

EARLY BEGINNINGS OF THE CHURCH OF THE
LUTHERAN CONFESSION IN THE DAKOTA-MONTANA DISTRICT

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Final Church History Paper

April 1, 1980

Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Library

11831 N. Seminary Drive. 65W

Mequon, Wisconsin

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"Roots" have been a subject of profound interest in recent years. I suppose that this paper in a sense can be called a tracing of "roots", the roots of the Church of the Lutheran Confession. Very little has been written in this area. Perhaps this is because the church itself was only been in existence for some twenty years. In this paper I have decided to concentrate on the beginning of the CLC only as far as the Dakota-Montana District of WELS is concerned. Actually, this could also be construed as the real beginning of the whole CLC body since it was in the Dakota-Montana District that a great many of the pastors came from to make up the first years of the CLC. And of course, the CLC's first president came from this district. The question that must be answered by this paper is where do we date the beginning of the CLC in Dakota? Do we consider as an answer the 1960 convention in Watertown, South Dakota or was there in fact a much earlier date that we can point to for this church's beginning?

When we speak of the formal organization of the CLC, we are thinking of that time when a small group of men (who had left Wisconsin) had already come to ^{an} agreement on the doctrines that were in controversy and who had already made preparations to incorporate as a new church body. We are talking about a group of men who had already organized a constitution. The date of the formal organization of the CLC is August, 1960, at Watertown, South Dakota. A second convention was necessary to finish the business in Sleepy Eye, Minnesota in January of 1961. Incorporation officially took place on Dec. 23, 1960 in the state of Minnesota. The name "Church of the Lutheran Confession",

was chosen on Aug. 11, 1961. Thirty-four congregations and 36 pastors and 10 male teachers registered as charter members. In 1962 three more pastors and eight congregations were chartered at the Spokane Convention. This was the formal beginning of the CLC.

However, was this the real beginning? No, indeed it was not. The earliest beginning of the CLC can be traced back to 1956 - 1959. In these years the CLC in its infancy was known as the "Interim Conference." Sometimes it was also referred to as the "Lutheran Spokesman Group." But even before these groups, there were those who separated themselves from the fellowship of Wisconsin and began to take steps toward the establishment of a new church. The Dakota-Montana District especially received much attention in these early years. Why? Perhaps the best way to answer this question would be to briefly review the events of the years 1930-1957 in the history of the Wisconsin - Missouri struggle. Such a review will enable us to understand why the Dakota-Montana District reacted in the way it did to the New Ulm resolution of 1957.

Since July of 1872 Missouri and Wisconsin had been in fellowship in what was known as the "Evangelisch-lutherische Synodal-Conferenz." This was a federation of Lutheran Synods which joined together their efforts for the purpose of encouragement as to faith and confession, for promoting unity as to doctrine and practice, to cooperate in matters of mutual interest and then also to cooperate in their outreach and mission work. The Synodical Conference, as it was later called, was the strongest federation ever to exist in Lutheranism in America because of its strong confessional position.

It was in the 1930's, however, that Wisconsin became very much

concerned with certain practices of the Missouri congregations. This concern was further strengthened when the so-called "1938 Resolutions" appeared on the scene. From these resolutions the Synodical Conference had confirmed for them the fact that Missouri and ALC were taking steps to establish church fellowship. This fellowship was to come through the agreement of Missouri's "Brief Statement" on the part of the ALC and the agreement of ALC's "Declaration" on the part of Missouri. WELS could not accept these thesis, but contended that a common confession be sought out by the two bodies in which agreement would be obtained in all doctrines in question.

There were of course many other issues involved in regard to practice that showed that Missouri was weakening its confessional position, to be able to meet on the same ground as ALC. These differing practices made WELS probe even deeper and with more interest into the doctrinal stand of Missouri. One practice which stirred up much interest was the national military chaplaincy program which was initiated by the LCMS in response to the war scare of 1935. At this time also the United Lutheran Church of America extended an invitation to all Lutheran Synods to join together. A unionistic spirit was in the air. This invitation only served to intensify the study of the doctrine of fellowship and union principles.

Without a doubt, there was one issue that took up the entire spotlight, Scouting. For some reason the LCMS was now saying that each individual congregation could decide on its own what to do about Boy Scouts in its area. This was a very clear indication to WELS that the LCMS was weakening from their previously strong confessional stand in regard to the matter of Scouting. Immediately there were problems

in the congregations of the WELS because members wondered why their boys could not belong to the Boy Scouts when the Missouri church down the road was allowing its boys to take part in the organization.

Missouri's confessional position was further clouded over with its new view on prayer fellowship. This problem appears from the so-called "Brux Case". Before it was all over Missouri resolved in 1944 that joint prayer at intersynodical conferences, asking God for guidance and blessing upon the deliberations and discussions of His Word, was not wrong practice. It was not wrong provided such prayer does not imply denial of truth or support of error. From this 1944 resolution it was clear that Missouri was making a distinction between joint prayer and prayer fellowship. This was not a distinction of the confessional agreement which formed the Synodical Conference.

In response to Wisconsin request that the LCMS formulate one confession that would touch on every doctrine in question, the "Common Confession" was drawn up between the ALC and the LCMS in 1950. However, this document proved to be very unsatisfactory to WELS, since it hardly touched any of the issues involved. Wisconsin let Missouri know of its displeasure in its Convention in 1951.

It is at this time that we note two differing opinions within Wisconsin starting to formulate in connection with the Missouri problem. There were some who saw it necessary to break with the LCMS already at this time. Others felt that the LCMS would return to its confessional position. They did not want to act until they had some very definite statements from Missouri that showed that their position had indeed changed. The clarified statement^s they wanted, one

might say, came in 1953. It was in this year that Missouri reaffirmed her acceptance of the Common Confession. They did this despite the warning from Wisconsin.

This set the stage for Wisconsin's 1955 Saginaw Convention. This was the Convention that most everyone felt a break would occur. However, this was not the case. Because Missouri had not been able to act on Wisconsin's warning of 1953 many felt they could not yet vote for a break. In those days Missouri met in convention every three years. For this reason, a resolution was adopted whereby Wisconsin would be "in vigorous protesting fellowship" with Missouri until they would have a chance to meet and respond. The outcome of this Convention angered many in Wisconsin. Many protests were filed at this time. Some of these protests eventually would be voices of the CLC.

After Missouri had met in 1956 our Synod (WELS) called a special Convention in Watertown. Here it was decided to hold the "Saginaw Resolutions" in abeyance because it was felt that some improvement was made in the Missouri position when they buried the Common Confession. It was felt by many that things were starting to look better. However, there were those, and they were not a few, who saw no change in Missouri and protested openly concerning the Synod's decision. This is where the Dakota-Montana District really begins to come into the picture. As Prof. Karl Sievert says in his history of the District, "The troubled waters in the District dated from that year. It seemed then, and I still think, that our District felt the brunt of this controversy, felt it much more than others."¹

The controversy became much more intense and more disunity in the District itself was evident as the 1957 Synod Convention was nearing.

Because Missouri apparently was doing little to change certain practices in its midst many more people in the Synod were convinced that Wisconsin would break with Missouri at the New Ulm Convention. In disagreement to the Synod's decision of 1956 "to continue in our vigorously protesting fellowship over against the LCMS" the Eastern Conference of the Dakota-Montana District memorialized the Synod to terminate fellowship with LCMS. In their words,

Therefore, we earnestly plead that the Synod assembled at New Ulm, Minn., Aug. 7-14, carry out the judgment of the Saginaw Resolutions, based on Ro. 16:17, 18, without delay.²

Ten members of the Western Delegate Conference addressed a similar plea:

Therefore, We, the undersigned, earnestly plead with the delegates of the 34th Convention of our Synod that, in obedience to the apostolic injunction in Ro. 16:17, 18, they officially declare the termination of fellowship relations with the LCMS.³

It seemed that the Synod was indeed going to respond to these and similar pleas throughout the Synod. This seemed especially to be the case when the Floor Committee on Church Union Matters reported:

We feel conscience-bound to declare publicly that these principles, policies, and practices create a division between our Synods which the LCMS alone can remove. Until these offenses have been removed, we cannot fellowship together with the LCMS as one body, lest our own Wisconsin Synod be effected by the same unionistic spirit which finally weakens and destroys all true doctrine and leads to indifference and liberalism concerning Scriptural truth.

Therefore be it resolved, that we now suspend church fellowship with the LCMS on the basis of Ro. 16:17, 18, until the principles, policies and practices in controversy between us have resolved in a thoroughly Scriptural and mutually acceptable manner.⁴

This was the resolution set before the body to be voted upon. The question was, would it pass? Remember there were still many who felt that it still was not the time to break. The floor was opened up to

discussion. And discussion there was! The seriousness of the moment can be caught by these words that were addressed to the convention:

We the delegates of the 34th Convention are now faced with one of the greatest decisions of our lives. The Lord is setting this before us and upon us and we know we shall be held to account for what we do. As we prepare to vote it is essential that we be reminded of what exactly is involved in our vote. The question is not primarily whether we win a brother or not; it is bigger than that. The question is not which vote will keep the Synod together, for it is much bigger than the Synod. The question has to do with a Baby, a little child. For four thousand years the gracious God was preparing a gift for his people on earth. In the fulness of time He placed before the world His only Son, and in Him a full and complete salvation for all. This Babe, the only beautiful thing in the world, Paul had the privilege of carrying to the heathen. He carried this Child untiring, patiently, lovingly to souls in every hamlet and town. But in one thing the Spirit was adamant: this precious gift, our Christchild, which Paul was carrying from town to town and house to house, dare not be mutilated. If the sinful reason of man attacked this life-giving message, then there was enormous danger for all. If the child was tampered with, then what was left? Then the churches of Asia Minor, or Macedonia, or Greece would have lost that which alone could have saved souls, win the erring, comfort the weak and afflicted. And that is why the same church, which works so lovingly, forgivingly and patiently with sinners, is nevertheless instructed to take violent, sharp and decisive action whenever the hand of man is raised against the Christ-child, i.e. when His Word is attacked. . . Now the Lord has been outstandingly gracious and given us His Child to carry before men for 100 years. And in America during the past 50 years Satan has been aiming at us, seeking constantly to contaminate our beautiful message, to mutilate our Child. The waves of liberalism and unionism, indifference to doctrine and subjectivism have assulted us, and now the godless chatter is eating like a canker at our vital organs. The church is not at stake, for Christ always conquers. The question in our voting is only this: 'Will He use us in building His Church? May we carry the Christ-Child to the world, or do we become a useless vessel, numbered among the many churches which did not appreciate the Gospel enough to suffer all for its preservation.' The preservation in our midst of the Child who richly forgives is at stake.⁵

Despite these and many other eloquent words, when the final vote was taken, the Synod by a vote of 77 to 61 defeated the recommendation of the Floor Committee to break with Missouri. Instead it voted to continue in its vigorously protesting status of before. One need not

regular conferences, conventions and special meetings.

The first action on the New Ulm decision by the District came in Aberdeen, South Dakota in a special Convention on Oct. 22, 1957. Here it was to be decided whether or not the District would concur with the Synod in their decision at New Ulm. It did just that! As a result, tempers flared and twelve formal protests were filed with the District President, Albrecht. In addition, after the adoption of the New Ulm decision by the District, Pastor Paul Albrecht resigned as President of the District. The motion to accept his resignation was rejected. A second motion was adopted to ask Albrecht to serve as President according to the dictates of his conscience. After a lengthy discussion, he gave no answer. He claimed that more time for consideration was needed. The convention ended! The struggle did not!

The Praesidium then called another special convention at Bowdle on Feb. 11, 1958. The purpose of the special convention was to reconsider the Aberdeen resolutions which endorsed the New Ulm decision. However, at every meeting the issues became a little more confused, the tempers a little hotter, and the split a little wider. What was even *sadum*, this disunity was now beginning to spread quickly within the congregations themselves. Nothing was resolved at Bowdle!

The whole matter was again reconsidered at the regular Pastoral Conference at Mobridge on April 21, 1958. There was reason for optimism among the pastors because of the presence of Prof. Carl Lawrenz and President O.J. Naumann. It was felt that they would clarify the issues. Perhaps then unity within the District would once again be a fact. These two men had come by invitation of the District. But

once again to the disappointment of many the protests were not disposed of and were still before the District.

It was at this time that some of the protesting parties began to meet privately and in secret in order to formulate future action. It is hard to give any specific data on these secret meetings because to many this is still a very serious matter. When the writer questioned Prof. Karl Sievert concerning these secret meetings (Prof. Sievert makes mention of them in his history of the Dakota-Montana District History), he declined to comment on them giving the following reasons for his decision:

- 1) There are men in high positions in Synod at this time who were more or less involved in the developments of twenty years ago, who in the end did not join the CLC. I do not care to involve them now.
- 2) Much of the information which one would need to make a comprehensive study, such as your topic involves, has never been gathered. In fact, some was never recorded and filed, so that it would be difficult to evaluate and judge the validity of the material. Then too, a number of men on both sides of the strife have been called to their eternal reward.
- 3) It might be harmful to the peace of some congregations to awaken the entire affair now, where things have been healed at least to a great extent.
- 4) I feel that we are living too closely to those days. As historians often say, "Riper judgments made from a distance would then prevail."

With respect to these opinions and concerns the writer did not dig any deeper into this area. But it is the contention of the writer that the birth of the CLC could perhaps be traced back to one of these secret meetings. The reason for this contention is based on certain data received from a layman by the name of Mr. Sam Haar from Roscoe, South Dakota. Mr. Haar was much involved with the events of his day. According to Mr. Haar, "After the Aberdeen Convention of Oct. 1957, nine pastors and about 15 laymen met to consider their future course of action inasmuch as the protest had been rejected as not based on

Scripture. They then agreed to meet at Bowdle, South Dakota on Feb. 16th for further mutual strengthening and consultation. And so it was that the CLC had its beginning, if not officially, but at least in substance." This, indeed, is an interesting observation.

For the time being these men were still part of the District. However, as the months passed and the split only widened it was time for another Convention. This time it was in June of 1958. Here it was decided to elect a "Committee of Three and Three" to seek ways to restore unity within the district. This committee was made up of both laymen and pastors, three of the minority opinion and three of the majority opinion.

At the reconvened Convention, Jan. 26-27, 1959, this committee of Six made their report to the body. They had failed in finding any solution toward unity! And in fact, their report only served to widen the gap more, so that in 1960 the new District President, W.A. Schumann, sadly had to report that in impatient action 5 congregations, 7 pastors and more than 800 communicants had left the district.

For many this was the end of the struggle. But for a few this was not the case. For within certain individual congregations there still were many problems to be dealt with. As pastors had taken sides in the conventions, so also members had taken sides within the individual congregations. For some unity on the congregation^{al} level was quickly restored as soon as there was unity within the District itself. For at least a half dozen others, (though) this was not the case. For some there was the decision of whether the members were to now go with their pastor if he had left the Synod. Rather than describe each one of these struggles, let us look at one. Let us look at Bowdle, South Dakota.

(N.B. In order not to do anything that might cause a rebirth of the problems between the CLC and WELS relationship and specifically between St. John's and Redeemer congregation in Bowdle, the writer has only sought out and reported general information and dates concerning the events of twenty years ago.)

By September 6, 1959 Pastor Paul G. Albrecht of St. John's in Bowdle, South Dakota (a small city in north-central South Dakota, approximately 800 population) had broken with the Synod because of the Synod's protesting fellowship position with LCMS. At this time the Praesidium of the District informed the Bowdle congregation that it must now make a choice whether to adhere to the Pastor or to Synod. On September 6, 1959, the congregation voted to remain in the Wisconsin Synod. The bone of contention was whether Pastor Albrecht was still pastor of St. John's. Pastor Albrecht said that he was! The majority of the members of St. John's said that he was not! The majority then called Prof. Karl G. Sievert of Northwestern Lutheran Academy (now closed) as its pastor to conduct its services. This complicated the issues even more for some of the members of St. John's since now the doctrine of the divine call was added to an already complicated and confused situation. Prof. Sievert started services on September 20, 1959.

Pastor Albrecht and his followers then decided to take the whole thing to court. They went to court thinking that they could in this way prevent the majority from using the church. Circuit Judge H.E. Mundt presided. The court, not being permitted to enter upon doctrinal questions of fellowship, decided only that Pastor Albrecht had not been removed as St. John's pastor, since no motion to that effect had ever been adopted.

Then followed the meeting of May 1, 1960. St. John's by majority vote removed Pastor Albrecht from the pastorate. Yet Pastor Albrecht refused to vacate the property.

The majority then took the matter to court. Judge Fred J. Nichols tried the case on Nov. 29, 1960. The decision went against Pastor Albrecht and the minority. Pastor Albrecht then appealed to the Supreme Court. But because neither Pastor Albrecht or his lawyer, nor any of the minority showed up for a court briefing, the Supreme Court upheld Judge Nichols decision.

The minority then split away from St. John's and built Redeemer Congregation (CLC) in Bowdle. As history shows, Pastor Albrecht went on to become the first President of the "Church of the Lutheran Confession."

It is now some twenty years after the struggle in Bowdle. For the most part, the hatred that existed in Bowdle in those years has ceased. In an interview with the present pastor of St. John's at Bowdle the pastor said that the subject is rarely brought up today. He also was very happily surprized^{that} the pastor of the CLC church allowed one of his members to sing in a wedding of a cousin in the WELS church. Perhaps this is a sign that the struggles between the two congregations indeed have ceased.

This, in my view, is a brief account of the beginning of the "Church of the Lutheran Confession" in the Dakota-Montana District. I do, of course, contend for a much earlier date for the CLC than the 1960 date that is so commonly pointed at. However, there is no real data to support my view. Present day historians of the CLC mention early meetings but none stick their necks out to speak

of those early secret meetings in Bowdle, Aberdeen, or wherever they may have been. Sam Haar's observation concerning the February 16th date in 1957 can, indeed, be considered when tracing the early history of the CLC. Its hard to believe that events of only 20 years past could be so unclear and obscure. But perhaps we should all be thankful that those events have passed and that God in His grace has once again restored unity within our Dakota-Montana District.

ENDNOTES

1. "Fifty Years Of God's Blessing In the Dakota-Montana District,"¹ p. 11.
2. Dakota-Montana District Proceedings, 1958, p. 23.
3. Ibidem, p. 23.
4. Convention Proceedings, 1957.
5. Lutheran Spokesman, Dec. 1958, p. 2-3.
6. Sam Haar Interview.
7. Dakota-Montana Report, 1958, p.24.

B I B L I O G R A P H Y

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1. Mr. Sam Haar (Roscoe, South Dakota)
2. Prof. Karl Sievert (Mobridge, South Dakota)
3. Pastor Mark Johnston (Bowdle, South Dakota)

Proceedings and Periodicals:

4. Synod Convention Proceedings, 1955-1957.
5. Dakota-Montana Reports, 1957-1961.
6. The Lutheran Spokesman, 1960-1979.
7. The Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly, April, 1977.

Books:

8. Fifty Years Of God's Blessings In the Dakota-Montana District, 1970.

Papers:

9. Gullerud, Carl M. History of the Church of the Lutheran Confession.
10. Ten Years Of Grace, by Pastor M.J. Witt