

Our Help in Ages Past

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As we look back over the past . . . we must also exclaim with Samuel . . . , “Hitherto has the Lord helped us,” us the pastors and us the congregations and their members. In how many difficulties has the Lord not spread his wings over us! He has helped us out of various troubles, worries and attacks from without and within, or strengthened us according to his fatherly compassion to bear them even though we were not freed from them.¹

Pastor Christoph Ludwig Eberhardt penned those words for his 1885 presidential report to the members of the Michigan Synod. These same words describe quite well our emotions as we prepare to celebrate the sesquicentennial of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod. God has blessed our fathers and he continues to bless us today. By considering the past we have the privilege of seeing our God in action, guiding and directing all things for our benefit. We have confidence that the Lord will continue to be with us today and tomorrow because he has already demonstrated that he is **OUR HELP IN AGES PAST**.

The Birth of the First Michigan Synod

Originally part of the Northwest Territory, a separate Michigan Territory was formed in 1805. It wasn't until after the War of 1812, however, that the territory began to experience an influx of pioneer settlers. The establishment of a steamship route from Buffalo, New York, to Detroit in 1818 and the completion of the Erie Canal in 1825 opened Michigan for settlers, including many who were foreign-born. This area was especially attractive to German immigrants from Switzerland and from the Rhine country, areas forever changed by the Napoleonic Wars.

By 1830 there were many Swabians moving into the southeastern part of Michigan. They left their homeland, but they had no intention of leaving their faith behind. Already in 1830 the Basel Mission Society (Baseler Missionsgesellschaft)² received a request to assist the Swabians in Michigan. In that plea for help Basel recognized an opportunity to get into the North American mission field.

¹ *Michigan Synod Proceedings*, 1885, p 10-11.

² A training school had been founded at Basel in 1815, largely due to the efforts of Christian Friedrich Spittler. The institute prepared students for mission work among the heathen and among German emigrants to North and South America. Basel had a six semester course of study that concentrated on Bible study and practical courses. Its graduates were sent out by the Basel Missionary Society, founded in 1822.

John Philipp Koehler, *The History of the Wisconsin Synod*. Edited and with an Introduction by Leigh D. Jordahl. St. Cloud, Minnesota: Sentinel Publishing Company, 1979. Professor Koehler reports (p 27) that Basel sent a total of 189 missionaries to North America between 1833 and 1881.

We could not help but welcome being directed to the western sections of the North American states, especially since in its great wildernesses not only the Church of Christ is finding a home, but also heathen Indian tribes are within close reach to whom the messengers of Christ thus are gaining access.³ Michigan provided the chance to carry out both objectives of the mission society.

In 1831 a group of Germans from Wuerttemberg settled in Washtenaw County near Ann Arbor. It was their appeal to the Basel Mission Society that finally led to the assigning of Friedrich Schmid⁴ to this mission field after he graduated in 1833 and was ordained at Loerrach, Baden on 8 April 1833. Two days after his ordination he began the journey which brought him to Detroit in the Michigan Territory on 16 August.⁵ Although he was anxious to get to his destination in Ann Arbor, Pastor Schmid could not refuse the Germans in Detroit who begged him to stay through Sunday and provide them with a worship service. On 18 August the first German Lutheran pastor in Michigan held the first two German Lutheran services – in the carpenter shop of John Hais and in the barn of a Mrs. Feldbacher.⁶ Before he left Detroit on the next day, he promised to return again in five weeks to administer Holy Communion.

Friedrich Schmid finally arrived in Ann Arbor on Tuesday, 20 August 1833. The following Sunday he held the first service in his new parish at a schoolhouse about four miles west of the town. The reason for holding the service outside of Ann Arbor becomes apparent when he reported:

Ann Arbor is a little village, mainly of English people, only a few German families are in the city, the remaining families, perhaps forty to forty-six, live out in the woods and forest. Everyone has his house upon his property, and for that reason the Germans often live as much as six miles from one another, but all in the same direction. Often there are many houses that are not far apart, so that one can see from one to the other. The little village lies upon a very beautiful and healthy elevation.⁷

This group in Scio Township was soon organized into Salem congregation. This took place, Schmid reported, “on the eleventh of September, on Saturday afternoon amid praying and pleading to the Supreme Shepherd of His congregation.”⁸

Although Ann Arbor was to remain his base of operation, Schmid’s boundless energy did not allow him to ignore other opportunities for service. In his early years much of Lower Michigan was his field of work. In

³ Koehler, pp 25-26.

⁴ Schmid was the son of blacksmith. Born on 6 September 1807 in Waldorf, Wuerttemberg, he had entered the institute of the Basel Mission Society in March 1828.

⁵ In a letter from Ann Arbor to Basel, dated 27 August 1833, Schmid provides a detailed account of his trip from New York to Detroit. This letter has been published in “Selected Letters of Friedrich Schmid.” Translated by Emerson Hutzell. In Michigan Memories: Things Our Fathers Have Told Us. Bivens, Forrest L.; deRuiter, Richard A.; and Schaller, Daniel L., editors. Published by the Michigan District of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, 1985, pp 14ff. Hereafter, Schmid.

⁶ Frederick Schmid, Jr., “The Life and Labors of Friedrich Schmid.” Translated by Emerson E. Hutzell. In The Schmid Letters. A translation of letters written between the years 1833 and 1879 by Pastor Friedrich Schmid, Pioneer Missionary, from Ann Arbor, Michigan, to his Seminary in Basel, Switzerland. Translated by Emerson E. Hutzell. Published by Emerson E. Hutzell, St. Louis, Missouri, 1953, p1. Hereafter, Schmid, Jr.

⁷ Schmid, p 19.

⁸ Ibid, p 31.

addition to preaching in Detroit, he also worked in Monroe, Lansing, Marshall, Grand Rapids and Sebawaing. Altogether Schmid organized nearly 20 congregations in what would soon become the state of Michigan.⁹

In a report from the mission field back to the Basel Mission Society, dated 25 November 1833, Schmid provides a detailed report of the work that he had been doing among the Germans. Noting that there was more work than he could do, he stated:

I believe, dear elders, that it is high time that a student of our Mission House be send here before the people become dispersed and one member joins this and another joins some other sect. There is an immense unworked Mission Field here in which many souls can be led to the Lord in the power of His grace.¹⁰

Schmid also spent a considerable amount of space in this report describing the physical and spiritual appearance of the Indians in Michigan. Although he overestimated the Indian population as “hundreds of thousands,” he understood the opportunity they represented.

The Indian world is ripe for harvest, and I believe German missionaries would be particularly successful because the English language, and particularly the English people, are somewhat despised in that they, and rightly so, are constantly driving the Indians farther and farther out of their land.

I have already started to learn one of the Indian tongues which is still used by many. . . . Dear elders, I am prepared to preach the Gospel to the heathens as soon as the Lord wills it.¹¹

Pastor Schmid’s love for his Lord and his love for souls cannot be questioned. He did, however, have a problem. He wanted to be a Lutheran, but he didn’t know how to be a confessional one. He understood the importance of a solid Lutheran confession in sectarian America, but his experience was in the “mild” Lutheranism of his homeland and his training was at the feet of the unionistic mission society at Basel. As Professor John Brenner notes, “Like Muehlhaeuser (the first president of the Wisconsin Synod) he did not like doctrinal controversy because he thought it hindered mission work.”¹²

Schmid’s appeal for help was heard and answered. In 1834 Basel sent Pastor G. W. Metzger to Michigan, but he soon went to Ohio. Soon thereafter Basel sent a Pastor Ries, but again he was called away to work in Illinois. In 1836 a Pastor Schwabe arrived from Basel, but he served the congregation in Detroit for only six months before he died. Given the number of workers, it seems somewhat presumptuous that when a Pastor Schaad arrived in Michigan in 1837 the two pastors would begin plans for a synod. Their goal in such an undertaking was simple – to preserve their independence from the Ohioans. In the early 1840s, perhaps late 1842 or early 1843, Pastors Schmid and Metzger, along with newly arrived Pastor G. Kronenwett, discussed the organization of a synod so they could ordain preachers according to the laws of the land.¹³

⁹ “Brief History of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Michigan and Other States.” Translated by Gerhard Struck. In Michigan Memories: Things Our Fathers Have Told Us. Bivens, Forrest L.; deRuiter, Richard A.; and Schaller, Daniel, L., editors. Published by the Michigan District of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, 1985, pp 160. Hereafter “Brief History.”

¹⁰ Schmid, p 33.

¹¹ Ibid., p 44.

¹² John Brenner, “A Synod for the `90s: The 1890s.” Essay delivered at the WELS Michigan District Convention, 1992, p 2.

¹³ Koehler, p 26.

At this time Schmid stated it was necessary in this country to have a clear confession. He emphasized that he and his colleagues intended to “adhere as true Lutherans to the Scriptures and to the confessions.”¹⁴ He was upset by the deception of the German branch of the Methodists, known as the “Albrechtsbrueder,” among the immigrant settlers and he was equally upset by the ignorance of the German speakers from Pennsylvania who had forgotten much of their Lutheranism.

Schmid and his two colleagues formed the first Evangelical Lutheran Synod in Michigan. It was known as “the Mission Synod of the West” because Schmid had in mind to do mission work among the Michigan Indians, as well as among the German-speaking settlers. In 1844 he reported that the Indian mission had been started and that a young man had been sent to work among the Chippewas who lived across from Detroit in Canada.

In 1844 the new Michigan Synod also received word that the Franconian colonists who had been sent to America by J. K. Wilhelm Loehe were willing to help with the work among the Indians. The Loehe missionaries even placed their own Indian mission under the Synod’s supervision. The pastors whom Loehe sent to Michigan included: Georg Hattstaedt at Monroe, Philipp Trautmann at Adrian, Friedrich Lochner at Toledo and Friedrich Craemer at Frankenmuth. They all joined the Michigan Synod. They were all confessional Lutherans and believed that they had found a home in Schmid’s group. Schmid had specifically told the Franconians that “no missionary is to be sent to the heathen who does not subscribe to the Book of Concord of the Lutheran Church.” He also assured them that “the members of our Synod are firmly committed to the Symbols of our church and pledge their missionaries to them.”¹⁵

It quickly became apparent, however, that the Michigan Synod’s practice differed from its confession. Basel in 1845 sent as missionary to Michigan a Pastor Dumser, who rejected the Lutheran Confessions. Schmid decided to use him in his mission effort among the Indians. Dumser, together with Missionaries Sinke and Auch, were sent to Sebewaing. That was not the only problem, however. Schmid also permitted mixed congregations of Reformed and Lutheran members and he allowed the celebration of the Lord’s Supper according to the Reformed practice. The Loehe men left the Michigan Synod in 1846 for confessional reasons and helped to found the Missouri Synod in 1847. The remaining members disbanded this initial synodical effort in 1848, either joining the Ohio Synod or becoming independents.¹⁶ The first Michigan Synod survived for only five years.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ “Brief History,” pp 160-161.

¹⁶ E. C. Fredrich, The Wisconsin Synod Lutherans: A History of the Single Synod, Federation, and Merger. Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Northwestern Publishing House, 1992, p 19. Hereafter Fredrich, Wisconsin Synod. Also confer “Brief History,” p 161.

The Rebirth: the “new” Michigan Synod

For a short time following the demise of his first Michigan Synod, Friedrich Schmid joined the Ohio Synod. For most of the time between 1848 and 1860, however, he was an independent pastor. His lack of denominational affiliation did not slow his efforts to gather congregations in the state of Michigan. He continued to ask the Basel Mission Society to send additional pastors. He also attempted to alleviate the worker shortage by personally training some men as pastors.

On 10 November 1859, Inspector Josenhans of the Basel Mission Society wrote to Pastor Schmid and suggested that there might be another avenue open for conducting the work in Michigan:

You write that you are about to organize a Lutheran Synod for Michigan in the Wuerttemberger manner. Wouldn't it be better if you joined the Missouri Synod of our Brothers. I know very well that it is not all that one wishes, but I am too far away from the situation to be able to give you advice.¹⁷

Given his dislike for “Old Lutherans” and what he perceived as their inflexibility, this suggestion did not draw a positive reaction from Schmid. Moreover, his desire to form another synod received a boost in 1860 when Basel sent two missionaries to help him. Since both Stephan Klingmann and Christoph Ludwig Eberhardt were very able men, it seemed that this was the right time for another attempt at forming a Michigan Synod. Schmid's dream became a reality on 10 and 11 December 1860 when there was a meeting “in the small study of Pastor Mueller in Detroit of eight pastors¹⁸ and three laymen who united to organize the Ev. Lutheran Synod of Michigan and Other States.”¹⁹ Of the pastors who founded the Synod only Pastors Schmid, Eberhardt and Klingmann remained members until their deaths. The other five soon disappeared from the synodical roster.

It comes as a surprise that a strong confessional influence is evident in the first constitution of this new body.

The Ev. Lutheran Synod of Michigan and Other States acknowledges and pledges itself to all of the canonical books of the Holy Scriptures, Old and New Testaments, as the only rule and guide of its faith and life, and to all the symbolical books of the Ev. Lutheran Churches as the correct conception of the Scriptures.²⁰

Since Schmid had already demonstrated that he was not interested in such a “stiff” confession and in light of later developments, it becomes apparent that the credit for this sound Lutheran confession must go to the young pastors Eberhardt and Klingmann.

Although it was never given the title, the second Michigan Synod was equally deserving of the descriptive designation, “the Mission Synod.” Home missions, in particular, became the hallmark of this group.

¹⁷ Schmid, Jr., p 4.

¹⁸ F. Schmid of Ann Arbor, S. Klingmann of Adrian, C. L. Eberhardt of Hopkins, H. Steinicke of Freedom, F. T. Hennicke of Marshall, P. Mueller of Detroit, C. Mutschel of Monroe and C. Volz of Saginaw were the pastors who founded the Michigan Synod.

¹⁹ “Brief History,” pp 161-162.

²⁰ Continuing in His Word: The History of the Evangelical Lutheran Joint Synod of Wisconsin and Other States. Prepared for Publication at its Centenary by the Centennial Committee of the Joint Synod. Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Northwestern Publishing House, 1951, p 85. Hereafter Continuing in His Word.

The Synod demonstrated its zeal for gathering the scattered members of the faith into congregations when it commissioned Pastor Christoph Eberhardt as its traveling missionary.

Eberhardt, along with Stephan Klingmann, graduated from the institute of the Basel Mission Society in 1860. The two men left Bremen together and arrived at the home of Pastor Schmid in Ann Arbor on 27 September 1860. There were two vacant parishes under Schmid's jurisdiction at the time. One was the established congregation in Adrian; the other was a mission station in Allegan County of western Michigan. In one of those stories passed down from generation to generation, the two men supposedly reached agreement among themselves as to their assignment. Eberhardt is reported to have told Klingmann: "Do you know what we are going to do? I am strong and healthy and better able to endure hardship than you are. I will become the traveling missionary, while you go to Adrian."²¹

Pastor Eberhardt began his work in October 1860 with Hopkins as his home base, but by the end of 1861 he had assumed the office of pastor at St. Paul's in Saginaw. His short tenure as traveling missionary says more about the hardships of the position and the break neck speed with which he attacked his work than it does about the strength of Eberhardt's constitution. Today we would describe his change of ministry as an evidence of physical "burnout."

Within two months of his arrival in Allegan County, Eberhardt had established 16 different preaching stations. This circuit covered some 360 miles. Furthermore, Eberhardt was no circuit "rider." He walked most of the route and managed to serve his people on a three-week rotation. In 1861 he reported to the Synod:

Today I must report that since the last Synod meeting an even greater area of activity has come my way. Owosso, 80 miles northwest of Detroit, was to be my preaching station farthest east. However, since that time I am preaching in three more places, namely two in Clinton County and in the little city of Lowell.²²

Serving approximately 150 families spread out over such a large area would seem to guarantee exhaustion when he continued to cover his stations every three weeks. Then we hear Eberhardt report, "On June 18, 1861, I began my missionary journey to Lake Superior."²³ Covering much of the shoreline of the Upper Peninsula, he discovered dozens of families and scores of individuals who were interested in the gospel. Yet there was not a single Protestant preacher resident in the area. Given his love for souls, it is not surprising that Pastor Eberhardt would appeal to the Synod to serve the people of the Lake Superior region.

Unfortunately, the Michigan Synod had no one to send and Eberhardt himself could not return. It appears that Eberhardt's body could not keep up with his heart. When he returned from his Lake Superior trip, he became gravely ill and was unable to perform his duties for a number of months. It was soon after his recovery that he accepted the call to St. Paul's Church and moved to Saginaw. That did not immediately end

²¹ "Brief History," p 163.

²² Ibid., p 164.

²³ Ibid., p 165.

his traveling, however. For a time he continued to serve all his old congregations and preaching stations. At the same time he served St. Paul's and did exploratory work in Mittelfranken, Frankentrost, St. Charles, Chesaning and West Bay City.²⁴

On the basis of the growth experienced by the Michigan Synod in its first three years, we would anticipate that it would quickly become a very large body. This, unfortunately, was not the case. The sad fact was the Michigan Synod founded many but kept few congregations in its fellowship. The Synod's pastors actually founded more congregations and preaching stations than they could realistically serve. When groups grew tired for waiting for the regular services of a pastor, they began to look elsewhere. At the heart of Michigan's problem was an irregular supply of additional pastors. The pastoral supply was irregular both in regard to the timeliness of its arrival and its quality. The Michigan Synod did not have its own worker training institution. It had to depend upon pastors who offered their services to the Synod and upon those graduates of the European mission societies who were sent to the Synod. The "volunteer" pastors were often castoffs from other denominations whose training and motivation were suspect. The European missionaries often displayed the unionistic tendencies of their alma maters. Neither group appreciated membership in a confessional body.

Although President Schmid had not been a strong proponent of confessionalism, the Michigan Synod moved in that direction during his presidency. When Schmid retired from his leadership position in 1867, he was succeeded by Pastor Stephan Klingmann who promoted the Michigan Synod as an adherent of the Lutheran Confessions. It was Klingmann who noted that unfaithful and/or incompetent pastors had damaged the reputation of the Synod. In his 1872 report to the Synod, President Klingmann described the situation:

Difficult and arduous was the battle and onerous the struggle of this little body for its existence. Disparities in our own house caused halting and enfeeblement, so that the tender plant could achieve no pleasurable growth until the sickly, unsound parasites had been excised. After about a third of the present membership of our Synod had separated from us because of their unionistic principles, the tender twig showed strong growth and advancement.²⁵

In the first dozen years of its existence about one-third of the Synod's ministerium had switched to the United Evangelicals. As a result the growth of the Michigan Synod was slow and its total membership was small.

There was also a problem with financial support for the Synod's mission activities. Klingmann noted that in 1867 seven congregations had gathered \$523.52 in "mission" offerings, but only \$67.50 had been received by the Mission Treasurer. Some of the offerings had been sent to para-church organizations, for example, the orphanage in Toledo. Most of it, however, had been sent to the mission societies, especially the Basel Mission Society. As late as 1883 President Eberhardt lamented:

We have found that large amounts have been designated by dear friends of mission work in our congregations to support a mission society which is not Lutheran. This society is sending its trained

²⁴ *Continuing in His Word*, p 87.

²⁵ "Brief History," p 167.

graduates to such local bodies who through them attempted to seduce our congregations. Unfortunately, in a few cases they have been successful in this.²⁶

This was especially the case in the congregations of Washtenaw County founded by Friedrich Schmid. Given the shortage of these mission funds and the fuzzy doctrinal position of its founder, it is not surprising that the United Evangelicals made such inroads into the Michigan Synod's membership. Eberhardt recognized that the amount of money diverted to the mission societies would have funded a large portion of the expenses of a small theological seminary.

From the General Council to the Founding of a Seminary

Change came to the Michigan Synod in 1867. As has already been mentioned, Pastor Stephan Klingmann, now the resident pastor at Salem Church in Scio Township, was elected president. In that same year the Michigan Synod affiliated itself with the newly formed General Council. This association was made with the hope of relieving Michigan's shortage of qualified workers, since there were a number of seminaries among the eastern Lutherans. It was thought that they might have workers to share with Michigan. Once again the attempted shortcut brought only headaches and additional problems.

When the Pennsylvania Ministerium extended a call to all Lutherans synods that "adhered to the Unaltered Augsburg Confession" to organize a general Lutheran body "on a truly Lutheran basis," it sounded like the answer to Michigan's prayers. When an organizational meeting was held at Reading, Pennsylvania on 12-14 December 1866, soon-to-be-President Klingmann represented the Michigan Synod. At that meeting Dr. Charles Porterfield Krauth of Pennsylvania presented two sets of theses, "On the Fundamental Articles of Faith" and "Concerning the Authority and Government of the Church," as the doctrinal basis for the new assembly, whose formal name was "The General Assembly of the Ev. Lutheran Church in America."²⁷

The Michigan Synod considered the constitution of the General Council at its 1867 convention in Scio Township. The delegates were especially interested in the confessional position of the General Council. The Proceedings record the personal challenge laid before the Synod's delegates:

It was stated that the Confession is now embodied in the constitution of all of our congregations. However, it was also noted that there is a great difference between the confession on paper and the confession in practice as regards both pastors and congregations. . . . For that reason the pastors ought to feel obliged to study our symbolical writings, as well as the writings of Luther and his true followers, and conform their preaching to this pure doctrine of God's Word, not only in the chief articles of faith, but also with regards to matters of indifference. If this is not done, we could rightly be called liars and hypocrites²⁸

²⁶ Ibid., p 168.

²⁷ Continuing in His Word, p 88.

²⁸ Michigan Synod Proceedings, 1867, p 9.

The constitution of the General Council was adopted by the 1867 convention. Newly elected President Klingmann and Mr. Henry Beck of Adrian were selected as Michigan's delegates to the first convention of the General Council that was to be held in Ft. Wayne, Indiana, 20-26 November 1867.

The initial convention of the General Council considered a request of the non-member Ohio Synod to discuss "four points:" chiliasm (millennialism), lodges, pulpit and altar fellowship. These four points were referred to the member synods for discussion. The Michigan Synod at its 1868 convention heard two essays on the "Four Points." Pastor Karl Schlenker's essay²⁹ was not well received since it lacked clarity and was negative in tone. Pastor Christoph Eberhardt's essay³⁰ was complimented for both its clarity and its sound Lutheran position. Michigan's convention finally resolved:

that we reject Chiliasm as does the 17th Article of the Augsburg Confession; 2) that we reject altar fellowship with those not in agreement with us; 3) that we reject pulpit fellowship with the sectarians; 4) that we reject lodgery as being opposed in spirit to Christianity."³¹

The Michigan Synod was disappointed when the 1868 Pittsburgh Convention of the General Council discussed the "Four Points" and adopted resolutions concerning altar and pulpit fellowship which were too indefinite to be of any value. President Klingmann said of them, "Let us not yet give up hope that the indefinite and misleading language of the proposed resolutions in regard to the 'Four Points' may still be given a clear and positive expression."³² This optimism, unfortunately, had no basis. Neither the 1869 nor the 1870 conventions of the General Council brought a clear resolution of the fellowship issues. In response to these concerns Dr. Krauth had stated, "The rule is: Lutheran pulpits for Lutheran pastors; Lutheran altars for Lutheran Christians." But his verbal explanation was never clearly defined in the General Council's confessional statements.

When the General Council once again requested the input of its member synods, the Michigan Synod in 1871 resolved "that we reject any and all pulpit and altar fellowship with those of other faiths, and tolerate no exceptions."³³ The response of the General Council came in 1872 with the adoption of its "Akron Resolutions":

1. The Rule is: Lutheran pulpits are for Lutheran ministers only. Lutheran altars are for Lutheran communicants only.
2. The *Exceptions* to the rule belong to the sphere of *privilege*, not of right.
3. The *Determination* of the *exceptions* is to be made in consonance with these principles by the conscientious judgment of pastors as cases arise.³⁴

²⁹ Michigan Synod Proceedings, 1868, pp 15-20.

³⁰ Ibid., pp 21-28.

³¹ Ibid., p 13-14.

³² Michigan Synod Proceedings, 1869, p 11.

³³ Michigan Synod Proceedings, 1871, p 18.

³⁴ E. Clifford Nelson, editor. The Lutheran in North America. Revised Edition. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Fortress Press, 1980, pp 311-312.

There is a contradiction in these theses. If the first thesis is true, there can be no exceptions. This inconsistency troubled the members of the Michigan Synod, but these theses generated a reaction from the rank and file of the General Council only when it was squeezed out of them.

In the following years the Michigan Synod made repeated efforts to have the General Council clarify its confessional position. After a period of rising hopes, the Synod had its hopes dashed again in 1884. At that time it became clear that the English-speaking synods, as well as the General Council itself, tolerated the preaching of their pastors in sectarian churches. As if to rub salt in the confessional wounds, this laxity was made painfully clear when the Michigan Synod hosted the 1884 Convention of the General Council at Zion Church of Monroe. On Synodical Sunday two of the pastoral delegates preached in the local Presbyterian church. In light of this offense the Michigan delegates filed a formal protest. Their objection was at first ignored and then it was finally tabled. After failing to have any action taken at the 1886 Convention, the Michigan Synod boycotted the 1887 meeting. Once again there was no action taken to satisfy the Michiganders.

After years of fruitless protests, President Eberhardt in 1888 recommended, “We must publicly declare our position over against the General Council by severing our connections with that body. Until we take that step, we shall rightly be regarded as un-Lutheran by positive Lutherans.”³⁵ After 21 years the Michigan Synod ended its relationship with the General Council. This action was neither rash nor hasty. It came after careful study of Scripture and patient, some would say excessive, admonition.

Michigan’s two-decade adventure in the General Council was profitable from the vantage point of the spiritual growth of its faithful members. It, however, was extremely costly as far as its relationship with other confessional Lutheran bodies was concerned. Its membership in the General Council prevented the Michigan Synod from affiliating itself with the Synodical Council and gaining the help of the Missouri and Wisconsin Synods. Michigan’s loss went beyond the lack of doctrinal support from confessional brothers. If the Michigan Synod had joined the Synodical Conference earlier, it could have profited from the use of the Conference’s colleges and seminaries.

The Michigan Synod needed pastors and teachers to serve its congregations. Unfortunately, they had looked for them in all the wrong places and in the process they had delayed the establishment of their own worker training institution. Studying this matter fifty years ago, Pastor Oscar Frey lamented:

Not only was the synod not able to obtain the desired number of workers but, as already mentioned, not a few of those who were obtained, were incompetent, unfaithful. The first 30 years it secured its pastors from almost everywhere, although after 1866 it did cease to apply to Basel on account of the sad experience it had with a number of its candidates. Its hope of obtaining an adequate and satisfactory source of supply of candidates by joining the Council was not realized. For awhile, during the late ‘60s

³⁵ Michigan Synod Proceedings, 1888, p 18.

and in the '70s it procured a number of pastors from the Pilgermission in Chrischona and later Hermannsburg and Kropp supplied it with most of its new men. In such a conglomerate body, composed of men of such vastly different theological training, unity in doctrine and practice was hardly possible and it was probably only that by the grace of God it had such leaders as Klingmann and Eberhardt in those critical years that orthodox Lutheranism did win out in the synod.³⁶

As the Michigan Synod approached the end of its relation with the General Council, it finally came to the conclusion that it would have to train its own workers. Pastor Christoph Eberhardt was elected president of the Synod in 1881. He apparently recognized that Michigan could not continue to ignore worker training without causing terminal harm to the body. In his 1884 report to the Synod he asked, "Is God about to show us a different way to come to our aid?" During that same year the convention resolved: "That the importance of training pastors be considered, because we must rely on ourselves for such training instead of on others; and that the time is at hand for the practical realization of this desire."³⁷

The resolution hints that the time was auspicious to begin worker training in the Synod. This was undoubtedly a reference to the offer of Pastor Alex Lange of Remus. Pastor Lange had previously served as a professor at the seminary in Buffalo, New York. He announced that he was willing to train young men for church work, in addition to carrying out his congregational responsibilities. After a quarter century of inactivity, excuses and delays, the Michigan Synod's seminary suddenly became a reality. In the spring of 1885 Lange reported to the pastoral conference that a few young men had presented themselves as students of the seminary and they had, in fact, begun their studies.³⁸

Shortly thereafter, Pastor Lange accepted a call to Manchester in Washtenaw County. This placed him in the center of the Synod. In addition, George Heimerdinger, a member of the Manchester congregation, presented the Synod with the use of a two-story brick building for two years. It was in this house that the Michigan Seminary opened in August, 1885. In its 1886 convention the Synod officially adopted the school as its own and called Pastor Lange to serve as its professor and director. The seminary began with six students. Three more were added in October, 1885, and two others entered the program in 1886. From these original eleven students five men – G. Ehnis, F. Krauss, G. Wacker, J. F. Hennig and J. Westendorf – would enter the ministry.³⁹

Since the house in Manchester was available for only two years, it was necessary to plan for a permanent facility so this successful beginning could continue. During the 1886 convention the congregations of the Michigan Synod were asked to express themselves concerning the building of a seminary. If they were in favor of such a project, they were also to indicate where they wanted the seminary built. Only the congregation

³⁶ Oscar Frey, "Outward Growth and Inner Development of the Michigan District in the Century Past." Essay delivered at the Michigan District Convention, 1950, p 7.

³⁷ Michigan Synod Proceedings, 1884, p 28.

³⁸ Brenner, p 7.

³⁹ Frey, p 8.

in Fredonia was not in favor of the building project. Six congregations asked that the seminary be built in their community. This number included the congregations in Lansing, Zilwaukie, Ypsilanti, Saline, Adrian and Saginaw. All made special promises of support, if their city was chosen.⁴⁰ The convention decided to select the location of the seminary by ballot. On the first ballot 44 votes were cast: Saginaw 19, Saline 3, Adrian 18, Lansing 3 and Ypsilanti 1. Zilwaukie had withdrawn from consideration before the vote took place. It was then decided to have a run off ballot between the top two contenders. On the second ballot Adrian was chosen as the home for the seminary; 24 congregation voting for Adrian versus 18 congregations for Saginaw.⁴¹

As you know, of course, the seminary was actually constructed in Saginaw. The change of location was engineered in January, 1887. President Eberhardt, who also happened to be the pastor of St. Paul's in Saginaw, called a special meeting of the Synod at Lansing. This convention considered whether the Synod was really ready to build a seminary. When it decided to go ahead, it also agreed that the format of the new seminary would be "practical" rather than "theoretical." Then the resolution to build the seminary at Adrian was reconsidered. The original decision was revoked and Saginaw was designated as the site for the school by a vote of 25 to 9. Although we might conjure up a variety of reasons for this move, not the least of which would be the Synod's president wanting the school in his own backyard, we must be careful not to get carried away. The official minutes of the meeting do not provide the rationale for the change.

Perhaps the best explanation for the change in location comes via Eberhardt's own notebook. There he compares the offers of assistance made by Adrian and Saginaw. He calculated that the Synod saved \$3,487 by building in Saginaw. Since the Synod had previously decided that it would not go into debt more than \$2,000 for the seminary's construction, it might well be that the change was motivated by financial considerations more than anything else. When one remembers that the entire sum flowing into the Synod's treasury from 1885 to 1888 never reached \$2,300, financing the school was a major concern.⁴² Saginaw had several building sites to offer, but more importantly it guaranteed a gift of \$4,150, if it was chosen as the seminary's home.⁴³

The Synod saved money by building in Saginaw, but it temporarily lost a congregation in the process. St. Stephan's congregation in Adrian left the Michigan Synod over this matter and did not renew its membership for several years. The congregation was upset by the entire procedure. Perhaps it considered President Eberhardt's calling of a special convention to be high-handed and self-serving. In Eberhardt's defense, however, it must be said that he was committed to the seminary. This is evident from his donation in February, 1887, of the 2½ acre⁴⁴ site on which the school was built. Even more important was his strong

⁴⁰ Michigan Synod Proceedings, 1886, pp 43-45.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp 46-47.

⁴² Continuing in His Word, p 186.

⁴³ Frey, p 9.

⁴⁴ Continuing in His Word, p 186, indicates that the property was "about 2 ¾ acres on Court Street". In 1892 Eberhardt donated another acre to the campus.

support for the school, his careful, mature advice and his willingness to be an adjunct member of the seminary's faculty. It is not surprising that he gained the affectionate title, "Father of the Michigan Seminary."

The ground breaking for the seminary took place on 30 April. On 28 August 1887 the seminary building was dedicated during the Synod Convention in Saginaw. Since the building was not quite done at that time and because furnishing were not yet installed, the opening service of the Michigan Seminary did not take place until 20 September. The entire cost of the project, which included a barn and equipment, as well as the main building, was \$8,871.61. Of this amount the Synod went into debt only some \$1,080.

Classes began on 21 September. Director Lange taught the ancient languages and exegetical theology. Pastor Eberhardt taught dogmatics, pastoral theology, homiletics and mathematics. Pastor F. Huber taught English and Teacher E. Sperling was in charge of music and singing. The course of study was to be seven years. The first four years were to provide the academic background necessary to complete the three-year study of theology. Because of the pressure for workers, very few students remained at the seminary for the entire seven years. When the first school year in Saginaw ended on 28 July 1888, the first two candidates for ministry, J. F. Henning and H. Luetjen, were sent out. The seminary was already bearing fruit.

Joining Together and Falling Apart

One is a lonely number. Having left the General Council in 1888, the Michigan Synod had no intention of remaining aloof from other Lutherans. This time, however, Michigan wanted friends whose confessional stand matched their own and whose practice matched its constitution. Although it was in no hurry to enter a new relationship, Michigan's goal was affiliation with the Evangelical Synodical Conference of North America.⁴⁵ It would be 1892 before the goal was reached. This was not indicative of any doctrinal concerns on Michigan's part. Its synodical publication, *Der Synodal-Freund*, founded in 1888, was very supportive of the Synodical Conference. Michigan, however, had a number of internal concerns to address, while it carefully considered this outside attachment.

Growth and development characterize the Michigan Synod during the period from 1888 to 1892. In those years the Michigan Synod received 12 pastors from its new seminary and an equal number from other sources. Not only was there a concerted effort to promote sound doctrine within its ranks, the body also worked to align its practice with its confession. One factor that contributed to this improvement was the establishment of the Visitation. The Visitors were asked to make contact with every congregation in their care once every three years. If possible, this was to take place on Sunday. The Visitor would then be able to hear the sermon. Later they were to address a series of questions to the congregation: "Is church discipline practiced, and in what

⁴⁵ This federation of American Lutheran synods was formally organized at Milwaukee, Wisconsin, 10-16 July 1872. The charter members were the Missouri, Ohio, Wisconsin, Norwegian, Illinois and Minnesota Synods.

manner? Are the divine services well attended? Are there any persistent abuses prevalent in the congregation? How are the contributions divided? Is the synodical publication read?"⁴⁶

Further evidence of the inner growth of the Synod was acceptance of a new constitution. The 1865 version had been brief and inadequate. It also contained statements that could easily be misunderstood. The new constitution represented several years' work. Unfortunately, it was too detailed and there was still some ambiguity in its statements. A third edition of the constitution was necessary and was finally adopted in 1903.

The 1892 convention of the Michigan Synod ended its brief period as an independent Lutheran body. The delegates voted in favor of pursuing membership in the Synodical Conference. It resolved that inasmuch as we are one in doctrine with the honorable Ev. Lutheran Synodical Conference of North America, and are earnestly engaged in eradicating all unsound practice among us, we herewith address an application for membership to the Synodical Conference which meets in New York later this summer.⁴⁷

The Michigan Synod's proposed affiliation with the Synodical Conference had also generated another proposal – the merger of the synods of Wisconsin, Minnesota and Michigan. The Minnesota Synod has proposed this venture in 1891 and the Pastoral Conference of the Michigan Synod had met with Minnesota's President Albrecht and Professor Schaller to review amalgamation plans at Marshall, Michigan in the fall of 1891. In addition, representatives of all three synods had met on 21 April 1892 to write a prospectus that could be presented at the three synod conventions.⁴⁸ That such a venture should be proposed was not surprising. The three synods had much in common: a similar German heritage, initial problems with confessionalism that had been overcome and a temporary membership in the General Council. At the Marshall meeting the Michigan Synod enumerated other, perhaps stronger, reasons for considering this issue:

We would gain a promising mission field in the west which would be required by us if the Seminary should offer us further blessings; the strengthening which we thereby anticipate, both inwardly and outwardly; the opportunity in that way of a better training of pastors and teachers; and the most effective carrying on of the church's charitable work.⁴⁹

After the Michigan Synod had resolved to apply for membership in the Synodical Conference, it had a lengthy debate on the federation question. The debate revolved around the eight points of the prospectus approved by the delegates from the three synods in April.

1. The three Synods of Wisconsin, Minnesota and Michigan will become one under the name of: "The Joint Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Wisconsin, Minnesota, Michigan and other States."
2. The three Synods will for the present form three Districts, that of Michigan, that of Wisconsin and that of Minnesota.
3. The Joint Synod is to have its own printing office and bookstore.
4. The Joint Synod is to publish a common parish paper, a theological journal, a school gazette and a yearbook. It is also to edit books for church and school. All official announcements, reports of

⁴⁶ Continuing in His Word, p 95.

⁴⁷ Michigan Synod Proceedings, 1892, p 34.

⁴⁸ Continuing in His Word, p 95.

⁴⁹ "Brief History," p 197.

ordinations and installations, notices referring to conferences, receipts and so forth are to be publicized in this common parish paper. The titles of the existing parish papers of the individual Synods are to be changed in this manner instead of being called PUBLICATION OF THE SYNOD OF _____ the name will be EDITED BY THE _____ DISTRICT OF THE JOINT SYNOD OF WISCONSIN, MINNESOTA, MICHIGAN AND OTHER STATES.

5. Home missions for the present are to be the responsibility of the Districts. They are, however, to be under the supervision of the Joint Synod, which is to supervise the manpower and the funds available for this purpose.

6. All rights and privileges not expressly assigned to the Joint Synod continue as those belonging to the Districts.

7. The government of the institutions now existing, or those still to be established, is to be the prerogative of the Joint Synod. Such institutions are to be the following: (a) a theological seminary in Wisconsin. (b) a joint academy and a common teacher's seminary. (c) an academy or a pre-seminary in Minnesota and in Michigan.

8. The institutions presently existing shall remain the property of the districts who now hold title to them, until they are voluntarily transferred to the general body.⁵⁰

The Michigan Synod finally resolved "that the Ev. Lutheran Synod of Michigan, realizing the practical advantages, concur in a merger with the synods of Wisconsin and Minnesota."⁵¹ It then went on to unanimously accept the eight points governing the merger of the three synods.

The final condition for the merger, that the Michigan Synod join the Synodical Conference, became a reality at the Conference's meeting later in the summer of 1892. That action paved the way for the constitutional convention of the Joint Synod in Milwaukee, 11-13 October 1892. Michigan fully supported this merger effort, knowing that it would have to convert its beloved seminary into a preparatory school. It was only later that some had second thoughts about what they had done.

On 27 April 1893 the Lord called his faithful servant Christoph Ludwig Eberhardt home. He had been one of the charter members of the second Michigan Synod, its president from 1881-1890 and the "Father of the Michigan Seminary." His prestige and his good counsel were removed at the beginning of the merger when, from our human point of view, it was needed most. Although the Synod had unanimously agreed to convert the seminary to a preparatory school, it soon became evident that a small number, most notably the members of the seminary faculty, were not happy with the arrangement. They petitioned for a temporary continuation of the theological department at Saginaw.

In retrospect it would have been better if Michigan had denied the petition and fulfilled the agreement. The Joint Synod also contributed to the painful situation when it allowed a concession to the original agreement. The Joint Synod noted: "It will be extremely difficult to achieve a desirable theological training in the institution at Saginaw. However, due the existing circumstances, we must leave the adjustment of the matter to

⁵⁰ Michigan Synod Proceedings, 1892, p 14-15.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p 35.

the honorable Synod of Michigan.”⁵² Undoubtedly the Joint Synod hoped that patience on its part would win over the dissenters. This did not happen.

The growing bitterness surrounding this issue became evident when President Lederer and the entire administration of the Michigan Synod was voted out of office in 1894. The new president, Pastor Carl F. Boehner, had once served in the Wisconsin Synod where he acquired a reputation for his harshness and his impetuosity. His administrative style only aggravated an already deteriorating situation. When some began to entertain ideas of splitting from the Joint Synod, a peace conference was held in an attempt to heal the wounds. In the spring of 1895 the president of the Joint Synod, Professor August Ernst of Watertown’s Northwestern College, met with representatives of both sides in the Michigan Synod. Those present at the meeting agreed that they would seek a resolution allowing the Saginaw institution to serve as a seminary for three or more years and then be converted into a preparatory school.

The Michigan Synod’s 1895 convention, however, resolved that all students presently enrolled at Saginaw should receive their theological training there. It petitioned the Joint Synod to support this resolution. Tempers flared in Michigan when a minority protested this action. Declaring that they had no confidence in either the synodical leadership nor in that of the seminary, they walked out of the convention. The problem escalated when the minority brought charges against the administration of the Michigan Synod and the Michigan Seminary at the convention of the Joint Synod in 1895.

When the Joint Synod rejected the petition of the Michigan Synod that would have allowed the retention of the theological department at Saginaw, the dispute intensified. The breach not only threatened to separate the Michigan Synod from the Joint Synod, there was an immediate break within the ranks of the Michigan Synod. The minority, who had objected to Michigan’s plea to extend the theological training at Saginaw, now refused to turn over contributions given for the Synod. This led to the suspension of the ten pastors involved. These men immediately organized themselves and decided to send delegates to the 1896 meeting of the Synodical Conference, where they filed charges against Michigan’s President Boehner and his supporters.

Since the Michigan Synod was not represented at the Synodical Conference convention, the Conference appointed a committee to investigate the problem and submit a report to the next convention. The dispute reached its inevitable conclusion when at its 1896 convention in Sturgis the Michigan Synod resolved to end its involvement in the Joint Synod, leave the Synodical Conference and exclude the suspended Michigan pastors, now eleven in number.⁵³ This group then organized itself as the Evangelical Lutheran District Synod of Michigan and retained membership in both the Joint Synod and the Synodical Conference.

⁵² *Continuing in His Word*, p 96.

⁵³ *Michigan Synod Proceedings*, 1896, pp 43-45.

How had affairs deteriorated so rapidly and so bitterly, given Michigan's initial agreement on the seminary issue? Professor J. P. Koehler was very blunt, when he reviewed this turn of events. He wrote:

The Michigan Synod, within four years, suffered a split that was not healed until fifteen years later. The original stock of this synod's pastors that had received its training in Saginaw was in an ugly mood, because the proposed conversion of their institution into a preparatory school, which would give it only a high-school rank, was deemed a degradation. No doubt, too, the superior caliber of the Kropp contingent in the Michigan clergy was resented (most of these eventually landed in Wisconsin). The ugliness of the mood appeared in what happened in the course of several years.

The attachment of the largely still immature, young element for their alma mater was exploited by Boehner, Linsenmann, Merz and Huber. The first-named was an unstable character which the Wisconsin Synod found out; in addition, the man was unscrupulous. His three partners were men who attained to positions to which they were in no wise equal. They themselves did not realize their shortcoming but were rather filled with self-importance. None of them was competent to teach Sexta, still they were supposed to teach theology.⁵⁴

Reunion

Faced once again with being a "Lone Ranger" synod, Michigan was open to finding new companions. The same leadership, who led the Synod out of its affiliations with the Joint Synod and the Synodical Conference, now led it into a new relationship with the Augsburg Synod. This Augsburg was not so much a synod as it was a collection of independent pastors. When the Augsburg Synod announced in 1896 that it was seeking fellowship with a synod that had a seminary and was willing to unite, Michigan began negotiations. A delegation from the Augsburg group attended the Michigan Synod's convention in 1896. This was followed by a colloquy in Saginaw on 19 and 20 May 1897, at which a doctrinal basis for fellowship was found. The formal declaration of fellowship was announced in Lansing at Michigan's 1897 convention.⁵⁵

It quickly became apparent, however, that this association was a mistake. When Augsburg tolerated false doctrine and practice among its pastors and refused to take action against them, the Michigan Synod properly objected. By 1900 the Augsburgers were tired of the discussions and asked that the affiliation be dissolved. Michigan quickly agreed, resolving:

Since the Ev. Lutheran Synod of Michigan has come to the conclusion that individual members of the Venerable District of Augsburg are departing from our Evangelical Lutheran doctrine and practice, and the District-of-Augsburg majority refuses to proceed with this matter, hence we thereby are made to realize that we are not of one spirit, so then we find no reason why this request should not be heeded and that without further debate.⁵⁶

This action is indicative of the change in spirit that was taking place within the Michigan Synod. The change began already in 1898 when the Synod replaced all the officials responsible for the fractures within Michigan and for the break with the Joint Synod and the Synodical Conference. Within a few years there had

⁵⁴ Koehler, p 192.

⁵⁵ Michigan Synod Proceedings, 1897, pp 22.

⁵⁶ Koehler, p 222.

also been a complete turnover in the faculty at the Michigan Seminary. The change in synodical leadership turned out to be a positive move, but the new director at the seminary would ultimately close the school.

Pastor W. Linsenmann had served as director of the Michigan Seminary from 1895 to 1902. He was succeeded by Pastor F. Beer. It appeared that he was a natural for this position, having previously taught at a preacher's seminary in Kropp. A man of scholarship, acknowledged as a teacher with gifts, recommended as a man whose doctrine represented the Missouri Synod, everyone anticipated the seminary would flourish. The opposite happened. Students withdrew from the school in increasing numbers. Before Beer's arrival there had been as many as 24 students in attendance, by 1907 there were only three students at the seminary and two of them were due to graduate in June. Although the minutes of the seminary Board do not clearly address the reasons for the decline, it seems that Director Beer's discipline was the problem. Believing there was a spirit of insubordination in the student body, he clamped down on them and they left.⁵⁷

When the seminary Board investigated the situation, Beers did not cooperate. When the Board asked for his resignation, he refused. With no alternative the Board terminated Beers. Action was taken, but the damage had been done. Faced with only one student in the fall, the Board closed the seminary in 1907.⁵⁸

New synodical leadership and the closing of the seminary eased tensions as the Michigan Synod moved toward reunion. For a number of years men had been having second thoughts about the Synod's earlier actions. In 1904 two free conferences were held with Missouri Synod pastors to see if there was agreement in doctrine and practice. The conferences were the first step in the Michigan Synod's return to the Synodical Conference. That same year at the convention in Riga the question was asked, "How are we to view our withdrawal from the Synodical Conference?" Although it must have been difficult, the Michigan Synod answered:

1. We must acknowledge that such a step was unjustified and precipitate, because we must tell ourselves that neither need nor conscience compelled us, and that there was actually no cause for our manner of procedure.
2. We are compelled to express our deepest remorse that we were not willing to accept, nor to give audience, nor to make use of the good services offered to us by the authorized delegation of the Synodical Conference; particularly intensely we rue the manner in which we at the time slighted the delegation.⁵⁹

At its 1905 convention Michigan tabled a memorial to reenter the Synodical Conference because the congregations of the Synod were divided on the subject. The convention also recognized that Michigan's disagreements with the Wisconsin Synod would have to be resolved before a reunion with the Synodical Conference could take place.

⁵⁷ Frey, p 12.

⁵⁸ During the 20 years of its existence as a theological seminary, the Michigan institution trained 40 men for the ministry. Of this number 28 were serving as pastors in the Michigan Synod. Eleven had joined other synods and one was deceased, when the Michigan Seminary closed.

⁵⁹ Michigan Synod Proceedings, 1904, p 42.

The final step toward an internal reconciliation took place in 1906 at a meeting in Bay City between representatives of the Michigan Synod and the Michigan District Synod. Both sides freely admitted their guilt and adopted a series of six questions and answers. These statements were printed in the 1906 Proceedings of both groups. Their joint confession is a high point in what had been a dismal affair.

1. How does the Michigan Synod view the fact that it did not abide by the promise it gave at the establishment of the Joint Synod?

Answer: The manner and way in which the Michigan Synod broke the commitment it had entered with the Joint Synod of Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Michigan was disorderly and unbrotherly.

2. How does the Michigan Synod judge today concerning the protest of the minority at its convention in Saginaw in 1895?

Answer: We recognize that it was wrong for the Synod not to consider the protest submitted by the minority.

3. How does the Michigan Synod now view the suspension and exclusion of the minority?

Answer:

a) We now regret both the suspension and exclusion of the minority. (Note: The Motzkus case is excepted from this resolution.)

b) We recognize that the exclusion of Motzkus was unjustified because it happened without him being heard.

c) We, the Joint Conference, recommend that the two presidents settle the Ludington matter.

4. How does the Synod now stand on President Boehner's manner of handling the various congregations as described in the report of the District Synod in the year 1896?

Answer: We reprobate Boehner's letters as described in the Report of 1896 together with the practice presented in it.

5. Does the Michigan Synod admit that the above-mentioned practice was un-Lutheran and that moreover the Synod had lost sight of the fear and obedience of God's Word at the time?

Answer: Yes, the Michigan Synod admits to this.

6. How does the District Synod of Michigan stand on the declaration in the 1896 Report that the Michigan Synod embraced false doctrine and lost its orthodox Lutheran character?

Answer: The place (1896 Report, page 32) should be stricken as well as every passage which contains a direct accusation of false doctrines; we regret that in the heat of controversy we used such sharp expressions.⁶⁰

This mutual confession became the basis for the reunification of the two Michigan groups and for the Michigan Synod's reunion with the Joint Synod. The Michigan Synod and the Michigan District Synod had additional meetings in 1908 at Monroe and in 1909 at Saginaw, culminating in the reunion of the two groups in 1910. The reunion with the Joint Synod began with the appearance of Michigan's reunion committee before the Joint Synod's convention at Fort Atkinson, Wisconsin, in 1909. The final details were ironed out in the Michigan Synod's convention in 1910. Although four congregations at Albion, Kalamazoo, Marshall and Sherman were not happy with the reunion and left Michigan for the Missouri Synod, the fifteen years of alienation within the Michigan Synod and between the Michigan Synod and its doctrinal allies had finally come to an end.

Forward: The Reemergence of the Michigan Spirit

After almost two decades of *Sturm und Drang*, the positive spirit of the Michigan Synod began to reassert itself. With the return of Michigan to the Joint Synod, it was resolved that the Saginaw school should be reopened as a preparatory school. Its new board⁶¹ met for the first time on 1 June 1910 and decided to reopen the school that fall with one class, Sexta or Ninth Grade, and with the director as the sole professor. On 2 August 1910, Otto J. R. Hoenecke, pastor of Bethel congregation in Milwaukee, was called to the directorship. If the school was to open on schedule, there was not time to call again – a fact which was pointed out to Pastor Hoenecke, along with the report that 15-20 boys were waiting to enter. Hoenecke accepted the call, permitting the school to open in 1910.

The next month must have been a blur of activity. Pastor Hoenecke and family arrived in Saginaw on 9 September 1910. There was little time to prepare the facility or to send out proper announcements of the school's opening. The school formally opened on 13 September with a service attended by little more than two dozen worshippers and classes began on 14 September with only five students in attendance. Furthermore, when the school opened, it had no official name. It was Dr. Ernst, who at a later board meeting, proposed "Michigan Lutheran Seminary" for historical and sentimental reasons.⁶²

The fragile beginning in 1910 was rewarded with a healthier enrollment in 1911, as fourteen new students enrolled and the total enrollment reached eighteen. Growth continued as additional classes were added, so that 31 students were enrolled by the time all four classes were represented on the campus. The increased enrollment necessitated the building of a three-story dormitory in 1912-1913 that was capable of accommodating 50 students. MLS graduated its first class, numbering seven, on 16 June 1914. Michigan was once again producing future workers for the Lord's service. Although the numbers enrolled would fluctuate over the years, the trend, especially in recent years, has reached numbers that the forefathers never envisioned.

The turmoil that characterized the Michigan Synod at the turn of the century soon vanished and a productive "routine" replaced it. In 1917 the Wisconsin, Minnesota and Michigan synods⁶³ moved from federation to a final amalgamation into the Wisconsin Synod we know today. The change from an independent synod to a district in a larger body did not alter the spirit of the Michigan congregations. This "Michigan Spirit"⁶⁴ demonstrated itself in a love for mission work, the financial support of that mission work and a concern for charitable efforts outside its borders. Pastor Karl Krauss, whose ministry at Lansing's Emanuel Church spanned 58 years, defined the "Michigan Spirit" in the following way:

⁶⁰ *Michigan Synod Proceedings*, 1906, pp 9-10. Also found in *Michigan District Synod Proceedings*, 1906, pp 7-8.

⁶¹ Dr. A. F. Ernst, Joint Synod President F. Soll and Pastor K. Machmiller were selected for the Board by the Joint Synod. At its May 1910 Convention the Michigan Synod elected Pastors J. Westendorf of Saginaw and Wm. Bodamer of Toledo to the Board.

⁶² *Continuing in His Word*, p 191.

⁶³ A Nebraska Synod, formed in 1904, was also a part of this merger.

It is not easy to define; it is something that needs to be experienced. For those of us who grew up in the district it is even more than an experience; it is a flesh and blood thing. We are part of it, and it is part of us. It was stamped indelibly upon our life and being. As I see it, the “Michigan Spirit” was characterized by an almost fierce loyalty, a burning zeal, and a congenial camaraderie.⁶⁵

The era after World War I changed many things in the Michigan District, as well as in the Wisconsin Synod at large. The language of church services and school instruction was changing from German to English. With a reduction in immigration the old pattern of mainly doing “mission work” among German immigrants was in need of review. Furthermore, the population was shifting from rural America to its cities. There was need for a change in the way we did church work.

Professor E. C. Fredrich acknowledged,

The brethren in Michigan were the first to sound the clarion. In 1929 they presented to their fellow synodicals in convention a significant memorial, perhaps the most significant of the dozens of Michigan memorials that would dot and clot synodical proceedings in the years ahead.⁶⁶

The memorial reviewed the unchanging Great Commission as it applied to a changing world. In particular the challenges connected with the growth of cities was presented. The memorial then noted:

Since in our synod the work of missions is not a district matter, but one of the merged body, our district’s duty can and must be to alert the merged body, that is its general mission committee, to the mission opportunities, the mission assignments, and the mission need and to do all in our power to alert the church body to the situation and to encourage it to come to grips with it.⁶⁷

Unfortunately the Depression would set in and set back the evangelism efforts in America’s cities. Instead of reaching out, the 1930s and early 1940s were spent dealing with the fallout from the Depression and another world conflict.

The Depression hit at the same time that the Wisconsin Synod had gone into debt for a number of building projects. At the end of 1931 the synodical treasury was \$752,649 in debt. The annual interest on that debt was \$30,950. The economic situation in the country was reflected in synodical contributions. Income plummeted and the interest on the debt still had to be paid. Mission outreach did not seem practical when it was necessary to cut budgets and salaries across the board. Teachers and pastors were now available for work, but there were no funds to send them out.

Pastor Edgar Hoenecke in reflecting on this situation opined:

Michigan men were practical men. This condition did not cause them to wring their hands in frustration and despair. They went to work to solve the problem as it showed itself in their own Michigan District and its conferences and congregations. Concern about enabling the Wisconsin Synod to become more active in doing the Lord’s work in reaching out with the Gospel was always the basic motivation.

⁶⁴ For a fuller explanation of this term, “Michigan Spirit,” refer to Edgar H. Hoenecke’s essay of the same title, pages 265-289 in Michigan Memories.

⁶⁵ Karl Krauss, Michigan District History, 1833-1971. Published by the Michigan District, WELS. Ann Arbor, Michigan: LithoCrafters, Inc., 1972, p 10.

⁶⁶ Fredrich, Wisconsin Synod, p 172.

⁶⁷ Wisconsin Synod Proceedings, 1929, pp 67-69.

Now the old “Michigan spirit” of fraternal good fellowship come into its own to brush aside the problem of reaching the people in the pews with the information and appeal. Monthly informational bulletins with graphic illustrations of the workings of the synod, of its various enterprises in institutions and missions, and of its districts and conferences performances were printed and sent to the congregations. These were accompanied by charts for display in the church entrances.⁶⁸

Michigan’s support for the Wisconsin Synod’s mission efforts increased to the point that the Synodical Praesidium asked that the Michigan materials be distributed more widely. It was after the 1933 convention that the newly elected president of the synod John Brenner and the district presidents introduced into all the districts what became known as the “Michigan Plan.” In his 1935 convention report, President Brenner noted a 14% increase in offerings. The debt would still handicap synodical outreach efforts, but at the very least the increase was a positive expression of hope. After ten years of work, the debt had been retired and a contingency fund of \$350,000 had been accumulated to prevent similar problems in the future.

With the retirement of the debt and the end of World War II, attention could once again be focused on mission work. Pastor Karl Krauss wrote, “A great interest in and zeal for the cause of missions has always characterized the Michigan District.”⁶⁹ This led to Michigan proudly proclaiming itself “the Mission District,” since its members, clergy and lay, were frequently in the forefront of promoting mission expansion.

The 1945 convention voted to explore mission opportunities in Africa. Although there was a delay in finding two pastors to do the exploration, Pastor Arthur Wacker, pastor of Salem Church at Scio, Michigan, finally volunteered for this effort. He was joined by Pastor Edgar Hoenecke of Plymouth. Together they explored a promising field in Northern Rhodesia, later Zambia. They returned to the United States in time to file their report for the 1949 synodical convention.

No action was taken in 1949, but in 1951 the Wisconsin Synod voted to send two men to Africa and one man to serve members of the armed forces in Japan, while exploring mission prospects there. The overseas mission effort of the Wisconsin Synod, blessed by God, has expanded around the world from that humble beginning.

While the world mission program was getting off the ground, similar efforts were underway on the home mission front. Once again the “Michigan Spirit” was at work. This time the spirit’s characteristic of “rugged individualism” showed itself. In 1953 the synodical convention passed a resolution that allowed mission expansion into states which were adjacent to areas where work was already being done. There was, however, to be “no leapfrogging.” This came as the Michigan District mission board was considering expansion into Florida. Mr. Louis Ott, a long time member of the Michigan District mission board, had a

⁶⁸ Edgar H. Hoenecke, “The Michigan Spirit.” In *Michigan Memories: Things Our Fathers Have Told Us*. Bivens, Forrest L.; deRuiter, Richard A.; and Schaller, Daniel L., editors. Published by the Michigan District of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, 1985, p 285.

winter home in Florida and wanted a Wisconsin Synod mission in the state. From 8 to 17 February 1954, Pastors Karl Vertz of Owosso, Harold Zink of Stevensville and A. H. Baer of Adrian, members of the mission board, did the first exploratory work in Florida.

After doing the exploratory work, the Michigan District received permission from the General Mission Board to send one man to Florida. In September 1954 Pastor William Steih of Kawkawlin arrived in Florida to serve in “Florida in general and St. Petersburg in particular.”⁷⁰ By December he had organized Faith congregation. In March 1955 ground was broken for a chapel.

Since no provisions had been made for chapel construction in the original General Mission Board resolution, individual Michigan congregations gathered funds for this “daughter” of the district. \$15,000 was gathered to tide the congregation over until its chapel and parsonage expenses were provided for by the synod’s Church Extension Fund. Michigan’s mission board earned a stern reprimand from Milwaukee for moving ahead on these projects without authorization, but the synodical board had little choice but to assume the mission’s support. Within four years there were four congregations in Florida. By 1969 the synodical convention authorized the formation of the Gulf-Atlantic Mission District with a separate mission board. The southern congregations were still members of the Michigan District and continued to enjoy the encouragement of the mother district. Less than 20 years after the first pastor arrived in Florida, the new South Atlantic District was established. Michigan’s first daughter was on her own.

There were similar developments on the East Coast. Former Michigan District president Pastor Waldemar Zarling recounted,

Our first resident missionary was sent to Falls Church, Virginia. The establishment of that congregation again quickly led to the opening of new missions all along the Eastern Seaboard, so what was known as the Colonial Conference by 1983 became another new district, the North Atlantic District, in 1984.⁷¹ In reference to the Michigan District’s mission work Zarling concluded, “This mission expansion included, besides the new districts, activity within the states of Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Michigan itself. It can be said without fear of contradiction that the Lord richly blessed our efforts on his behalf.”⁷²

In addition to the development of mission fields at home and overseas, the Michigan District also promoted the strengthening of the WELS via a number of other efforts. The theological training of pastors had always been near and dear to Michigan’s heart. In 1946 the Michigan District suggested that the Thiensville Seminary make its course of study more practical. To that end it proposed the inauguration of a vicar program. In the same year Michigan also suggested that established congregations begin daughter congregations. At the

⁶⁹ James P. Tiefel, “A Few Faithful Men.” In *Michigan Memories: Things Our Fathers Have Told Us*. Bivens, Forrest L.; deRuiter, Richard A.; and Schaller, Daniel L., editors. Published by the Michigan District of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, 1985, p 300.

⁷⁰ Fredrich, *Wisconsin Synod*, p 213.

⁷¹ Tiefel, p 300.

⁷² Ibid.

1948 synodical convention Michigan again was ahead of its time when it suggested the calling of a full-time synodical mission executive. When such position were finally approved, it is interesting to note that many Michigan men filled them, including Pastors Edgar Hoenecke, Theodore Sauer, Duane Tomhave and Norman Berg. It should also be noted that the synod's Committee on Relief was begun in Michigan and until recently was manned almost exclusively by Michigan men.

Waldemar Zarling summarized the "spirit" of the contemporary Michigan District when he stated:

In brief then, the mood and trend of our district during the mid-century were ones of willingness to work and the will to do the work with whatever means could be profitable. As we look back upon that period we must join with those men who purveyed their own times and then concluded, "SOLI DEO GLORIA."⁷³

Concluding Comments

We can learn much from the Michigan of the past. We see the devastation that results from a weak confessional position or from the shortage of well-trained workers. We come to understand the need to listen to our brothers and to work together for the benefit of all concerned. Above all, we note in the Michigan Synod, and later in the Michigan District, a love for the Lord and a deep concern for the souls of people. These characteristics generated in its membership a zeal for missions and for the Lord's work in general.

In its earliest years this "spirit" showed itself in gathering together German immigrants around Word and Sacraments. At the same time the early fathers wanted to reach out with the gospel to the Native Americans in Michigan. In this century it meant that clergy and laymen worked together to overcome financial difficulties which threatened to stop the spread of the gospel.

The Michigan environment has changed substantially from the mid-1800s, yet the same desire to reach out to those near and far is evident. As conditions changed, there was no desire to change the Word. Michigan has been willing, however, to explore new ways of getting the message to those who need to hear it. At times Michigan has led by example; at other times it has prodded its brothers. Michigan's attitude has often been appreciated and just as often it has been derided. A readiness to offer another perspective or another way of carrying out the work is not a problem, as long as faithfulness to the Lord and his Word is the motivation and the goal.

In 1985 Pastor James Tiefel wrote:

There is no greater danger to a confessional church than administrative myopia, that attitude which brooks no dissent and accepts no challenge. In the author's opinion, the "Michigan Spirit" has helped to keep the Wisconsin Synod from developing that sort of attitude. Who would argue today that Michigan's reactionism in an earlier era was precisely what the synod needed? Whether her reactionism is needed today we will leave for history or heaven to judge.⁷⁴

⁷³ Ibid., p 314.

⁷⁴ Ibid., p 318.

As we review the history of Lutheranism in Michigan over more than 150 years and the work of the Michigan Synod and the Michigan District over the almost 140 years of its existence, we have to acknowledge God's goodness. In spite of our many failings, God has used the Michigan brethren to spread the message of life in Christ. He has preserved sound doctrine and allowed us to grow, both in numbers and in strength. As we celebrate the sesquicentennial of our Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, we thank and praise God for his blessings. We can join with Pastor Eberhardt and proclaim:

As we look back over the past . . . we must also exclaim with Samuel . . . , "Hitherto has the Lord helped us," us the pastors and us the congregations and their members. In how many difficulties has the Lord not spread his wings over us! He has helped us out of various troubles, worries and attacks from without and within, or strengthened us according to his fatherly compassion to bear them even though we were not freed from them. So also he will prove himself faithful to us in the future according to his great grace.⁷⁵

"Not to us, O Lord, not to us
but to your name be the glory,
because of your love and faithfulness" (Psalm 115:1).

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⁷⁵ Michigan Synod Proceedings, 1885, p 10-11.

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