

A PORTRAIT OF A FAITHFUL SHEPHERD:

Gerhard W. W. Birkholz  
Minnesota District President  
(1978-1992)

by

Brian K. Hennig

for

Senior Church History:  
Lutherans in North America

Prof. John Brenner

May 2, 1996

## PROLOGUE

I met Pastor Birkholz in 1992, during Call Day at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary in Thiensville, WI. I was a Middler at that time, and had just received my vicar assignment for the following year - St. Paul's, Litchfield, MN. I had no idea where it was or who was there. That is, until a tall man with white hair, a kind smile, and a strong voice threw his arm over my shoulders and said, "We're going to have great year!". I didn't know what to think of him at the time, but I would soon find out.

While working with Pastor Birkholz in Litchfield, I discovered what a dedicated, hard-working, faithful servant he was. He never complained about his workload, or called attention to himself. Rather he went ahead and did the best he could with what the Lord gave him at the time.

Pastor Birkholz is one of those many people whom God used to influence me in my study for the ministry. His joy in doing God's work, his humble confidence, and his faithfulness to God's Word taught me that working in the Lord's kingdom is a blessed privilege. God has blessed his Church with so many faithful workers. For fourteen years the Lord also blessed the Minnesota District through the work of its faithful shepherd, President Gerhard Birkholz. With thanks to God for such faithful workers, the following portrait is given.

### BACKGROUND

Gerhard Willard Waldemar Birkholz was brought into this world on July 7, 1927, in Marshall, Minnesota, to Rev. Edward and Hertha Birkholz. By the power of Holy Baptism, Gerhard was born again and made a dear child of God on July 31, 1927, at Christ Lutheran Church in Marshall. Five years later he moved with his parents to Redwood Falls, Minnesota, receiving Christian instruction from his father at St. John's Lutheran. His "confirmation" in the Christian faith took place there on April 6, 1941.

Mrs. Hertha Birkholz was born Hertha Kussow of Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Both of her parents died at an early age, so a teacher at Bethesda Lutheran in Milwaukee, Mr. Falk, took her into his home. Although she had no brothers or sisters, the Lord blessed her with a good Christian home at the Falk's. The Falk children were like her own brothers and sisters. She lived and worked as a housekeeper in Milwaukee until she met a young man at the Lutheran Seminary in Wauwatosa, Edward Birkholz. Although she would live the rest of her life in Minnesota, Hertha kept in contact with the Falk family and often came back to Milwaukee to see them.

Gerhard's father, Edward, was born with his identical twin brother, Ernst, in Renville, Minnesota. Until their high school years, Edward and Ernst lived and worked on a farm in Renville. Both of them attended Dr. Martin Luther High School in New Ulm, Minnesota, and went on to study for the preaching ministry at

Northwestern College in Watertown, Wisconsin, and at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary in Wauwatosa. Upon his graduation in 1912, Pastor Birkholz was called through the Mission Board of the Minnesota Synod to serve at St. John's in Darfur.

In November of 1915, Edward Birkholz was installed at Christ Lutheran Church in Marshall, Minnesota. Many eventful things took place during his ministry there. One of them was the 1918 merger of the Wisconsin, Minnesota, Michigan and Nebraska Synods into the Joint Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Wisconsin and Other States. World War One was also raging at this time, creating a bit of anti-German mentality in America. (His son, Gerhard, recalled that someone had thrown rocks through Christ Lutheran's windows because of strong anti-German sentiments.) The English language was also being used more and more so that during the Twenties, "[the Minnesota] District could be said to be a truly bilingual church body . . . Lay people could hear and read and speak the Word in the language of their choice; the pastor and teacher had to be adept in both languages" (Golden Jubilee 21). (That may answer why a young man by the name of Mr. Schwan took citizenship training from Rev. Birkholz. Mr. Schwan had come to Marshall to start an ice cream business.) America was also in the midst of a severe and enduring economic depression. Yet Christ Lutheran was able to purchase a new parsonage during Rev. Birkholz's ministry.

In 1932 Rev. Birkholz accepted the call to St. John's Lutheran Church in Redwood Falls, Minnesota. During his thirty

years of service at St. John's, the congregation enjoyed unusual growth. In fact, the congregation considered enlarging their old church building but delayed plans because of World War II. In 1948 the thoughts of enlarging the church building gave way to plans for a new church building. This dream came true when the new church building was dedicated on May 16, 1955 (Golden Jubilee 266,267).

During his years at Redwood Falls, Rev. Birkholz also served on the Dr. Martin Luther College Board of Control. In 1962 Rev. Birkholz retired, having served for fifty years in the Minnesota District.

Gerhard Birkholz came from a rather large family of four girls and two boys, most of whom studied for the public ministry. His older brother, Howard, studied for the pastoral ministry and later served as a registrar and professor on the Dr. Martin Luther College faculty. (The Lord called him home through a sudden heart-attack at the age of forty-nine.) Three of Gerhard's four sisters, Dorothy, Naomi, Gwendolyn, and Ulma, went through Dr. Martin Luther College.

Pastor Birkholz expressed fond memories of his years in Marshall and Redwood Falls, especially of his family. The Lord placed him into a loving Christian home with parents who loved God's Word and took the spiritual nurture of their children seriously. Gerhard's parents served as good role models for him. From them he learned to love the outdoors. (Pastor Birkholz has a love for flowers, trees, gardening, hunting, and fishing.)

From his father he learned to work with his members and respect their trades. (His father would take him along to help his members shock and thresh grain.) By word and example, they lovingly encouraged all their children to consider serving the Lord in the public ministry.

### EDUCATION

By the time Gerhard reached school age, his father was serving St. John's in Redwood Falls. Gerhard attended the public elementary school there, and he completed the eighth grade and his confirmation instruction in the spring of 1941.

In 1941 Gerhard enrolled in the pastor's course at Dr. Martin Luther High School (MLA) in New Ulm, Minnesota. He participated in concert choir and athletics and proved to be a good athlete on the basketball court. He enjoyed English, History, Religion and Reading, but did not have a great love for foreign languages. (He had former District and Synod President O. J. Naumann for Latin, Algebra and Geometry. They would later serve on the Conference of Presidents together.) He also developed his leadership skills by serving as class treasurer and president.

Gerhard attended classes during the height of World War II, which meant that many things were subject to rationing. Because food and gasoline were rationed, the variety of meals was limited, as was travel. (In his Junior year, Gerhard hitch-hiked to Rochester to see his mother in the <sup>h</sup>Hospital for Mother's Day.)

Football and baseball also had to be dropped from the athletic programs. Because funds were short, he worked his way through school by washing dishes, shoveling sidewalks, and mowing lawns on the New Ulm campus. He also worked at the Green Giant Plant in LeSeuer, Minnesota, during the summer.

On June 8, 1945, he graduated from DMLHS and started classes that summer at Northwestern College in Watertown, WI. (This would prevent any students from being drafted because they did not have "4-D classification.") He again showed an interest in <sup>nu</sup> *They were assigned a 4-D classification* athletics by participating in football, basketball, bowling and intramurals. He also served on the Athletic Board, sang in the male chorus, and was elected as the secretary and president of his class. He enjoyed the company of his close friends; Daniel Malchow, Carl Nommenson, and Martin Petermen; who played on the basketball team with him. (He would work closely with some of them during his district presidency.) He again spent his summers working at the Green Giant plant and doing odd-jobs for people.

On June 9, 1949, he <sup>was</sup> graduated from Northwestern College and went on to Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary in Thiensville, Wisconsin. For extra-curricular activities, Gerhard sang in the male chorus and served on the College of Cardinals (student council). He and his friends would pick apples during the fall and would work on some of the estates along Lake Michigan. He gained experience through preaching in the area and by conducting Sunday School classes at the Milwaukee County Home, which was a type of orphanage.

During the years that Pastor Birkholz attended the seminary, they had an older faculty consisting of Professors Reim, A. Shaller, Lehninger and Peters. (Prof. Shaller was killed in a tragic car/train accident during Pastor Birkholz's years at the Seminary.) The only "young" faculty member was Carl Lawrenz, who worked long and hard hours for the Seminary. (According to Pastor Birkholz, he would doze off sometimes during tests.) There was no vicar program during Gerhard's time, so he completed his studies in three years.

#### FAMILY

On May 30, 1952, Gerhard Birkholz<sup>was</sup> graduated from Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. Two years later on July 18, he was united in marriage with Gerane Alma Gutzke at St. Paul's Lutheran Church in New Ulm, Minnesota. Gerane grew up in the town of New Ulm and was a member at St. Paul's Lutheran Church. She attended Dr. Martin Luther High School, and from there went on to Dr. Martin Luther College. After her graduation from DMLC, she taught for five years at Christ Lutheran in West Salem, WI. She taught all eight grades and was the church organist.

The Lord blessed Pastor and Mrs. Birkholz with a daughter whom they named Wendy. (Wendy came on a Sunday morning, which caused a bit of excitement at the time.) She attended public elementary school and received confirmation instruction in Lake Benton, Minnesota. She<sup>was</sup> graduated from Martin Luther Academy in New Ulm, Minnesota, and attended Bethany Lutheran College in



Mankato, Minnesota, for two years. From there she spent two years pursuing a degree in criminal justice at St. Cloud State. She is now married to Mr. John Finley and is residing in Bloomington, Minnesota (just blocks away from where the Birkholz's are now living). The Lord has blessed Wendy and her husband with two daughters.

The Lord blessed the Birkholz home with peace and good health. But, more importantly, he blessed them with a home in which his Word was proclaimed and lived. Like his father, Gerhard showed a great deal of love and devotion to his family. Although Gerhard was quite busy during his ministry, he always found time for his wife and daughter. They enjoyed doing many of the things Pastor Birkholz grew up doing: gardening, traveling, and fishing. To this day they cherish one another's company.

#### AREAS OF MINISTRY

Upon his graduation from Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Pastor Birkholz was assigned to serve as Tutor at Northwestern Lutheran Academy in Mobridge, South Dakota. He <sup>seved</sup> worked there from 1952-1954. He taught a number of courses: Geometry, Biology (which he never took, so he had to do a lot of preparation), Religion memory courses, 9th grade English, and Physical Education. He coached girls and boys basketball and supervised the dormitory students. He found the work to be challenging because of all the time he spent doing preparations for class, correcting papers and tests, and supervising the students. But he always appreciated

the opportunity of working in one of the Synod's schools.

While at NLA, Gerhard served with two other tutors, D. Wietzke and M. Lutz. A small faculty of four men was serving NLA at this time: Fenske, Sievert, Schuetze, and Meyer.

Enrollment was steadily increasing while Pastor Birkholz worked at NLA. The students came from many different areas, ranging from Minnesota and the Dakotas to Nebraska and Colorado. To compensate for the increasing enrollment, the Synod began construction on a new classroom building and gymnasium. Because construction was still under way when Pastor Birkholz came, he had to conduct much of his coaching and physical education courses in rented facilities or on outside courts. (He recalled how students disliked having Phy. Ed. outdoors because of the "sandburs.") Yet he considered his experience in working with high school students invaluable. Throughout his ministry he would demonstrate an interest in young people programs.

After his second year at NLA, Pastor Birkholz was assigned to the triple parish of Christ, Morrystown; Bethlehem, Wautauga; and St. Paul's, McIntosh, South Dakota. There were about fifty souls in both Wautauga and McIntosh. The largest of the three, Morrystown (@100 souls), had a Christian Day School. Pastor Birkholz was ordained and installed by his father on August 8, 1954, and served in that area until December of 1958. (He was hoping to serve there at least five years since the pastors before him had not.)

The churches were about ten miles apart, which made it

possible for Pastor Birkholz to conduct three services a Sunday: 8:30 a.m. at Wautauga, 9:45 a.m. at McIntosh, and 11:00 a.m. at Morristown. The area was very rugged. In fact, the "gumbo" road conditions got so bad sometimes that Pastor Birkholz had difficulty visiting his members in the outlying areas. He noticed, however, that the rugged conditions never seemed to bother the people. He found them to be great "next-year-people." (e.g. If crops failed that year, they would say, "That's okay. Wait till next year.")

In 1958 Pastor Birkholz followed the Lord's call to return to Minnesota and serve the dual parish of St. John's, Lake Benton, and Immanuel, Verdi. He was installed on December 7, 1958 and served there until April of 1970.

Pastor Birkholz was the first young pastor to come to the Lake Benton congregation in many years. (The previous pastor, A. H. Birner, was rather elderly and passed away in September of 1958.) He organized a youth group in which forty out of forty-two young people attended. He thought they were "a good group of kids." Many of them were active in the church and community and were good students.

A number of significant events took place during Pastor Birkholz's ministry in Lake Benton. In 1966 the congregation in Lake Benton celebrated its 75th Anniversary. Part of the celebration included the mortgage burning of the new church building that had been built just before Pastor Birkholz came. Toward the end of his ministry in Lake Benton, the smaller

congregation in Verdi voted to disband and join with St. John's in Lake Benton.

On April 19, 1970, Pastor Birkholz began his ministry at St. Paul's Lutheran Church in Litchfield, Minnesota. He would serve in Litchfield until his retirement on March 1, 1993. While at St. Paul's, Pastor Birkholz was also asked by the Minnesota District to serve in various roles, culminating in his service as District President.

Through Pastor Birkholz's ministry, the Lord brought many blessings to the members of St. Paul's Lutheran. Many of those blessings came in the area of Christian education. At the beginning of his ministry in Litchfield, the Sunday School had been meeting in the church basement. The facilities were too small and noisy for the Sunday School whose enrollment had grown to about 100. Pastor Birkholz and the church council saw the need for better educational facilities; so at a special voter's meeting on June 8, 1975, the congregation voted to build an addition to the church. The building was to have sixteen Sunday School rooms, several offices, and a fellowship room. The new building was dedicated on August 29, 1976. (On February 21, 1988, the mortgage for both the new building and the parsonage were burned.)

Pastor Birkholz was firmly committed to Christian education. For that reason he also encouraged the starting of a Lutheran elementary school in the congregation. Although the congregation decided not to open a school in 1986, the idea continues to come

up for discussion and consideration.

Pastor continued to show an interest in youth work when he came to Litchfield. They did not have much of a youth group before he came. During his ministry there, the congregation developed a rather active youth program in the Luther League (teen group) and in the Lutheran Pioneers. Pastor also enjoyed working with the children during the annual Christmas Eve Program which he wrote and designed himself.

Because of Pastor Birkholz's extra duties as President of the Minnesota District, the congregation voted to call a vicar to assist him. In 1979, David Putz became the first vicar, with nine other young men in the years following: J. Ruege, D. Kolander, N. Burger, K. Ebert, M. Wessel, J. Balge, J. Thomford, R. Stelljes, and B. Hennig. Pastor Birkholz also worked closely with two graduate assistants, R. Rockhoff and W. Werth. Although they were all young and inexperienced, he felt that he learned right along with them. He spoke of how their work and presence made a pastor feel young. He enjoyed the challenge of working with these young men and their different gifts and personalities. In his kind and patient way, he encouraged them to develop not only their gifts but also a good rapport with the members. To this day, he keeps in contact with many of them and enjoys watching their progress.

One can see how the Lord brought many experiences into Pastor Birkholz's life that would be helpful to him in his presidency. For instance, his father served congregations in the

Minnesota District for fifty years. He also served on the DMLC Board for thirty years and as a circuit pastor. Through his father's ministry, Pastor Birkholz got to know the Minnesota District; its congregations, its people, its characteristics, and its history. He also learned what it was like to live in the parsonage.

Through his own ministry, Pastor Birkholz received a good overview of the district's work. He got to know its education system while serving on the faculty and board of Northwestern Lutheran Academy, the Martin Luther Academy board, and the District Board of Education. During his ministry he also worked on the District Stewardship and Evangelism boards, which helped him see the difficulties and blessings of mission work. While he served as a circuit pastor, he discovered the challenges of overseeing doctrine and practice. He learned about the District Praesidium's responsibilities while he served as District Secretary for two terms and as District Vice-president for three (1968-1978). All of these things, along with his years of experience in the parish, made him a likely candidate for District President. At the Thirty-first Biennial Convention of the Minnesota District, June 27, 1978, he was elected to be District President.

#### MINNESOTA DISTRICT PRESIDENT (1978-1992)

The office of District President holds a number of responsibilities, which Pastor Birkholz was honored to have. One

of those duties is stated in Article Six of the Constitution for the Districts, "The President shall represent the district . . ." (37). Pastor Birkholz enjoyed serving as the District's representative. He appreciated getting to know the congregations of his district with their different backgrounds and people. He considered it a joy to share in the many installations, dedications, and anniversaries of these congregations. Above all, he appreciated being able to help his fellow-workers in their callings.

But there were also some challenging aspects to his position. Nearly every day he would receive phone calls from different parts of the district for one problem or another. At times he felt like a "fireman." (i.e. It was like putting out fires here and there and not knowing when and where the next one would pop up.) Along with those problems came the stress of dealing with them and the many parties involved. He would often receive phone calls from other parts of the country asking him to explain his actions or decisions. For that reason, he constantly had to watch what he said or wrote so that others would not misunderstand him. (He always felt person-to-person contact was the best way to prevent misunderstanding.) Another source of pressure was time. Because he was on the road so often attending meetings, he needed to be a good steward of his time. By being a faithful steward of his time, he would faithfully serve not only the District but also his congregation and family.

But the Lord did not leave him alone in his challenging

office. Through the encouragement, advice, and prayers of his co-workers, God gave him the strength to endure the pressures of his position. He blessed him with a good support group on the District Praesidium: Gerhard Horn (1st V.P and former D.P.), David Ponath (V.P.), Warren Henrich (V.P. and Dist. Secr.), Edward Schultz (V.P.), and J.D. Liggett (Secr.). He would often seek the help and advice of the circuit pastors. Quite often they had a better feel for the needs and problems of the congregations under their supervision. (If someone sent a delegation to him to complain about their situation, he would often ask them, "Have you spoken to the circuit pastor?".) Sometimes he would call his friend and colleague, Carl Voss, who served with him on the Conference of Presidents. (He felt their districts had many things in common.)

As District President, Pastor Birkholz was supposed to be an advisory member of every board, committee, and commission of the District (Constitution and Bylaws 37). He took a particular interest in the District Mission Board (DMB). He reveals a bit of his zeal for mission work in one of his reports from the Minnesota District Newsletter:

Oh, that our hearts might also burn with zeal to serve our risen Lord. The Lord; who created us, redeemed us, and preserves us; now asks us to spread the message of the mercy and love in Christ . . . What a pleasure! What an opportunity! What a responsibility to communicate the most wonderful information that can be told. May the joyous, triumphant message of Easter fill the hearts of all Minnesota District pastors, teachers and lay people with zeal to go and tell anew the saving message of Gospel of our living Lord Jesus (vol. 1, no. 1, pg. 1).



The Mission Board met once a month at various mission congregations in the district. (They did this both to get to know the congregation and to show their support.) They would also go out and examine possible new sites for building.

During Pastor Birkholz's presidency, a task force had been assigned to study the home mission division: "for the purpose of offering suggestions and improvements of its administration" (1988 Proceedings (DMB Report) 29). The task force proposed a program of evaluation of all home missions. An evaluation tool was developed and implemented by the DMB to identify strengths and weaknesses of mission congregations. The Board would find it helpful in giving encouragement and guidance to these congregations.

The DMB faced a number of challenges while Pastor Birkholz was president. They struggled with the question of what to do with missions that were taking in a lot of Synod support but showing no growth. Many of those missions were in Iowa and Missouri, which had strong ELCA and LCMS influence. They had to deal with a few congregations that were reluctant to do any sort of mission work. (Many of them were discontent<sup>ed</sup> LCMS people who didn't like new people coming into their congregation.) The Mission Board implemented the "evaluation tool" to help these congregations. It also designated a "contact man" for each mission, who would give monthly reports on those missions.

The Mission Board and Pastor Birkholz also had to deal with what was already then a synod-wide problem - lack of funds.

Synod Mission Offerings (SMO's) were not meeting the needs of the Synod. America was in an economic recession, causing high inflation and less giving. This lack of funds would keep the Mission Board from opening new mission fields. The 1982 DMB report shows how this problem spilled over into the Church Extension Fund:

The number of mission openings has decreased sharply not for lack of opportunities but because the Church Extension Fund dollars, inflated like all our dollars, just don't accomplish as much anymore. The Board for Home Missions is reluctant to open a new mission unless projected CEF cash flow gives reasonable assurance of being able to provide a permanent initial worship unit within five years of granting mission status. Gifts and loans to the CEF are urgently needed (1982 Proceedings 67).

The report also states that there was a need for a full-time campus pastor in Minneapolis area, but plans for this position were put on hold because of lack of funds (66).

The lack of SMO's hurt not only Home Missions but also World Missions and Worker Training. Pastor Birkholz addresses<sup>d</sup> this problem in his 1982 "President's Report to the District":

God wants us to make use of the talents which in grace he has given us. He presents to us the opportunity, the responsibility, and the privilege to use those talents . . . You will be listening to the reports of the needs in the world and home mission fields and to their requests to share the Gospel. You will hear what needs to be done to maintain our seminary, colleges, and academies . . . You will realize how inflation, the recession and the economic situation have effected the work of the Church. You will become very aware of the need for the continued and increased financial support of every member . . . (1982 Proceedings 30).

Because of this problem, Pastor Birkholz worked hard to encourage better giving to Missions. He would take the time at

whatever event (leadership seminars, conventions, conferences, etc.) to address the needs of the Synod and to encourage giving to missions. [His goal was to have Minnesota at the top of the "Big Five" Districts (MN, MI, the 3 in WI) in average giving per member, a goal which was met.] He tried to increase mission awareness by inviting missionaries into the district to speak. And in 1986, Minnesota became the "pilot district" of a new stewardship program of which Pastor Birkholz speaks in his "Report to the District":

Our district was selected by the newly establish Commission on Communication and Financial Support (CCFS) to serve as a "pilot district" in setting up the structure of Lay Communicators and Contact Men. With your excellent cooperation and the leadership of our District Stewardship Board, . . . this work was accomplished and then used as an example throughout the other Districts (1986 Proceedings 54f).

The CCFS would insure better communication between the Synod headquarters and the local congregations. It would make the needs of the Synod better known, and would also show how SMO's were being used. As the CCFS report states in the 1986

Proceedings:

The District President now has two arms, one arm being circuit pastors to assist him in the area of doctrine and practice, the second arm being that of CCFS to assist him with his constant duty of raising the synodical budget (89).

If a District President has a synodical institution within his jurisdiction, he is to serve as an advisory member of its governing board (Constitution and Bylaws 37). With Dr. Martin Luther College in New Ulm, MN, Pastor Birkholz had the opportunity to serve on its board for fourteen years.

President Birkholz and the Board of control had to wrestle with a number of issues involving DMLC. The plan to move MLA to Prairie du Chien was being debated at the beginning of his presidency. Because of increasing enrollment at the College, the campus became overcrowded. Plans had been made to build another dormitory and a cafeteria on some newly purchased property. Others offered the idea of moving MLA to a completely new location. Some argued that Prairie du Chien was not centrally located and would cost too much to maintain. Others argued that MLA was being used as an area Lutheran High School, and was not producing enough students for worker training. But in 1979, <sup>s</sup>Synod took action and moved MLA to Prairie du Chien. For the first time in 95 years, the College was the sole occupant of the campus in New Ulm.

Another issue involved the question of accreditation. In 1963 the college faculty had completed a self-study toward accreditation with the University of Minnesota. Accreditation was granted, but not without debate. Some were very concerned that our <sup>s</sup>Synod was heading in the path of secularism (seeking recognition from the world). They feared that seeking accreditation with a secular institution might cause a compromise in Christian principles. Others felt that it would increase the quality of education in our institutions. The matter was resolved when a guideline was laid down in 1962 which encouraged the pursuit of academic excellence but not at the expense of Christian principles. It turned out that the University demanded

no compromise of principle, and that accreditation promoted a better quality of education (1984 Proceedings 70). But the issue came up for debate again in the 1980's as DMLC considered state certification for its students.

President Birkholz and the Board also had to handle the question concerning synod membership. One of the faculty members was born and raised in the ELS and wished to retain his membership there. The DMLC administration permitted it because it had been allowed for others in the past. This created a difficult situation because the instructor was not a member of the WELS and, therefore, not under the supervision of the Conference of Presidents. The matter was resolved when the faculty member sought WELS membership.

Throughout his presidency, Pastor Birkholz showed a great deal of support for worker training. His 1984 "Report to the District" demonstrates this support:

Our Synod's objective is to share the Gospel of Jesus Christ with all people. In order to do so, we must also fulfill another objective, namely, to provide a teaching and preaching ministry qualified to proclaim the Word of God faithfully, effectively, and universally, in accord with the Lutheran Confessions . . . How dependent we are upon DMLC and WLS to train our church workers thoroughly in the Scriptures . . . [The need for DMLC and WLS] emphasizes the importance of our joining together as congregations into a Synod to be able to provide such worker training facilities and faculties to prepare these workers for the Church. It should remind us of the need to encourage our youth to enroll at our Synod schools to be prepared to serve the Lord in sharing the Gospel . . . (1984 Proceedings 30f).

Pastor Birkholz also did much to encourage the young men and women who <sup>had</sup> just <sup>o</sup> came out of DMLC and WLS to serve in the public

ministry. He counseled and encouraged many capable pastors to stay in the ministry. (He found they often became overwhelmed during the Holiday Season and then sank into depression afterward.) The following quote from a district newsletter demonstrates his care and concern for called workers:

We [are] reminded that Holy Spirit still uses people as his instruments today. We may never be polished evangelists, but the power to bring people to faith lies in the Gospel and not in the polish with which we present it . . . May the Holy Spirit who placed these graduates into the pulpits and classrooms of our District and throughout the WELS, grant them his power to be his witnesses (vol. 1, no. 2, pg. 1).

Part of President Birkholz's duties included his overseeing every ordination, installation, transfer, and vacancy within his district (Constitution and Bylaws 38). This occupied a good portion of his time since there could be up to 25 vacancies a year. He took this duty seriously, and right away made improvements in procedure. Previously, the District Presidents had been putting only three names on call lists. He wanted to give more names to choose from, so he put up to twelve names on a list. (Later on he would cut it to seven.) He also allowed <sup>the congregations</sup> them to add names as long as they sought his approval first. He felt this gave the members a greater sense of involvement in the calling procedure.

He had to handle a few problems involving the calling process. Over the years he saw that people had lost a clear understanding of the call. Some people wanted the calling process to be a job interview in which they could evaluate a candidate. In other situations he had to deal with low salaries

and a general lack of love and respect for called workers. In either case he clearly explained the doctrine of the call to them and showed the advantages of their Synod's calling system.

Every district is to supervise its members in matters of doctrine and practice. President Birkholz was to oversee this important responsibility (Constitution and Bylaws 38f). In his very first "Report to the District", he demonstrates his commitment to teaching the Word in its truth and purity:

The future of the Church rests on the sound Scriptural training of its workers and also their going out into all the world to proclaim this faithful Word. As Paul directed Titus [to hold fast to the faithful Word], we direct these workers, and they then direct their hearers to hold fast to the faithful Word . . . As lay-people, teachers and pastors we are then to hold fast this precious Word that error in doctrine or practice do not deprive us of this faithful Word. With new zeal let our gratitude for the faithful Word be shown forth in our desire to share and spread the truth of the Gospel to the ends of the earth that in Jesus Christ they too might be saved (1980 Proceedings 24).

Pastor Birkholz and the District Praesidium faced many challenges in the area of doctrine and practice. One of them involved the remnant of LCMS pastors who came into the WELS shortly after the Wisconsin broke fellowship with Missouri. Before this the Synod did not have a very thorough colloquy procedure for pastors who wanted to come into the WELS. Previous District Presidents had been a little too lenient in letting in certain pastors from the LCMS; some of them had left LCMS with severe financial problems, others were legalistic in practice, and many were not even in agreement with the WELS in doctrine and practice. Eventually this <sup>led</sup> to a better colloquy program in

which the individual had to attend the Seminary for a semester. He would also meet regularly with the Seminary president, Synod Vice-President, and the President of the District to which he would apply for membership. With this procedure they could find out about the person's background and discover where he stood doctrinally.

Pastor Birkholz also worked in the aftermath of the CLC's break with the WELS. Because the WELS did not break fellowship with the LCMS soon enough, a number of pastors in the New Ulm area left the synod taking large portions of their congregations with them, namely; Nolting at Sleepy Eye, Reim at New Ulm, Schaller at Nicollet, R. Reim at Mankato, and two other pastors in Red Wing and Sanborn. This created a lot of unrest during District President Lenz's years. By the time President Birkholz came, the situation had settled down. But the scars remained and hurt the Minnesota District because families, relationships, and communities were divided by it. The CLC members were still very bitter and antagonistic toward the WELS during Pastor Birkholz's presidency.

Toward the end of his District Presidency, Pastor Birkholz and the Praesidium had to deal with the question of sexual exploitation and state requirements concerning the records of counselors. Pastor Birkholz offers some explanation in his "Report to the District" in 1992:

During the biennium there has been several matters which have required special attention. One of those has been charter 148A of the Minnesota Statutes on "Action for Sexual Exploitation; Psychotherapists" and



our responsibilities for our called workers and congregations because of it. Meetings were held with lawyers representing other church bodies in this matter; the lawyer for Church Mutual Insurance Company; with whom many of our congregations have coverage, and the President of the LCMS Minnesota District. Because it presently mainly effects Minnesota, but could also be enacted by other states, a legal advisor also gave a presentation to the Conference of Presidents. The Conference of Presidents is presently considering methods of properly meeting the requirements of the law as it pertains to our present procedure in calling (1992 Proceedings 52f).

The Minnesota District started a system of keeping records of charges against pastors in this area. Those records would indicate whether the pastor was proven guilty or not guilty. This eventually led to Synod-wide record keeping.

Another doctrinal question came up concerning the termination of a call. A pastor from the Minnesota District appealed to the Synod after his call had been terminated by his congregation. The appeal committee upheld the acts of the District Officers and the congregation. From that point on, steps were taken to insure that a person would receive support for six months after the termination of his call.

One doctrinal issue kept arising during Pastor Birkholz's ministry. In 1981, the C.O.P appointed ten men, one from each district, to a committee for studying the Bible teachings on the roles of Men and Women. They received input from the District, studied the Scriptures, wrote an essay on the topic, and submitted it to the District Conventions for study. The document was subjected to input and revised. Some were not in favor of the document, claiming that it was legalistic. The issue came to

a head when a congregation in the St. Croix conference submitted its own study on the topic which was not in accord with Scripture or with the Synod's doctrinal statement. This caused a great deal of animosity among and toward the pastors of the St. Croix conference.

The following quote demonstrates the patience and love that Pastor Birkholz and the Praesidium showed to these men and to others erring in the faith:

The [pastors of the St. Croix Conference] had two conferences at which essays were presented and discussed. February 21, 1992, a special meeting was held at Bloomington at the invitation of the St. Croix Conference. In attendance were the Synod President, Vice-Presidents, C.O.P. Doctrine Committee, the Minnesota District President, Prof. John Brug, and Rev. Wayne Mueller. Ten essays were presented by members of the St. Croix Conference . . . followed by discussion of primary concerns and basic problems concerning "The Scriptural Principles of Men and Women's Roles" and the document prepared by the pastors of St. James Lutheran Church of W. St. Paul, "Heirs Together of the Gracious Gift of Life." . . . The congregation was urged to further study the issues on the basis of Brug's Bible Study. We pray the Lord's guidance for Scriptural unity and agreement in these matters (1992 Proceedings 53).

Having grown up in the Minnesota District, Pastor Birkholz considered it a privilege to have served as its president. In a letter to the Minnesota District, he wrote:

It was a great honor for me to have the privilege to serve the Minnesota District as your president these past fourteen years, being born and raised in this District, it has always meant so much to me, and I am humbly grateful the Lord enabled me to serve him and his church in this capacity . . ." (Newsletter vol. 12, num. 4, pg. 11).

Pastor Birkholz was a shepherd who faithfully watched over the many flocks under his care. Yet he would never take credit

for these gifts but always <sup>was</sup> thankful that the Lord gave him the strength and ability to endure. In his final report to the District, Pastor Birkholz offered these parting words of gratitude, humility and encouragement. They also sum up well his years of service and the blessings God brought through him and to him:

The Lord has been gracious to me enabling me to serve as a "Partner in the Gospel" (Convention theme for that year) for forty years, 33 1/2 of these years in my beloved Minnesota District. It was my privilege to serve as a tutor at Northwestern Lutheran Academy in Mobridge for two years, on the NLA Board, then as a circuit pastor in Minnesota, on the Martin Luther Academy Board, as District Secretary, Vice-president, and then these past fourteen years as your District President. This has enabled me to realize the importance of being a partner and having partners in the work of the Gospel.

I'm grateful for your patience and understanding with my weaknesses and shortcomings. Actions that were not always pleasant and appreciated had to be taken. Not all of you were in agreement with our decisions as a Praesidium. We realize, we too are human and might have carried out our responsibilities differently. Daily in prayer I asked the Lord's help for wisdom and strength to serve him and you to the best of my abilities. Without that help these past years of service would not have been possible. Thank you, Lord, and all of you! There are big responsibilities ahead for our newly elected officials. But as partners with the Lord and you, they will with God's help serve you well for the welfare of our Minnesota District and the Lord's Kingdom (Proceedings 54).

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**

- Birkholz, Gerhard W. W. Personal interview. 9 Apr. 1996.
- Birkholz, Gerhard W. W. Personal letter. 25 Apr. 1996.
- Fredrich, Edward C. The Wisconsin Synod Lutherans - A History of the Single Synod, Federation, and Merger. Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 1992.
- Golden Jubilee History of the Minnesota District of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod and Its Member Congregations - 1918-1968. Authorized by the Golden Jubilee Convention of the Minnesota District at D.M.L.C, New Ulm, MN. 1969
- The Constitution and Bylaws of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod - 1974. Available at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Library, 6633 W. Wartburg Circle, Mequon, Wisconsin 53092.
- The Minnesota District Newsletter Apr. 1981: vol. 1, no. 1.
- The Minnesota District Newsletter Jun. 1981: vol. 1, no. 2.
- The Minnesota District Newsletter Oct. 1981: vol. 1, no. 4.
- The Minnesota District Newsletter Apr. 1991: vol. 11, no. 6.
- The Minnesota District Newsletter Aug. 1992: vol. 12, no. 4.
- Proceedings of the Thirtieth Biennial Convention of the Minnesota District - Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod. Assembled at Dr. Martin Luther College, New Ulm, Minnesota. June 29 to July 1, 1976.
- Proceedings of the Thirty-first Biennial Convention of the Minnesota District - Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod. Assembled at Dr. Martin Luther College, New Ulm, Minnesota. June 27 to June 29, 1978.
- Proceedings of the Thirty-second Biennial Convention of the Minnesota District - Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod. Assembled at Dr. Martin Luther College, New Ulm, Minnesota. June 24 to June 26, 1980.
- Proceedings of the Thirty-third Biennial Convention of the Minnesota District - Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod. Assembled at Dr. Martin Luther College, New Ulm, Minnesota. June 22 to June 24, 1982.
- Proceedings of the Thirty-fourth Biennial Convention of the Minnesota District - Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod. Assembled at Dr. Martin Luther College, New Ulm, Minnesota.

June 26 to June 28, 1984.

Proceedings of the Thirty-fifth Biennial Convention of the  
Minnesota District - Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod.  
Assembled at Dr. Martin Luther College, New Ulm, Minnesota.  
June 24 to June 26, 1986.

Proceedings of the Thirty-sixth Biennial Convention of the  
Minnesota District - Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod.  
Assembled at Dr. Martin Luther College, New Ulm, Minnesota.  
June 21 to June 23, 1988.

Proceedings of the Thirty-seventh Biennial Convention of the  
Minnesota District - Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod.  
Assembled at Dr. Martin Luther College, New Ulm, Minnesota.  
June 26 to June 28, 1990.

Proceedings of the Thirty-eighth Biennial Convention of the  
Minnesota District - Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod.  
Assembled at Dr. Martin Luther College, New Ulm, Minnesota.  
June 24 to June 26, 1992.

Schuetze, Armin W. and Irwin J. Habeck. The Shepherd under  
Christ - A Textbook for Pastoral Theology. Milwaukee, WI:  
Northwestern Publishing House, 1974.

St. Paul's Evangelical Lutheran Church. A Century of Grace,  
Growth and Gratitude - 1889-1989. Litchfield, Minnesota:  
St. Paul's Ev. Lutheran Church, 1989.

**I. EARLY YEARS (Birth to Confirmation):**

- A. Full Name:
- B. Date of Birth:
- C. Place of Birth:
- D. Baptism: (When? Where? By whom?)
- E. Confirmation: (When? Where? By whom?)
- F. Parents:
  - 1. Full name of your father:
  - 2. Full name of your mother:
  - 3. What can you tell me about your parents? (e.g. place of birth; family background; religious upbringing; education; occupation(s); special gifts and qualities)
- G. Siblings (names and brief backgrounds):
- H. Where did you live as a child? In general how would you describe the area(s) in which you grew up? How would you describe the people that lived around you?
- I. To what church(es) did you belong during these years?
- J. Where did you receive your schooling during these years?
- K. Who were the influential people in your life during this period? (e.g. parents, siblings, pastors, teachers, etc.) In what way(s) were they influential to you?
- L. Do you recall any special experiences or significant events from these years of your life? If so, would you care to list and describe any of them? What sort of impact did they have on you?
- M. In general how would you describe these first years of your life? What was it like growing up in your home and in the area(s) in which you lived?

**II. HIGH SCHOOL YEARS:**

- A. When and where did you attend high school?
- B. In what kind of activities did you participate during high school?
- C. Did you have any special interests or hobbies? If so, would you care to list and describe any of them?
- D. What subject(s) did you enjoy studying? What did you enjoy about them?
- E. Did you receive any scholarships or awards during this time? For what did you receive them?

Appendix - A Interview Questions

- F. Did you have any special responsibilities? If so, would you care to list and describe them?
- G. Who were the influential people in your life? (pastors, teachers, professors, friends, classmates, etc.) In what way(s) were they influential to you?
- H. Do you recall any special experiences or significant events from these years of your life? If so, would you care to list and describe any of them? What sort of impact did they have on you?
- I. In general how would you describe these years of your life? What was it like attending your high school? What was it like growing up in this period?

**III.****COLLEGE YEARS:**

- A. When and where did you attend college?
- B. In what kind of activities did you participate during college?
- C. What sort of interests or hobbies did you have?
- D. What subject(s) did you enjoy studying? What did you enjoy about them?
- E. Did you receive any scholarships or awards during this period? For what did you receive them?
- F. Did you have any special responsibilities during these years? If so, would you care to list and describe them?
- G. How did you "put yourself" through college?
- H. Who were the influential people in your life? (pastors, teachers, professors, friends, classmates, etc.) In what way(s) were they influential?
- I. Do you recall any special experiences or significant events from these years of your life? If so, would you care to list and describe any of them? What sort of impact did they have on you?
- J. In general how would you describe these years of your life? What was it like attending your college?

**IV.****SEMINARY YEARS:**

- A. When and where did you receive your seminary training?
- B. In what kind of activities did you participate during your seminary training?
- C. Did you have any special interests or hobbies? If so, would you care to list and describe any of them?
- D. What subject(s) did you enjoy studying? What did you enjoy about them?

- E. Did you have any special responsibilities that related to your seminary training? Could you list and describe them?
- F. Who were the influential people in your life? (pastors, teachers, professors, friends, classmates, etc.) In what way(s) were they influential to you?
- G. Do you recall any special experiences or significant events from these years of your life? If so, would you care to list and describe any of them? What sort of impact did they have on you?
- H. In general how would you describe these years of your life? What was it like attending the seminary during those days? How did your training compare to the training offered at the seminary today?

**V. FAMILY**

- A. Full name of your wife:
- B. Can you tell me a little bit about your wife? (e.g. place of birth; family background; religious upbringing; education; occupation(s); special gifts and qualities)
- C. Wedding: (When?; Where?; By whom?)
- D. Daughter (Full name and brief background)
- E. In what kind of activities did you and your family participate? Did you have any special interests?
- F. Do you recall any special experiences or significant events as a husband and/or father? If so, would you care to share any of them and the impact they had on you?
- G. What was it like being a husband and father during your ministry? What sort of challenges and blessings did you experience?

**VI. NORTHWESTERN LUTHERAN ACADEMY - Mobridge, South Dakota**

- A. Years served:
- B. How would you describe the area in which you served? How would you describe the people that lived in that area?
- C. What were your general responsibilities under this call?
- D. What can you tell me about the congregation/institution you served? (e.g. historical background; special qualities and gifts; general background of the people)
- E. Did you face any particular challenges during this call? If so, would you care to list and describe any of them? How did the Lord help you and those whom you served deal with those challenges?



- F. Do you recall any special blessings or opportunities the Lord brought to you and/or those whom you served? Could you list and describe any of them?
- G. Did you have any special responsibilities on the district or synod level during this time? If so, could you list and describe them?
- H. Who were the influential people in your life during this period? (e.g. friends, family members, pastors, teachers, professors, district and synodical officers, etc.) In what way(s) were they influential to you?
- I. Do you recall any special experiences or significant events from these years of your life? If so, would you care to list and describe any of them? What sort of impact did they have on you?
- J. In general how would you describe your years of service in this area? What was it like working with the students, faculty, and members of this institution/congregation?

Please repeat the questions above for points seven through nine.

VII. Morrystown, Wautauga

VIII. ST. JOHN - Lake Benton, MN

IMMANUEL - Verdi, MN

IX. ST. PAUL - Litchfield, MN

**X. MINNESOTA DISTRICT PRESIDENT (1978-1992)**

- A. What did you find challenging about your duties as District President?
- B. What did you enjoy about your work as District President?
- C. From whom did you seek counsel and assistance in your duties as District President? (e.g. District officers; Synodical officials; pastors, teachers, professors, etc.) In what way(s) did they help you in your responsibilities?
- D. In which areas of responsibility did you concentrate most of your time and energy? Why in those areas?
- E. Did you have any specific or special goals as District President? If so, would you care to list and explain any of them?
- F. What kind of responsibilities did you have on the District level before your presidency? How was this previous experience helpful to you in your duties as District President?
- G. You served as an advisory member of the DMLC Board of Control. Do you recall:
- any special opportunities which the Lord offered to the college during your presidency?
  - any significant challenges?
  - any notable changes in philosophy, administration, faculty, curriculum, enrollment?
  - any important issues involving the college?
- How extensive was your service on this board?  
How closely did you work with the board and the DMLC faculty?
- H. You served as an advisory member of the District Mission Board. Do you recall:
- any special opportunities which the Lord offered in the area of missions?
  - any significant challenges?
  - any notable changes in philosophy, administration, manpower, location, etc.
  - any important issues you discussed?
- How extensive was your service on this board?  
How closely did you work with the board members?
- I. Each District has to supervise its members in matters of doctrine and practice through the visiting elders. You had the responsibility of overseeing the work of the visiting elders. Do you recall:
- any significant challenges to this important duty? How did the Lord help you deal with them?
  - any important issues in doctrine and/or practice?
  - any controversies involving doctrine and/or practice? (names are not necessary)

- J. You assisted congregations in the filling of their vacancies. Do you recall:
- any significant challenges to this important duty? How did the Lord help you deal with them?
  - any notable changes in calling procedures, number of vacancies, types of calls?
  - any important issues involving calling procedures, the doctrine of the call, etc.?

How did you go about forming call lists? What was your standard practice for every vacancy and at every call meeting? Who assisted you in this responsibility?

- K. You presided over the Minnesota District Conventions during your years as president. Do you recall:
- any significant challenges to this important duty?
  - any notable changes in the general format of these conventions?
  - any key debates that would have an influence upon the district and/or synod?
  - any special opportunities that came about through these district conventions?
  - any memorable convention(s)? In what way were they memorable?

- L. As the Minnesota District president, you served on the Conference of Presidents.
- Did you have any special responsibilities on the C.O.P.? If so, would you care to list and describe them?
  - What would you consider to be the chief issues discussed on the C.O.P. during your presidency? Did you come to any important decisions?
  - In general, how would you describe your service on the C.O.P.? What was it like working with the other District Presidents? What challenges, opportunities, and blessings came about for you on the C.O.P.?
  - Do you recall any notable changes in the Assignment Committee that had an effect on your work as MN D.P.?

- M. You worked with several vicars and graduate assistants during your presidency.
- Do you have any memorable experiences as a supervising pastor? If so, would you like share any?
  - Did you find the role of supervising pastor challenging? In what ways?
  - Did you experience any special opportunities or blessings from your work with vicars and graduates? Could you list and describe any?

- N. In general how would you describe your years as District President?