

# Synod Loyalty

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Beloved and Esteemed Brothers,

Two funny things happened to me on my way to this forum.

- a) I *volunteered* for this paper. To the best of a swiftly eroding memory, this marks a first in a pastoral career spanning nearly three and one half decades. The sound of a strange voice saying, "I'd like to write a paper on..." was both frightening and startling.
- b) This paper was started in December, well in advance of this august gathering. A semi-rough draft was then read to the steering committee luncheon meeting convened by our honorable chairman. The rough draft had a rather lengthy title followed by a pithy subtitle. Apparently neither was a "grabber" since, when the formal announcement of this conference appeared in print, both title and subtitle had died a swift and unlamented death and in its place was substituted the title you see on this paper.

"Someone" had caught the sense of the draft and decided to shuck the cob down to the kernels and forget the flowery tassles. So, chastened, a wee bit chagrined, and only slightly wounded, let us begin to explore a few thought on, - "Synod Loyalty."

In order that all of us might understand from what perspectives this presentation is being made, it may be wise to outline, via a series of statements, a few basic assumptions. Hopefully, these will serve to put all of us on the same playing field of thought.

## Assumption #1

I am a "Company man." I always have been a "Company man" and, God willing, in due course, I shall die a "Company man." It isn't quite, "My WELS right or wrong," - but it's close. This is stated without apology and without judgmental belligerence.

As I see it, there are several cogent reasons for this. It is the synod of my birth and rebirth. It is the synod which gave me much of my education. When led by the Spirit to prepare for the public ministry, it received me warmly and embraced me willingly. From birth to the present date, it has nurtured, nursed, put up with, and accepted me and although a few of my closest and dearest friends (?) have said that I am living proof that God has a sense of humor in that, I am oftentimes viewed as a "strange gift to the Church," nevertheless, my WELS has honored me by taking the "different gifts" and fitting them into the larger scheme of things. Out of a deep sense of gratitude, I publicly confess that I am a debtor to my WELS.

There is one more major reason for this "Company man" geist and mentality. As I see it, the WELS is the *only* viable, Scripturally grounded vehicle which God has brought into existence through which I am able to contribute, in whatever way I can, the carrying out of the worldwide Mission Mandate of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Certainly, as in any human organization, it has its flaws, foibles, peculiarities, and personalities. However, the leaders whom the LORD has put into "2929" are men of integrity and dedication, who, out of honest and good hearts seek only to carry out the will of the selfsame Savior by way of sharing His precious Gospel.

## Assumption #2

From "the remanent of old coots" to "the diaper corps" and to all who fall between the extremes of age in The Service, I love The Brotherhood! I am constantly and delightfully gratified to see daily evidences of highly skilled, humbly intelligent servants of the Lord Jesus, "Workmen who needeth not be ashamed," united in a high calling and banded together in an uncommon Cause. Hardly a day passes in which I do not thank God for His unbounded grace that He has allowed me to be included in an elite band of warriors for Christ, the WELS ministerium.

Of all of God's human creatures who currently live on His green globe, some five billion plus, less than 1,500 of us are on the WELS clergy roster. This is a miniscule percentage of the world's population.

In light of these things, is it any wonder that when you say, "Brotherhood" to a WELS pastor, you've (almost) "said it all!" The qualification is added since it also must include such words as: love, mutual respect, caring, compassionate, understanding, and supportive.

Here endeth the assumptions.

### I. "Where's the Beef?"

It's been building for quite sometime; the 1987 convention pushed it over the top. It's called hurt and pain and fear for the good and welfare of both a beloved church body, and the Brotherhood. Maybe it is "just a phase" we're enduring and maybe it "has ever been thus" in our Wisconsin Synod; but, I do not think so. Things are different and even as the world has changed dramatically in this century, so has our synod. Indulge me as I open my anxiety closet and rummage around therein.

The "dog days of August" were very much in evidence in Watertown during the the days of the convention. It was beastly hot. Kipling once said, "that only mad dogs and Englishmen venture out into the noonday sun..." If he had known about the WELS, he might have added that only in the WELS are synodical conventions held in August in unair-conditioned gymnasiums, which, after a couple of hours, could be rented out as a giant sauna.

The soaring temperature may have contributed to frayed nerves, short tempers, and waspish speeches. It could be that, as in congregation meetings, when money troubles dominate the agenda, the ugly twins of faultfinding and anger are never far from making an unwanted appearance. All of these things may have combined to give us a "neutral convention" not progressive but then not demonstrably regressive either, but, in all candor, it was disturbing to this spirit.

We've had hotter convention days in years past with even hotter issues to be debated and resolved. (Those of us who lived through the 50's and the early 60's have those traumatic conventions permanently seared into our souls). But, this convention featured hot debate about virtually everything and resolved very little. In the view of some observers, a smoldering recess was declared and in less than two years from now, the battle will be joined again with largely a new set of players, but the same old issues there to be bashed and rebashed at fever pitch.

In a church body such as ours, as indeed in all of life, *perception* is as important as reality. Sometimes it becomes *more* important than reality since perception is what the majority of the pastors and the general constituency deal with by way of their attitudes and feelings toward "synod."

What were some of the perceptions voiced both during and after the convention daze?

- 1) "It was a power struggle between the Coordinating Council and the peasants."
- 2) "It was a PYP\* convention"                   \*Protect Your Pocketbook.
- 3) "Never did I hear so many of the younger men speak so sharply and/or discourteously to the leadership."
- 4) "About the only time that there was a unanimous "Yea" vote was the motion to adjourn. Otherwise it was 'No' or 'Call for division'."

- 5) "The bean counters beat the stuffings out of the missionaries."
- 6) "The leaders are leading. Maybe it's time to check on who is following."
- 7) "The natives are restless." (This pithy comment came from two of the most astute convention "readers" I have ever known).

Please remember that these are assessments, judgments, perceptions voiced by fellow pastors, members of the Brotherhood, all of whom love their synod as much as anyone reading or hearing these words. It could be that all of them are dead wrong! But then, that isn't the issue; who is "right" or who is "wrong."

That which occasioned a paper such as this was the opinions noted earlier and, in all candor, I too did not feel that the spirits of this convention wore name tags titled "cooperation," "unified effort," "good will," "forward," or "satisfaction."

Is this a serious sign of "an ill wind that bodes no good" or is this merely the product of an overactive, paranoid, personality? When a series of uniformly unhappy assessments, all of which state perceptions which are counter to the picture of a joy filled, contented, progressive and productive WELS ministerium, someone gets disturbed and upset, and conference papers, such as this, are born.

## **II. More Peas Under the Mattress of Contentment**

The convention pulled the trigger. The gun was loaded earlier, all chambers. What bothers more than a little is when a young man, fresh out of the seminary, arrives at his first assigned parish and within *weeks* sees his major enemies *not* Satan, sin, or the flesh, but his synod and its leadership! The problem, according to this individual, was the synod's unwillingness and/or inability to take a firm stand of denunciation against a fraternal life insurance company!!

Within months, after failing to pull the congregation out of our fellowship, he resigns, leaving behind bewildered souls who suffered horribly. (Two of his former members limped down our way and by the grace of God, found their way into our "hospital"). There is no way that this short, violent, "ministry" could have been edifying to the saints gathered at that place.

It bothers me when two or three men, not without some talents, cause divisions in precious parishes and find aid, comfort, and encouragement from, of all people, The Protestants! Could these spiritual accidents and disasters have been prevented?

It bothers me (a lot) when a man, now in his mid-ministry, has publicly kept up a steady drumfire of criticism aimed at leaders, programs, institutions and agencies of our synod for virtually all of his career. This "closet Protestant" apparently feels that he has been especially gifted with "spiritual ESP" so that he has been enabled to read hearts, minds, and the *real* intents of people and programs of the WELS. Like "The Shadow" of early radio days, he *knows* all of "*the hidden agenda's*" of our "misguided and Scripturally weak" leadership.

From his lofty and lonely perch on top of the walls, which he has furiously built, he launches his spiritual (?) silkworm missiles across the bows of anyone and anything which dares to raise its head in an effort to carry the Gospel forward into all the world. That his scathing commentary is sent in for publication in the pages of a despicable and scurrilous gossip mongering scandal sheet that appears to have as its motto: "We Print All Church Dirt," does not disturb him one iota. He doesn't do it; what others do with his "deathless prose" is their concern and business.

And he writes on with apparent impunity under the blanket comment: "Well, everyone knows him and that's the way he is." An appropriate response to this would seem to be the opening words of an old Introit, "How long, O Lord; how long...?"

Yet another prevailing spirit that bothers and bewilders is our chainsaw wit. Too many of us have graduated summa cum laude from the "Don Rickles Charm School of Hockey Pucks and Put Downs." We are

good at it! How well I remember two brothers who were tagged at Northwestern: "Blackie" and "Foolish," and who died years later with these loving (?) nicknames.

A young seminarian, a former editor of the Black and Red once wrote: "We have plenty of negative criticism around. 'Northwestern humor' is supposed to be famous for witty mockery. We are all pretty professional at cutting down whatever we set our minds to." (B&R, September, 1983)

Along this same vein, a "refugee" from another synod comes to us, spends a year with us at the seminary, and happily finds a home with us. To hear him speak, he has found nirvana in the WELS.

"Does anything disturb you about us?" he is asked. "Well, (rather reluctantly), he said, you fellows sure play rough with each other. I have a little difficulty getting used to how you speak to and about each other." Welcome to the WELS, my son!

This spook, unfortunately, is not "ours" exclusively. President Ralph Bohlmann (LC-MS) once wrote: "A besetting sin for us in the synod seems to be our tendency to gossip, find fault, choose up sides and believe the worst about each other." The fact that others have this "down and dirty" tendency spooking around in their midst should be of no comfort to us whatsoever.

### **‘Tis Time to Be a Spook Buster**

Before we get into the fine art of "spook busting," ecclesiastical exorcism -WELS style, it may be wise to inject an historical perspective. So, go back with us now to those thrilling days of yesteryear when out of the inner core from a couple of tiny offices in the first rinky-dink "publ' house," there appeared one man, one full-time employee of "official WELS," its treasurer, Charlie Niedfeldt. That's it folks. That's all she wrote, - and, it was said that, "Charlie ran the synod out of his hat band." That was a little more than a generation ago, something over thirty years back.

Now, like the Patriarch Jacob, and under the same blessing hand, we've become more than "two bands" as we crossed the Menomonee River Parkway. We simply outgrew the original Publishing House; then offices on North Avenue (also in the NPH), an annex building, and finally a remodeled bank building. Next came the decision to build on National Avenue. But before that project could get off the ground, "2929" was born and the *second* full-time president, a wad of executive secretaries, and a fiscal office staff with numbers (to a simple farm boy) rivaling a Cecil B. deMille epic, announced to all and sundry that the WELS was no longer a parochial, provincial, almost xenophobic, small pothole on the church road map but rather, under God, could speak of a multimillion dollar, international church body. We exploded out of our tiny midwestern cocoon, and in the pastoral lifetime of a good many of us, we find ourselves represented in every state of the union plus having almost 5% of our ministerium posted in foreign lands and territories.

Synod conventions grew proportionately. They went from a clubby gathering of good ol' boys who knew each other well (and who frequently became a wee (?) bit contentious), to relatively large, "who-dat?" sessions where a good deal of time is spent trying to get the names and class numbers right of all the speakers.

Everything grew: budget, buildings, and bureaucracy. Gone were the days when you could publish a yearly budget summary of the WELS on one-sixth of a page of The Northwestern Lutheran (Convention issue; NWL 1951) and literally one man could take care of synod business out of "two cigar boxes." Blessings like blossoms popped out all over our field - "which is the *world*," and WELS business became *big business*. (Thank you, God!!!)

But, to handle the blessings and the business we needed full-time workers; first executive chairmen, then executive secretaries, and now "administrators." (We've changed the names three times until we've found "the right one.") We also needed, desperately, a full-time president, a pastoral point man.

How God blessed us! He gave us an "O.J.," a man who more often than not answered his own phone with the simple and yet so comforting, "Pastor Naumann." He gave us a James Schaefer, a Ray Wiechmann and then a Norm Berg. He gave us a Robert Voss, an Ed Hoenecke in San Diego and a Norris Koopman in Milwaukee. When Hoenecke hung it up, he gave us a Tate Sauer, an organizational whizz. These men, along with a Harold

Eckert followed by an Elton Huebner, together with a few others, were on the cutting edge of leadership, funding, and administration.

They made, not just a good first team, *they were great!* These were/are men of intelligence, deep devotion to Christ, visionary, hard drivers, able to see the total picture, all possessing tremendous pastoral hearts. These brothers also were gifted with an acute sense for the Mission of the Church - *missions*.

Some, mostly outside of our synod, publicly stated that which was buried deep in the heart-of-hearts of more than a few inside the synod, namely, that after 1961 the WELS would gradually dry up like Solomon's day flowers and blow away.

Instead, we exploded, nationally and internationally. We were "In every state by '78." We were permitted to open more than an average of *two missions a month*. We were allowed to send ten expatriate missionaries within the span of two years to man posts with strange sounding names in countries all over the globe.

The good news is that we grew. The "bad news" is that we grew. We've got boards, committees, commissions, editors, and full-time administrators producing, planning, writing, executing, overseeing, directing, and keeping track of a bewildering multiplicity of tasks and responsibilities, and a few of us outside of the metro area know them. In fact, one could safely bet the church mortgage if one would state that very, *very few* parish pastors - anywhere - know *all* of the fulltime people of "2929" by name and/or face.

But brothers, what has that to do with the price of peanuts or anything else for that matter by way of a "we-they" complex? Are we in danger of becoming polarized because we, *especially we*, don't "know" anybody anymore???

It seems to me that: Now is the time for *all of us* in the Brotherhood to exercised our thorough theological training, both as to congregational leadership and unified *team* play. *God*, the gracious God of the Church, who has seen fit to place us where *we* are in "the Kingdom for such a time as this," is the *same* God who called and carefully placed into His Service those who occupy positions of responsibility and leadership in *our* synod. We simply cannot allow ourselves the luxury of the thousand or so of us in the parish each to "do our own thing," to go off in our own direction, and only insofar as that *our* solutions to the problems in the church happen to coincide with the consensus judgment of our brothers, who have carefully zeroed in on a specific course of action, after prayerfully weighing all of the variables, - "Well, that will have to be good enough. We cooperate, we unite, we pull together in the same direction *when and if* it suits us and 'they' will have to be satisfied with that!"

Walt Kelly once had his comic strip character, Pogo opine, "We has met the enemy - and *he is us!*" Walt Kelly might well have been speaking of us in the WELS. Far too often we seem to revel in a good (?) fight among ourselves. We choose up sides, *us* against *them* and have at it hammer and tong.

And how we go after each other! We carp, complain, criticize, and frequently castigate. One is reminded of the "hens in the chicken yard" of an old Broadway musical: "We pick a little, squawk a little; pick a little, squawk a little, and pick again somemore."

Beloved brothers, the "they" and the "them" are our spiritual kith and kin! We are in effect, picking on, wacking away at, cutting down on *ourselves* and the *only* one who enjoys watching our self immolation is the Arch Enemy of God and man.

### **“Behold, How They Love One Another”**

Surely one of the most arresting lines in all of Scripture is the brief, thought provoking description of the first century Church uttered by outsiders.

Is it so wrong to say that the Spirit had more in mind for the twentieth century Church than merely to have those words serve as an interesting historical footnote concerning our ancient fathers? Is it so wrong or impractical or hopelessly "mushy" to suggest that we of the WELS strive to emulate those who went before us, long ago?

Brother-to-brother, may I be so bold to present a few specific items for your earnest consideration:

- a) Turn up the fires of Christian love we have for each other; turn down the demeaning criticism.
- b) Turn up gentlemanly civility when we speak to or of each other; turn down the judgmental rhetoric.
- c) Turn up trust; annihilate suspicion.
- d) Respect each other as servants of the Most High God; do not see your mission in life to keep everyone else humble.
- e) Monitor our humor and witticisms; avoid savagery like the plague!
- f) Speak well of and put the best construction on ...motives, programs, and policies of *our* synod; do not assume "them guilty" (of whatever) until proven innocent.
- g) Begin all evaluations and judgments with the "givens" that all of our God appointed leaders are people of honor and integrity with hearts and motives as pure as our own.
- h) Enthusiastically jump on the WELS mission bandwagon. Jump off only to put your shoulder to the wheel and help push it onward and upward.
- i) Remember that stones are to be fitly framed together in the building of the Church; they are not to be used for bashing each other.
- j) Be a singer, not a zinger. Avoid the temptation to publicly or in small circles of brothers to slam "the easy target." That's *our* ship of the Church. We are in danger of sinking ourselves with our torpedo shots.
- k) Let us learn to repeat to ourselves at least three times a day: "All together now, *Team-WELS!*"

There is one final, (and yes, there thankfully is an end to this which seems to illustrate eternity, in that it goes on and on and on...), thought.

We have all been trained to be leaders, strong leaders of God's people gathered around Word and Sacraments in congregational settings. But the best leaders learn first to be a follower, a follower of the Lord-Jesus Christ.. We all follow Him and, under the Spirit, teach others to do the same. We do this so that His saving message may be believed and proclaimed as far, as wide, and as swiftly as possible to as many as possible.

To help us in this *mission* of the Church of Jesus Christ, God has permitted us to found and form a "Larger Church," a synod, one which bears the honorable name, the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod. As in the congregational setting, the synod has its God appointed leaders. As in the congregational setting, not everyone is called by God to be a leader. As we ask our people to trust and follow based on the bedrock of the Word, their chief(s), so does the synod have the right and the legitimate expectation to ask the Indians, the parish pastors on their roster, to cheerfully give heed, cooperate, and follow with joy!

Our beloved "Mother WELS" has her full share of problems. The world and sin guarantee it; Satan fathers them and fosters them. What "Mother" doesn't need are problems within the family from her obstreperous sons.

She can and should receive love and loyalty. These qualities cannot be bought. But they can be cultivated and freely rendered by those who care for her and treasure their God-directed lives within her midst.

God speed the day when someone says: "Behold, how they love one another," and they are talking about us - in and of the WELS and its ministerium.

Let it be so...