

"IT WAS A NECESSITY FOR THE MICHIGAN
SYNOD TO TRANSFER THE TRAINING OF
ITS SEMINARY STUDENTS TO THE SEMINARY
OF THE WISCONSIN SYNOD."

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The so-called Michigan Problem really began in the year 1892. In October of this year representatives of the Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Michigan Synods met in Milwaukee to discuss a merger of the three Synods. This merger was consummated. Michigan, represented by 22 pastors, 1 teacher, and 6 laymen, promised to give its active support to all of the activities of the Joint Synod, and to abolish its theological department, making it into a preparatory school. The problem arises in this promise.

It seems as if a small group of men, particularly some of the members of the faculty at MLS, did not appreciate this arrangement. Although the Synod had agreed unanimously to abolish the Seminary and change it into a prep school a number of men sought for a temporary continuation of the theological department. They petitioned the Michigan Synod for such a continuation. The Michigan Synod in turn carried the petition to the Joint Synod which promptly referred the problem back to them. "It will be extremely difficult to achieve a desirable theological training in the institution at Saginaw, however, due to the existing circumstances, we must leave the adjustment of the matter to the honorable Synod of Michigan"

Michigan, it appears could not handle the problem. Polarization began not only at the Seminary, but also throughout the Synod. This polarization finally led to a change in Synod administration. Pastor Carl Boehner

was elected to elected to replace Pastor C. A. Lederer. Under the leadership of Boehmer, the split which had begun grew even wider. Those who still wanted to honor the agreement with the Joint Synod felt as if they could place no confidence in this new administration and complained quite bitterly.

An attempt was made in the spring of 1895 to solve the problem. Both factions of the Michigan Synod sent representatives to Saginaw for a peace conference. At this meeting also was the president of the Joint Synod, Dr. A. F. Ernst. Although nothing was finalized at this meeting, both sides did agree to work towards the adoption of a resolution in the upcoming Michigan Synod convention of 1895. This resolution was to state that the Seminary would function as such for a period of three years, following which it would be converted into a prep school.

Any hopes that this meeting at Saginaw had given to those involved were quickly dissolved at the convention. There it was resolved that "all students enrolled should receive their training there". Also, the Joint Synod was petitioned to approve this resolution. This convention then became the straw that broke the back of those who still wanted to back the Joint Synod.

Though they were in the minority, the group who wished to remain loyal to the Joint Synod created

quite a stir. Having once again voiced their protest, their lack of confidence in the administration of both the Seminary and the Synod they left the convention. At the convention of the Joint Synod in St. Paul, Minnesota that same year, they brought formal charges against the Michigan Synod. The Joint Synod upheld the charges and rejected the petition of the Michigan Synod for approval of its resolution. What followed was the long expected break.

Refusing to send financial support to the Synod of Michigan, those ten men who had traveled to St. Paul were suspended. Further action was taken against them at a convention in Sturgis in September of 1896. At this convention the Michigan Synod also decided to sever its relations with Minnesota and Wisconsin, and to drop out of the Synodical Conference.

The few years following the convention at Sturgis are a sad page in the history of the Michigan Synod. By 1897 they had swung so far as to form a General Synod with the Augsburg Synod. Fortunately, however, this unnatural union was dissolved by 1900. While the years 1896 to 1900 were dark years for the Michigan Synod, they also appear to be the years in which the pendulum began to swing back in the direction of good leadership and common sense.

Beginning with 1900 the Michigan Synod, under new leadership, began to hope for a reconciliation with the

Synodical Conference. They proceeded slowly but by 1904 they were holding a series of free conferences with pastors from both the Missouri Synod and the Michigan District Synod. The latter group was composed of the suspended minority mentioned earlier. By 1906 the Michigan District and the Michigan Synod were once again reconciled. This came as a result of a meeting in Bay City where both parties expressed an acknowledgement of wrong.

While the Synod was experiencing a revitalization the years 1902 - 1907 marked years of deterioration for Michigan Lutheran Seminary. In 1902 Pastor Linsemann, the Director resigned. He was replaced by a Seminary professor from Kropp, Pastor F. Beer. It is said that Pastor Beer was partially to blame for what happened at the Seminary over the next five years because of his strict disciplinarian tactics, but no one knows for sure. The fact is that from 1902 when the enrollment was above 20 students to 1907 the enrollment dropped steadily. By fall of the year 1907 only one student remained.

The doors of Michigan Lutheran Seminary were closed on August 10, 1907 and remained so until 1909 when it was resolved, the Michigan Synod having once again joined the Joint Synod, to open it as a preparatory school.

It is my contention that, viewed from the standpoint of both the Michigan Synod and the Joint Synod, it was a necessity from the start to transfer the theological department of MLS to Wisconsin.

I believe this contention is pretty well established. Already at the meeting in 1892 it was considered a good idea, not only by the representatives of Minnesota and Wisconsin, but also by the entire representation of Michigan which amounted to a considerable number of its ministerium, to transfer the theological department to Wisconsin. The reasons for their decision are not given, but I think they lie hidden in the response of the Joint Synod to Michigan's first petition for a temporary continuation, "It will be extremely difficult to achieve a desirable theological training in the institution in Saginaw. However...". To me this statement expresses a lack of confidence in the theological training given in the Seminary at Michigan.

Consider the fact also, that a number of the professors on the Seminary faculty together with a number of leaders in the Synod were instrumental in the union with the Augsburg Synod. I am not suggesting that all of the professors at Michigan Lutheran Seminary were doctrinally unsound, or that one could not obtain there a Scriptural training. Many of the men who brought the Synod back on the right track received their training at this Seminary. What I am suggesting, however is that it was evident to many that Michigan just did not have the manpower from which to draw continually enough theologically advanced men to staff a Seminary. I think this is substantiated also by the fact that they had to call a new Director from overseas, Director Beer.

From this standpoint then, I feel it was a necessity for Michigan to transfer its Seminary. True, when the change was finally accomplished, it was because the Seminary had collapsed in Saginaw, and so the necessity became more of a practical thing, easily understandable. Perhaps even this collapse was the result of the aforementioned conclusion, namely, that Michigan did not have the manpower or resources within itself from which to adequately staff a Seminary.

The question remains, why was Michigan so hesitant to make the change? Perhaps they did not feel this necessity, perhaps there was a contingent in the Synod who wanted to remain a separate identity, the answers are as numerous as ones conjectures. All we can be sure of is that the problem was solved to the satisfaction of the majority involved. Though as a preparatory school, Michigan Lutheran Seminary lives on, dear to the hearts of all those who have studied there.

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