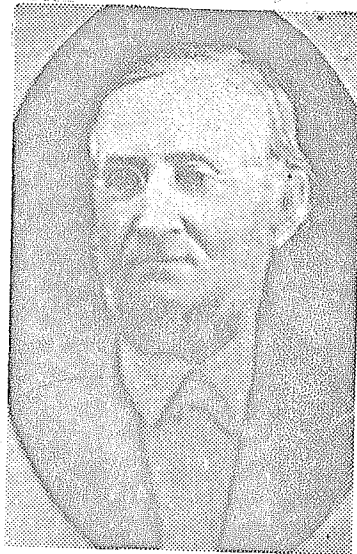


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GOTTLIEB REIM THE FIRST UNKNOWN PRESIDENT  
OF THE WISCONSIN SYNOD

Or:

"THE HELENVILLE PROBLEM" REVISITED VIA NEW ULM"



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As the title indicates, this paper intends to bring to light more information about the third president of our Wisconsin Synod. As the subtitle indicates the scope is somewhat narrowed. I have tried to gather information about Pastor Reim's ministry in New Ulm. In this way I hope to discover something about a 19th Century Pastor's approach to his ministry. As 20th Century WELS members we may have as our first question, "How orthodox was he?" This is a legitimate question, not that we wish to defame his name or decide his standing before God which only he can do. But along side that question we need to add another, "How did he strive to conduct his ministry in such a way that he was faithful to The Chief Shepherd and the sheep entrusted to his care?" In this way we can learn valuable lessons for our own ministries in the 20th Century.

This is the outline:

- I Pastor Reim's Early Life
- II His Ministry in New Ulm
- III The Helenville Problem Revisited

#### I PASTOR REIM'S EARLY LIFE

As a young man in Obertuerkheim, Wuerttemberg, Germany Gottlieb Reim started out in the adult world as a cobbler. At the age of 22 years however, he decided to enter the Baseler Missionshaus. Five years later he graduated, found his way over to America, and eventually to Milwaukee where he presented himself to Pastor Muehlhaeuser.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>John Philipp Koehler, The History of the Wisconsin Synod (St Cloud, Mn: Sentinel Publishing Company, 1970) p50

His first assignment was at Ashford, Wisconsin.

During the synod convention that same year Philipp Koehler, a Mission-Student from the Barmen school was ordained that same year. These two young men, along with many others whom the fatherly Muehlhaeser accepted into the Wisconsin Synod, gradually began to lead the synod to a more confessional stand.

By 1860 the Synod leadership had passed to J. Bading, a more conservative Lutheran. Philipp Koehler though, was perhaps the most actively conservative Lutheran in the Synod. That his activism irritated others at times is a documented fact. Muehlhaeuser himself was irked after the 1863 convention which was hosted by Koehler's congregation at Manitowoc; "I am afraid in such cases of overstepping the bounds of respect, otherwise I would have given . . . a piece of my mind too . . ." <sup>2</sup> The main cause of this friction was the transatlantic ties with the European mission societies. Muehlhaeuser himself by this time had definite misgivings about these unfortunate relationships. In the same letter to Reim from which the above quote was taken, the first president of our synod had this to say:

What I fear is that they are more of a drawback to Synod than anything else. I hardly believe that such associations can be maintained if these societies are dealt with straightforwardly; and still they are maintained. And to what are these associations leading? It has already come to this that men whom these societies or institutions

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<sup>2</sup>ibid, p 93.

send over to us are ordained just because of deference to them, when they hardly would be ordained otherwise and shouldn't be either."<sup>3</sup>

Such was the situation in our Synod in 1863. From the time of his arrival because of his talents and leadership ability, Pastor Reim moved up in the ranks of our synod. He had a role in training new pastors and gave a position paper on the synod's confessional stand at the 1861 synodical convention. That both Reim and Koehler, along with many others, wanted to improve the Lutheranism of the Wisconsin Synod can be seen from the record. However, the proper direction to go in order to get there was widely debated.

The Mission Societies wanted to know what our synod's official position was in regard to serving Union and Reformed congregations. In an attempt to define our position, Pastor Moldehnke drafted a document which included the following:

Of course, the everlasting fighting and attacks of the various denominations make it imperative in this country that each define itself distinctly against the others. But while the Reformed church, which here is dominant, is decidedly aggressive against us, we have continually supplied union congregations with the Word and Sacrament, as soon as they signified their willingness to suffer Lutheran doctrine and practice, and we shall in the future, for Christ's sake and the sake of the brethren's need, observe this policy. . . . This dual ministry is under discussion in the synodical report of June 1862, p. 21, and 1863, p. 27, and such a serving of two masters in the matter of doctrine rightly gives great offense to Lutheran congregations, as in fact one of our congregations was the first to point it out. Surely, we can't demand of a union congregation that it immediately turn Lutheran, but properly this, that it abide by Lutheran doctrine and practice, in case it wants to be served by us, and surely, it's our duty to see that no pastor of our Synod teaches varying doctrine, but simply Lutheran, wherever he officiates.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup>ibid p93

<sup>4</sup>ibid p95

This "dual ministry" was the current topic of discussion. The document stated that the Synod was not prohibiting two pastors by the name of Huber and Sauer to serve union congregations along side of Lutheran but that they teach Luther's Catechism in the Lutheran congregation and the local (essentially reformed) catechism in the other.

Vice President Reim sent this draft or a similar statement to Secretary Koehler for his signature and the Synod's Seal. Koehler had this to say in his return letter to Reim:

Dear Brother Reim!

It seems strange to me that you still expect of me to sign the petition to the Oberkirchenrat in Berlin and affix the seal. No, I must tell you again that I neither can nor will do either of the two. Whatever the consequences, I can't subscribe to something that to my mind doesn't square with the truth. For it is an untruth that our Synod is willing for Christ's sake to continue to serve United congregations as long as they just suffer Lutheran teachings and practice and thus really remain unionist . . . Now then, act according to your insight and your conscience. If you are bound to steer Synod's little ship into the Union's roomy harbor for Mammon's sake, then the men at the helm must assume the responsibility, I'll rather jump overboard and keep my conscience clean. I have already informed Brother Bading of the matter.

Hearty greetings!

Your brother in Christ,  
Phil. Koehler.<sup>5</sup>

The situation became even more confused when Koehler took it upon himself to write his own letter to the Berlin Society.<sup>6</sup> Reim apparently took Koehler to task for this and other actions and accused Koehler of "uncharitalbe, judging and

<sup>5</sup>ibid p96

<sup>6</sup>ibid p96

and fault finding". Koehler had this to say in response to another one of Reim's letter's:

. . . I don't think it is right that such grave accusations are simply to be lightly brushed aside. Your opinion of Missouri, Buffalo, Iowa, etc., I find much too harsh and unjust, and so cannot agree with it. Now you'll probably get to think that I am Missouri or otherwise minded; but you would be mistaken if you were to think so. However, I am not so Wisconsin minded either as many of us. What I mean is that many things about our Synod will still have to undergo a great change before we may rightly call ourselves "Evangelical Lutheran".<sup>5</sup>

If Philipp Koehler could be considered "Missouri minded" by Reim then perhaps the following words from Reim's own mouth might classify him as "Pennsylvania and Mission Society minded". These words are taken from his presidential report to the '64 Convention. President Bading was in Europe at the time:

In general I might mention that our relations to the Societies in Germany and to the honorable Synod of Pennsylvania have remained the same as heretofore. They have vigorously supported us this year too, and their zeal for our advancement is growing apace. The sending of a sizable number of workers has already been announced. But it is especially our Seminary that they are giving their attention with friendly counsel and eager support. I recommend to the honorable Synod to voice by suitable resolutions its gratitude toward the honorable Societies and the honorable Synod of Pennsylvania.<sup>6</sup>

The diligent participation of our friends in the old homeland aided our Honorable President in the richest degree, in the efforts for the founding of our Seminary, and we can without any anxious cares keep working on our seminary which is already on the way.<sup>7</sup>

In his "Report on the Execution of Last Year's Synodical

<sup>5</sup>ibid p97

<sup>6</sup>ibid p99

<sup>7</sup>Proceedings of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, 1864,  
p 8.

Resolutions" acting President Reim had this to say,

Soon after the previous year's Synodical convention our honorable President traveled under the authority of our Synod to Germany, for the purpose of gathering funds for the founding of our Seminary. So far as his correspondence indicates he has succeeded in arousing a high degree of interest for this project among our friends over there, and has succeeded in collecting a significant sum.

Although Koehler made a motion to break with the European mission societies, it appears that the great majority were in favor of continuing these relations. The uncooperative Koehler therefore was replaced by Adolf Hoenecke for the office of Secretary; Wm Streissguth, vice president; and the Chief Administrator on this side of the Atlantic, Gottlieb Reim.

Bading was quick to congratulate the new President as soon as he received news from the convention. The former president was now counting on Brother Reim to keep things running smoothly at home, while he continued the fund drive in Europe. To accomplish this inevitably involved "appeasement" to the German societies.

An interesting example of this is a letter which Reim instructed Secretary Hoenecke to write for the Germans.

We do not want to and really do not wish to be looked at as such who are filled with hatred for Reformed doctrine, nor as such who question the Reformed confession as a way to salvation or who in conciliatoriness toward the Reformed church see the blessing of the Lutheran menaced. . . .<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup>ibid, p6

<sup>9</sup>Koehler, op cit. p106

The following lines to Reim accompanied this draft:

Dear Brother Reim. --I think this draft, herewith submitted to you, will do. Cordiality in letters is not my way, when I have to develop<sup>e</sup>; if you can change anything in that respect it will be all right. . .<sup>10</sup>

And a somewhat amusing post script points out the American situation, in light of the above draft for the mission societies:

Sent a letter of comfort yesterday to the congregation in Ridgeville. The congregation is clamoring for a pastor. It is beset by the Methodists. In Thiele's field, too, these robbers are at work.<sup>11</sup>

At this point I would like to make a transition from 1864, the year in which Reim was president of the Wisconsin Synod, beyond the time when he stepped down from that office because of "problems at Helenville". A clearer picture of Pastor Gottlieb Reim and his pastoral ministry can be formed by looking at the years he spent in New Ulm, Minn., in his ministry at St Paul's.

## II HIS MINISTRY IN NEW ULM

In this town a congregation had been started with the help of circuit riders and gradually grew. However, when it applied for membership in the Minnesota Synod in 1867 it was refused because it's name included the word "Reformed". The congregation at first had problems with pastor-parish relations. One pastor by the name of Popp was dismissed by the congregation. Another by the name of A Kenter, after serving for two months turned in his resignation. Present at the same meeting was, the president of the

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<sup>10</sup>ibid

<sup>11</sup>ibid



Minnesota Synod, Pastor John Siecker.<sup>12</sup> The Congregational History as penned by Pastor C J Albrecht is revealing:

. . . beschloz die Gemeinde auf Rat des Praeses das Wort "Reformiert" zu streichen, dagegen beim h. Abendmahl nur Brot anstatt auch Hostien zu gebrauchen. (Es wurde nämlich seither für die Lutheraner Hostien, für die Reformierten Brot gebraucht). Im Jahr 1868 wurde die Gemeinde in die Minnesotasynode aufgenommen.<sup>13</sup>

Having gone three years without a resident pastor, the congregation called Pastor Reim from Beaver Dam, Wisconsin in 1870.

There is no record of discord between Pastor Reim and his congregation. He used his organizational talents in many ways. Under his leadership the membership grew significantly. In 1873 St Paul's hosted the Minnesota Synod Convention.

Disaster struck however, July 15, 1881 when a tornado devastated most of the city. Pastor Reim appealed for help to the churches of the Synodical Conference. The generous gifts amounted to a total of \$6,040. This enabled the congregation to construct a stately church, large enough to accomodate 90 families.

It was not in God's plan for him to see the day of dedication, however. On his way to a sick call in Nicollet Co. he sustained a back injury due to a fall off a wagon,

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<sup>12</sup>C J Albrecht, Congregational History of St Paul's Ev Luth Ch, New Ulm, Minn p306

<sup>13</sup>ibid

and died a few days later. Here is a section from his obituary:

At first there was hope for recovery. The now departed himself still spoke of this hope: that he would soon again be up and around. Only in God's wisdom something else was decided. Already at 9:00 that same day he became delirious and around the middle of the night death released him from his suffering. He died with a joyful faith in his Savior whom he portrayed so prudently before the souls of his little-colt-fold (Pflegebefohlenen). He was a father full of love for his family; as a pastor he had served his church faithfully with the gifts, which he had received. Still, that, the faithful Shepherd on the last day will reveal. The synod lost in him one of the most qualified and faithful members, and we will sincerely miss him. Yet because God in his wisdom has decided thus, we will bow before him humbly and say: "Lord not as we will but as thou wilt". He gave the shepherd-roster of the church a shepherd after his own heart. He consoles the wife and the children left behind, and he shows himself to them as the true helper and faithful One in every need.<sup>14</sup>

The congregation then called C.J. Albrecht who arrived one month later, and was installed as their pastor. In his history of the congregation he relates that several Reformed-minded members insisted upon receiving bread at the Lord's supper instead of hosts. After instructing the members individually and publicly, he declared to the congregation that he could not be a faithful Lutheran pastor and carry out his ministry in this way. The congregation then decided to use only hosts from now on. A few members who had been instructed in the matter left the church.<sup>15</sup>

The new sanctuary which Pastor Reim had planned

<sup>14</sup>Gemeinde Blatt, July 15, 1882, p174

<sup>15</sup>Albrecht, op cit. p307

was dedicated in the midst of this period of discussion and instruction on October 22, 1882. A monument to a man whose life was marked by setbacks, ~~but~~ what he left behind was built upon by another.

### III THE HELENVILLE PROBLEM REVISITED

After Pastor Reims' election to the presidency in 1864<sup>16</sup> the mission-society controversy continued. It was Bading and Reim against Koehler with Hoenecke in the middle. A crises situation at Reim congregation in Helenville called for a public review of the matter at the conference and then at the synod level. The synod however, was not convinced of his guilt in the matter. Moreover, the congregation in Helenville eventually exonerated him of any wrong doing. After this trying situation, Pastor Reim took a call to a congregation in Beaver Dam, Wisc; from there he went to New Ulm. "The Helenville problem" was left behind and as a well seasoned pastor he used the talents which the Lord gave him to serve His people <sup>in</sup> that growing community of New Ulm.

We can appreciate better the heart of the man by looking at the words of his Presidential Report to the 1865 convention. "For a course of years it was the zealous endeavour of our Synod, to share as intimately as possible the confession of our Evangelical Lutheran Church".<sup>16</sup> Responding to the charges of "eternal confessionalism" he said:

<sup>16</sup>Proceedings of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, 1865,  
p3

This reproach, which was often enough made about us, we do not consider just, in view of the confession of our church; it was an unjust (accusation). Moreover we will gladly have this become our defect....

Later on he reported: "Already it is possible for us, to pluck the first fruits of our seminary by ordaining its first student;<sup>17</sup>

He wanted to uphold the Lutheran Confessions as a correct exposition of the Word of God. And he wanted this word of God to go out among the scattered souls of the Northwest territory. For this reason he worked towards the establishment of a Lutheran Seminary. Knowing the history of St Paul's congregation at New Ulm, however, we may wonder, how could he condone a divided communion practice?

First of all, we do not know all the details of their communion service or services (there could have been a separate one for the Reformed-minded members). Certainly it is true that whether unleavened hosts or leavened bread is used is not in and of itself the main issue. What matters of course is that the Lord's Supper is celebrated according to the Lord's command and that the people examine themselves before they partake. Pastor Reim may have recalled that Luther administered Communion "in one kind" to those whose consciences were weak. It is also true that the old practice was discontinued after further instruction. Such cases of casuistry may be kicked about years later to determine what really should have been done.

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<sup>17</sup>ibid p3

God however, is the final judge of such matters of conscience.

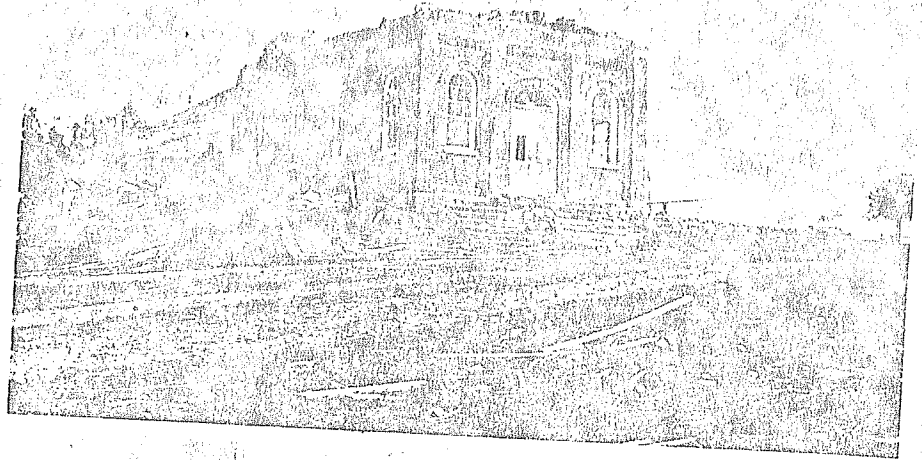
This same God and Lord used Pastor Gottlieb Reim to carry out his purpose of spreading the gospel. These words recorded in the pages of the Gemeinde-Blatt, ninety-six years ago are still appropriate today, "Peace be with him and with us all who by God's grace are still living."<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>Gemeinde Blatt op cit p174

APPENDIX I

Changes in  
St. Paul's  
House of  
Worship



St. Paul's First Church Damaged by  
Cyclone in 1881.



Construction underway on new  
church to replace the tornado dam-  
aged church.



New  
Church  
Dedicated  
in 1882



St Paul's first church, dedicated  
in 1866

"A monument to a man whose life was marked by setbacks. What he left behind was built upon by another".

Am 2. Juni 1867 beschloß die Gemeinde sich der Synode von Minnesota anzuschließen, konnte aber wegen des Namens "Reformiert" nicht aufgenommen werden. Im Juli 1867 wurde Herr Pastor A. Kanter (?) ersucht eine Probepredigt zu halten, nach gehaltener Predigt wurde er von der Gemeinde angestellt, er trat sein Amt im August desselben Jahres an. Es wurde nun auch beschlossen ein Pfarrhaus zu bauen u. sollte um die Baukosten aufzutreiben eine Lotterie veranstaltet werden, auch das Jahr darauf 1867 wurde eine Verlosung zum Besten der Gemeindekasse veranstaltet. Das Pfarrhaus wurde neben der Kirche an der State Str. errichtet, Größe: 16 x 28. Kosten \$600.00. Am 17. Sept. 1867 reichte Herr Pastor Kanter (?) seine Resignation ein, die von der Gemeindegemeinde angenommen wurde. Bei derselben Versammlung, die der Praeses der Minnesota-synode, Herr P. Siecker aus St. Paul leitete, beschloß die Gemeinde auf Rat des Praeses das Wort "Reformiert" zu streichen, dagegen beim h. Abendmahl nur Brot anstatt auch Hostien zu gebrauchen. (Es wurde nämlich seither für die Lutheraner Hostien, für die Reformierten Brot gebraucht). Im Jahr 1868 wurde die Gemeinde in die Minnesotasynode aufgenommen.

p 306  
see a century of  
Grace p 6

Im Juli 1870 wurde Herr Pastor G. Reim aus Wisconsin berufen u. trat im August desselben Jahres sein Amt hier an. Im Jahr 1873 versammelte sich zum ersten Mal hier die Synode.

p 307

Im (15.) Juli 1881 wurde die Stadt von einem schrecklichen Wirbelsturm heimgesucht, Kirche u. Pfarrhaus wurden dadurch auch beschädigt. Die Gemeinde wurde durch freiwillige Beiträge der Glaubensgenossen innerhalb und ausserhalb des Staats so reichlich unterstützt, dass sie eine neue Kirche bauen konnte. Die Summe betrug \$6040.00. Der Grundstein der Kirche wurde am 9. Mai 1882 gelegt. Die neue Kirche steht ebenfalls an der State Str. u. 2, North Str. eben an der Westecke.

increased  
administrator

Unter der Amtsführung des Herrn Pastor Reim hat die Gemeinde an Gliederzahl bedeutend zugenommen, leider sollte er aber nach Gottes Rat in der neuen Kirche sein Amt nicht mehr verwalten. Er verunglückte auf dem Weg zu einem Kranken u. starb am 22. Juni 1882.

will  
met an  
accident

Im Juli 1882 wurde Pastor G. J. Albrecht, von Greenwood, Hennepin Co., Minn. berufen und am 20. Aug. 9. S(onntag) p(ost) T(rinitatis) von Herrn P. von Nicollet eingeführt. Unter P. Reims Amtsführung wuchs die Gemeinde bis auf 90 Glieder, leider aber waren unter diesen mehrere reformierte Glieder die durchaus darauf bestanden ihrem Bekenntnis gemäß beim h. Abendmahl Brot zu gebrauchen. Die Gemeinde bekannte sich auch durch den stetigen Gebrauch von Brot zu den reformierten Gesinnten. P. G. J. Albrecht wusste bei seiner Berufung nichts von diesem reformierten Gebrauch u. hat darum gleich nach Antritt seines Amtes darauf bestanden, dass die Gemeinde sich ganz und unumwunden zur Lehre der luth. Kirche bekenne, denn nur in diesem Fall könne er sein Amt als luth. Pastor an der Gemeinde verwalten. The Gemeinde beschloß alsdann, dass von nun an beim h. Abendmahl nur Hostien gebraucht werden sollen. Einige Glieder, die aber hinreichend vom Pastor belehrt wurden, traten aus der Gemeinde aus. Am 20. S(onntag) p(ost) T(rinitatis) den 20 Oct. 1882 wurde die neubaute Kirche eingeweiht. Festprediger waren P. L. F. Frey, u. H. Albrecht. Die Gemeinde hatte nun ein stattliches Kirchengebäude mit Thurmuhr u. 3 Glocken, eine Glocke war schon in der alten Kirche. Die neue Kirche hatte eine Größe von 46 x 70. Eine Pfeifenorgel wurde im Jahr 1883 für \$1000.00 angeschafft.

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acknowledged  
frankly

Dagofunde) ?  
förde

pastor mentioned  
in  
in obituary  
Gemeindeblatt









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

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Note: Special thanks goes to Prof Heinrich Vogel for  
transcribing the German script!