

NEBRASKA'S DILEMMA:

DISTRICT OR SYNOD?

BY

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## NEBRASKA'S DILEMMA:

### DISTRICT OR SYNOD?

In the 1850's the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod was only an infant among Lutheran church bodies of America. It was approaching its 50th birthday having done quite a bit of growing. Yet that growing had been mostly confined to Lutheran congregations in the state of Wisconsin alone. Wisconsin was still an infant in regard to expansion into other states.

The first area outside of Wisconsin that became a part of the Wisconsin Synod was an area in the state of Nebraska. There are some unanswered questions regarding the beginnings and early carryings on of this area of Nebraska. For example, what was the reason of these Lutherans to become a conference, then an independent synod, and finally a district of the Wisconsin synod? Why was there a lapse of almost seventeen years between when these Nebraska people were invited to become a district and when they actually did?

It is difficult to answer these questions from the records which remain from this period in Nebraska Lutheranism. From the scanty history which has been written about this and the synod and district proceedings of the time, we hope to come to some fair deductions concerning these matters.

### NEBRASKA'S ROOTS

The Lutherans who later formed the Nebraska District came to Nebraska in 1866. They originated from Ixonia, Wisconsin, a congregation which had been formed out of anti-synodical feelings. These people brought their anti-synodical organiza-

tional ideas with them when they moved to the Norfolk area of Northeastern Nebraska.

It was in 1878 that the Lutherans in Norfolk began to have contact with the Wisconsin Synod. Through their newly assigned pastor, Michael Pankow, a graduate of Northwestern, Watertown and Springfield, the seed was planted for future relations with Wisconsin. Pankow himself joined the Wisconsin Synod in 1881. By the end of the 1890's there were nine pastors and two congregations from Nebraska which were in fellowship with the Wisconsin Synod, (History of the Wisconsin Synod, Koehler, II ed., p. 179).

#### RECOGNIZING A PROBLEM

By 1897 these pastors and congregations had organized as a conference of the Wisconsin Synod. The Synodal Bericht, June, 1897 reports some concerns of this young conference that was so far removed (almost 500 miles from Milwaukee) from its brothers in the "holy city".

The Nebraskan's concerns were in the realm of money. Because of the distance involved, it was quite expensive for them to attend the yearly synod conventions. Not as many pastors as wanted to could finance their own travel expenses and there were only two congregations that could help out holding membership in the synod. The brothers in Nebraska turned to the synod hoping for some travel reimbursement to help lessen their load. The synod responded by setting up a committee to study the problem and also by providing for a special offering to be gathered at the next synod meeting to help the financial state of the Nebraska representatives.

Nothing is mentioned in the Synodal Bericht as to how the

collection went and whether more men were able to attend the 1899 meeting because of it. However, the arrangement still must have been unsatisfactory in the eyes of the men from Nebraska. In June of 1900 they approached the synod with a new request. They wanted permission to organize themselves as a district of the Wisconsin Synod. The following reasons were given:

1. They felt they would be better able to carry out their "mission".
2. They felt they would be able to stimulate more interest among their congregations in regard to synod matters.
3. Travel expenses limited attendance at synod conventions.

We see some of the same problems again surfacing; inability to finance trips to the convention. Obviously one of their hopes for a newly formed district was that more money could be somehow raised to help subsidize men attending synod conventions.

#### A SEEMING SOLUTION

The synod's reply to this proposal was positive. The report mentions that the proposal was accepted and a committee was appointed to counsel the Nebraska people as they formed their district.

The planning must have went quite well. In August of 1901 the first gathering of the Nebraska District of the German Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Wisconsin and other States was held. Some resolutions were drawn up concerning the relationship between the Nebraska District and the Wisconsin Synod. These the synod approved in its 1902 convention with some minor changes.

#### A BONE OF CONTENTION

There seemed to be one bone of contention however. Nebraska

looked to appoint its own district president to be in charge of the workings of the district. The synod however made the following resolutions in their 1903 convention and sent them back to Nebraska:

1. The Wisconsin Synod president would meet with a committee from Nebraska to work on setting up a new plan for the union of the district and the synod.
2. The president of the Wisconsin synod was also to serve as the general president for the Nebraska District.
3. If the Nebraskans did not agree to this then they were advised to form their own synod.

The synod obviously was not willing to compromise on their position concerning the presidency of the district, nor did they mince words as to what the only solution would be if Nebraska did not agree.

#### A NEW SYNOD

The resolutions brought about much debate at the August 1903 Nebraska District convention. It was decided to name a five man committee ( 3 pastors and 2 laymen ) to formulate some recommendations which would then be presented to the synod. The report of this committee suggested going with the only seemingly sensible solution - that of forming their own synod and then seeking unions with the Allgemeine synode von Wisconsin, Minnesota, Michigan u.a. st.

The Nebraska convention immediately acted on this recommendation. They decided to take the form suggested by the committee and authorized the president and secretary of the district to :

1. inform the synod of this step;
2. request that membership be granted in the Joint Synod;
3. request a peaceful release from the Wisconsin Synod.

These resolutions along with others were sent to the Wisconsin Synod and reviewed at their 1904 convention. The Synodal Berichte records that the reaction was one of caution. Wisconsin's reply was to urge that Nebraska reconsider before they take this step and go out on their own. There also was a vote of confidence expressed by Wisconsin and willingness to work together with a new Nebraska Synod if indeed it was formed.

Nebraska followed through with its plans. The next year's Synodal Berichte of Nebraska is entitled "verhandlung der ersten versammlung der Deutschen Evan. Luth. District- Synode von Nebraska u. a. st. A new Synod was being formed. A constitution was drawn up and membership in the Joint Council was applied for. This membership was granted in 1906 when the constitution of the Joint Synod was changed to also include the Nebraska District - Synod's representatives as voting members.

#### WHY A SYNOD?

Here the first chapter in the history of the Nebraska District ends. Nebraska remained a synod until the amalgamation of 1918.

The question as to why there ever was such a thing as the Nebraska Synod seems to have a two fold answer. Koehler leans toward the financial problems involved in travel to and from Synod conventions as the sole reason. A second reason however also seems to be quite apparent. The people of Nebraska had a strong desire to retain their independence. Possibly that desire found it's roots way back in the congregations' anti-synod feelings brought with them from Ixonia. Maybe it was just part of being "stubborn Germans".

Whatever the reason for the forming of the Nebraska Synod, let us thank God that the synod remained a steadfast proclaimer of the Gospel of Jesus Christ! Let us thank God for the blessings of the fellowship the Wisconsin Synod has enjoyed to this day with the Nebraska District! And also, let us thank God that he led those German settlers from Ixonia, Wisconsin to settle in Nebraska and open up one of the most quickly successful mission fields of the Wisconsin Synod's early years!

RESOURCE MATERIAL

Synodal Berichte Nebraska, 1901 - 1919

Berichte Wisconsin Synode, 1895 - 1919

History of the Wisconsin Synod, by J.P. Koehler, 2nd edition,  
The Protestant Conference, 1931.

A special thanks to John Hartwig for his help in digging  
through the Synodal Berichte and in translating the mother tongue.