem to think. It is merely a group of churches that have agreed to "go together" to do work jointly on a larger scale too difficult for a congregation to do by itself. Among the congregations listed in our synod's Annual there have always been such which did not belong to synod, though they offer support. Synod cannot dictate to any congregation. In the Church God's Word alone rules and is supreme.²

It is clear from this letter that Pastors Pieper and Schuetze were willing to put services as ministers on the line in behalf of their convictions. It is also evident that they were placing a clear-cut either-or ultimatum before the voting members of St. Peter.

The voter's meeting was held, as was previously mentioned on Feb. 7th at 1:00 P.M. This meeting was a carry-over of the Annual meeting held on Jan. 10th. Here are portions of the minutes from that important meeting:

A portion of the minutes of the meeting of January 10th was read; "Mr. Hinn then made the motion that St. Peter Lutheran Church of Fond du Lac, Wis. by all means, continue its relations and membership in our Wisconsin Synod, and abide by its decisions in the matters of fellowship as voted upon by a large majority of the delegates at its recent convention that was held at Saginaw, Mich. in August of 1959. Motion seconded." The chairman then asked for a discussion on the motion. A discussion followed with a number of members speaking for and against the motion.

Teacher Gerhard Mueller, Pastors Waldemar Schuetze and Gerhard Pieper declared that if the vote to continue with the Wisconsin Synod was passed this would terminate their calls.

It was decided a vote "Yes" on the motion meant the congregation stays in the Wisconsin Synod and a "No" vote meant the congregation leaves the Wisconsin Synod. The ballots were then cast with all that voted registering.

The ballot committee came in and reported the result of the vote as 110 - yes, 96 - no, 6 - abstaining, 1 - void.

Pastor Pieper asked if the chairman considered the results of the ballot as valid. The chairman repeated this question to the entire assembly, there being no question raised the chairman declared that it would be considered a valid vote. Pastor Pieper then asked that he be given two weeks to remain in the parsonage to pack. Pastor Schuetze indicated his willingness to serve those who voted no.

Motion made for president and secretary to inform Rev. Pieper and Schuetze and Teacher Mueller that they may remain in homes until we are in need of same. Motion seconded and carried.³

A special meeting was held later on that same day with the Church Council, School Board and Faculty. In that meeting Pastor John

Mattek was asked to serve as vacancy Pastor. Mrs. R. Colward and Mrs. D. Waldschmidt were contacted and asked to serve as temporary teachers.

A subsequent letter was drafted and sent out to all the members of the congregation to state the position of the congregation following the vote and to ask the members whether they are still members or whether they have withdrawn. An article appeared in the Milwaukee Sentinel covering this story and explaining that it took the congregation $3\frac{1}{2}$ hours to deliberate on their decision to remain in the Wisconsin Synod. The article also explained that the congregation of Redeemer Lutheran Church in Fond du Lac had voted last fall to remain in the synod after a warning by Rev. Robert Reim, who also resigned their pastorate as a result of the vote.

Pastors Pieper and Schuetze wrote another letter following the congregational vote to remain in Synod. They sent this letter to every member in the congregation. In this letter they expressed their desire to serve all the people who held the same convictions concerning the Wisconsin Synod that they held. Here are some excerpts:

We want to assure you that we pastors are not forsaking our people in this crisis and are ready to conduct services and to minister to those who want us to be their shepherds and who are willing to uphold the Truth of God's Word with us.

Please watch for announcements in the local this week indicating when and where our services will be held.

Last Sunday the congregation declared by a vote of 110 to 96 to continue its relation with the synod, even though we and others had earnestly warned against the wrong course the synod is taking.

This vote, in the minds of those who went for synod, is to mean that Pastors Schuetze and Pieper and our teachers G. Mueller and

Miss Schmolesky are no longer to serve in church and school.

We are indeed sorry that many were more ready on the foregoing Sunday to listen to 'outsiders' than to their own called pastors, for we had warned against calling in synod men and had predicted that only greater confusion would result, as it actually has.

Sunday's vote was by secret ballot. The vote certainly does not reflect the true sentiment of our large membership since so many were absent from the meeting, and the vote was very close in so important a matter, and questions arose whether all who voted were eligible voting members.

Since, however, only about one third of the members were present and acted Sunday, and there are hundreds of others in the congregation who had no chance to express themselves at this meeting, we are sending this letter to the homes in our congregation.

In order that we may know which of the people we are henceforth to serve, we ask you to fill out the slip attached to this letter and to return it at once in an enclosed envelope. This is extremely important.⁴

They also sent along a slip with the letters and asked each member to fill out and return. On these slips of paper they had to check yes or no on whether they regarded Pastors Pieper and Schuetze as their divinely called pastors.

In their letter Pastors Pieper and Schuetze remarked that the congregation was in a state of great confusion. Actually just the opposite was true. The church council reacted quite well in contacting Pres. Oscar Siegler immediately after their voters meeting. Upon his advice they secured the services of Pastor Mattek as vacancy Pastor and they also contacted two women to serve as temporary teachers. All this information was given to each member of the congregation by the church council in a letter they sent out. Also in that letter was information stating that all classes, meetings and other affairs of the church would continue

as usual, information concerning the calling of another pastor, information regarding the spiritual needs of the members, future guest preachers and information for the bulletin. The opening paragraph explains quite well how they reacted after both pastors and two teachers resigned following the voter's meeting:

Upon the close of our meeting last Sunday afternoon, the members of the church council and the school board convened so that the business of the church might continue in a smooth and orderly fashion. The council members met with the Dist. President, the Rev. Oscar Siegler, to be informed of that which would be proper and orderly under the circumstances. The school board spoke with each faculty member to learn their sentiments after our vote. 5

An article in the Fond du Lac Commonwealth Reporter on Feb. 12, 1960 gives a capsule summary of what transpired following that dramatic voter's meeting on Feb. 7th.

Two teachers from St. Peter's school and three members from the 18-member church council and school board have indicated their dissatisfaction with the congregation's vote in regard to staying with the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod and have resigned from their duties.

But the church and school activities, for the most part, have not been affected either by resignations or by announcements from the Rev. Gerhard Pieper and the Rev. Waldemar Schuetze, who terminated their duties as pastor and assistant pastor. This came after the congregation Sunday decided to retain association with the Wisconsin Synod which, in turn, has continued affiliation with the Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod.

Not an hour has been missed at the school and not a child has been withdrawn, according to a report today from the Rev. John Mattek, vacancy pastor. Sunday services at 8, 9, and 10:30 a.m. will be held as usual at the East First Street church.

The Rev. Frederick Blume of the Wisconsin

Evangelical Theological Seminary in Thiensville will be the guest pastor this Sunday and on Feb. 21 the annual meeting of the congregation will be continued at 1 p.m., at which time the Rev. Oscar Siegler will meet with the congregation and assist in preparing to call for another pastor at the church.⁶

A number of unfortunate incidents occurred following the split at St. Peter Lutheran Church that no doubt added to the hard feelings that some people in Fond du Lac still harbor today. First of all, during the week following that Feb. 7th voter's meeting Pastors Pieper and Schuetze put an add in the Fond du Lac paper stating that St. Peter's Lutheran Church will conduct services at Roosevelt Junior High School Auditorium on the following Sunday, Feb. 14th, at 9 and 10 a.m. Even though the Feb. 7th congregational vote had been considered valid and Pastors Pieper and Schuetze had terminated their services at St. Peter's, they still acted as if they were the pastors carrying the name of the church over to a new location.

This was indeed an unfortunate incident for it caused the real St. Peter's to respond, in order to avoid confusion on the part of the people, by placing a statement in the paper saying, "There is only one corporate St. Peter's Lutheran Church in Fond du Lac. Its services, as for more than 100 years, will be held as usual. Sunday in its Church on the corner of East First and Marr Sts."

On the day of the Feb. 7th vote St. Peter congregation graciously allowed Pastors Pieper and Schuetze to remain in the parsonages until such time as they would be needed. It was a gesture of kindness on the part of the congregation, but unfortunately all the church records were kept in the parsonage. This made things difficult for the vacancy pastor, Rev. Mattek, to determine who

continued as a member of St. Peter. Pastors Pieper and Schuetze also siezed this opportunity to use the records to send their letters to every member of the congregation. This caused the church council of St. Peter to pass a motion saying that the two pastors could be asked to vacate the parsonages sometime in the future after thirty days upon ten days notice.

The letter Pastors Pieper and Schuetze sent out two days after the Feb. 7th congregational vote expressed their dissatisfaction with the outcome of the vote and with the percentage of eligible voters present. They still wished to serve those who voted to secede from Synod. Since it was hard for them to determine how many people held the same sentiments they held, they continued calling on members of St. Peter. There is one incident recorded in the minutes of a church council and school board meeting at St. Peter which told of a distressing situation that occurred when Rev. Pieper called on a member of St. Peter's at the hospital. The member was making a good recovery but after a visit of Rev. Pieper the patient was so emotionally upset that he was almost in a state of shock and needed a sedative to calm him down. A motion was made, seconded and carried by the church council to have the secretary write a letter to St. Agnes Hospital to inform the personnel there that members of St. Peter's were not to be listed on Rev. Pieper or Schuetze's card. I'm sure that Rev. Pieper didn't go to the hospital that day with the deliberate intentions of upsetting that individual, but nevertheless, it showed some of the confusion that occurred when Rev. Pieper and Schuetze carried the name of St. Peter with them, and it also shows what unfortunate things can happen when a pastor or pastors leave a congregation taking a segment of the congregation with them.

There are other incidents which took place which are not recorded in any church minutes, but which are recorded in the minds of those involved. During the weeks and months following the split at St. Peter's while Rev. Mattek served as vacancy pastor a number of unChristianlike acts of harassment occurred at the Mattek home. These acts, for the most part, occurred while Pastor Mattek was away during the evenings attending meetings at St. Peter's. Although Mrs. Mattek didn't like to dwell on the subject, she did tell of harassing and sometimes obscene phone calls she received, and of incidents that occurred outside the home like the opening and closing of garage doors and the like during the night. It is unfortunate that such things had to happen, but again it just shows what unfortunate and sometimes un Christian things can occur when a congregation suffers a split.

Pastors Pieper and Schuetze and a small segment of the people from St. Peter's left and eventually started their own church which later affiliated itself with the CLC. Although the segment of people that left St. Peter was small it did contain some wealthy and influential people. They were able to purchase land, build a church and a school in a very short time. Their congregation grew rapidly and today numbers over 1200.

St. Peter's called as their new pastor the Rev. Karl Gurgel who accepted the call and was installed in May of 1960. He is also the pastor at St. Peter's today. St. Peter's recovered from the loss it suffered following the split numerically, but it hasn't recovered entirely emotionally. The emotional scars and hard feelings are still harbored by some today. It is a subject they would rather forget than discuss.

It is indeed a sad thing when a congregation suffers a split or a division in its midst. St. Peter Lutheran Church is testimony to that fact. Considerable confusion and problems often accompany such a split. We can only pray that in the future other congregations and pastors who may consider such drastic action as a split, would reconsider and reevaluate their position on the basis of God's Word. St. Peter Lutheran Church of Fond du Lac shows how such drastic action can traumatically affect a congregation.

ENDNOTES

1. Letter from St. Peter's Church Council, Feb. 3, 1960.
2. Letter from Pastors Pieper and Schuetze, Feb. 4, 1960.
3. Minutes from Annual Meeting of St. Peter Lutheran Church (Part II), Feb. 7th, 1960.
4. Letter from Pastors Pieper and Schuetze, Feb. 9, 1960.
5. Letter from St. Peter's Church Council, Feb. 9, 1960.
6. Article, "Few Leave St. Peter's In Synod Fight," in Fond du Lac Commonwealth Reporter, Feb. 12, 1960, Vol. 34, No. 113.