

A HISTORY OF WELS MINISTRY TO ITS SERVICEMEMBERS DURING THE WAR YEARS

by

Mark E. Schoeneck

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## A History of WELS Ministry to Its Servicemembers During the War Years

As long as this world stands, "there will be wars and rumors of war." Since Lutheran Christians are "in" this world and since God has commanded his children to obey government (Rom 13), Lutheran Christians including WELS members have and will continue to serve in our country's armed forces.

This paper is about the efforts of WELS to minister spiritually to its own military members and others during the great wars. Particular attention will be given first to World War I (WW I), secondly to World War II (WW II) and the military chaplaincy question, and thirdly to the Vietnam conflict and the rise of the WELS civilian chaplain. We will see in this 55 year period (1917-1972) a certain historical development as WELS as a relatively small synod begins work in close cooperation with the Missouri Synod during WW I but plays a more independent and expanded role in WW II and finally in Vietnam as one of the only church bodies to call, pay for and send its own pastors to take care of its own members.

Having been a lifelong member of WELS and having served in our nation's Air Force for ten years, I have had a particular interest in WELS service to our military members. This paper has been a pleasure to research.

### I. WORLD WAR I

World War I, "the Great War," "the war to end all wars" was not our greatest war nor did it end all wars. But our Lutheran boys did serve in great numbers and the war did see the beginnings of an organized effort to minister God's word to our servicemen. The chaplains of WW I were not strongly regulated by the government; they served like Red Cross volunteers or News Correspondents today.<sup>1</sup> All that would change before WW II.

During the two years of this world conflict, the WELS which at that time was known as the Ev. Lutheran Joint Synod of Wisconsin, Minnesota, Michigan, and other States did its work among our servicemen primarily through the Missouri Synod's Lutheran Church Board for the Army and Navy. We were in fellowship with Missouri and Missouri being by far the larger of the two Synods naturally took the lead. Therefore the statistics listed, unless otherwise stated, will reflect the work of the Synodical Conference of which the WELS (Joint Synod) was a member. WELS had set a goal of raising one fifth of the cost necessary to minister to all Synodical Conference Lutheran soldiers.<sup>2</sup>

President John Brenner (Joint Synod) on Sept. 21, 1917, urged our families to send in names and addresses of our men to the Board for Army and Navy to a R. F. C. Streufert.<sup>3</sup> The Board organized local Synodical Conference pastors to begin work at the "camps" or "gathering places" of the trainees. Most of these

pastors began this work on a part time basis but as the war progressed and the camps grew, full-time pastors were obviously needed. For example, in Dec., 1917, Camp Grant has about 500 Lutherans<sup>4</sup> but by Feb., 1918, it had 3,943<sup>5</sup>. Already by Dec., 1917, it could be said that out of the 210 camps scattered throughout the United States, 175 had a Synodical pastor working with the men. By Feb., 1918, there were 24 fulltime camp pastors<sup>6</sup>.

Lutherans served in very sizable numbers during WW I. At Camp Grant the Lutherans were second in numbers only to the Catholics and at Camp Dodge they were the third largest religious denomination.<sup>7</sup> (Despite the German heritage and roots of no doubt most of the Lutheran soldiers, one pastor reported no "conscientious objectors" among our boys.<sup>8</sup>)

What exactly did the camp pastor's work involve? It involved first of all worship services. Although there were some Lutheran servicemen who didn't appreciate the services and "walked out", it was not uncommon to have services with over 350 men. Many a pastor reports the men "suddenly start hungering for the Word."<sup>9</sup> Services were even conducted for interned German seamen at a POW camp on the east coast and 300 Germans attended!<sup>10</sup> On March 17, 1918, the Synodical Conference dedicated a "Lutheran Center" building at Army City, Kansas. This was a 104' x 30' structure complete with social parlor, office, lavatory, camp pastor's room writing desks, and library for the men. This house was open from 3:00 a.m. to 10:00 p.m. daily. Rev. Carl Kurth was pastor; he also had an assistant. In the dedication sermon he reminded the men that they were fighting "a righteous war" and that they were "fighting for the fundamental principles dear to the heart of every true American."<sup>11</sup>

I quoted these last statements to remind the reader that the German Americans of the early twentieth century were not unAmerican. My father living in northern Wisconsin (Enterprise) has often spoken of "verbal" abuse the German Americans sometimes received during these times: "Whenever you drive down the road and come to an old broken down farm house, you know a German lives there!"

The work among Lutheran servicemen was not restricted to worship services. Hymn books, prayer books, Bibles, and "church papers" were given to the boys.<sup>12</sup> "Prayer Book for the Boys Under the Flag" was very popular.<sup>13</sup> Articles in the Northwestern Lutheran urged families and local congregations to write to their boys, to encourage them to use the word, and to send them gifts.<sup>14</sup>

The camp pastors also did what they could at the hospitals. One Lutheran pastor reports that he had to cancel services for two weeks because of an influenza epidemic at his base. He worked in the base hospital day and night. During those two weeks scores of men died including fourteen of our Lutheran boys.

The pastor reports that some Lutherans there died and he had never gotten their names referred to him.<sup>15</sup>

That brings up an unfortunate theme that reoccurs over and over again throughout both world wars, Vietnam, and even during peacetime: Send in the names and addresses of our men in uniform! Pastors can't help them if they don't know they are there. This is by far the most frequent request among pastors working with servicemen. It's bad enough the addresses change at the drop of a hat; it's bad enough that our people are often stationed in remote areas of the world where it is not feasible to send a WELS pastor, but to have spiritual help available and then to have it unused for lack of a name and address, that is a disaster not only for the church but also for the servicemen involved!

To carry on the camp work in WW I with all that was involved took money. The WELS (Joint Synod) had pledged to pay one fifth of the expenses to minister to Synodical servicemen. The Joint Reformation festival Oct., 1917 between Missouri and us collected \$1,800.00 and \$2,000.00 which went to the Board for the Army and Navy.<sup>16</sup> Between Nov., 1917 and March, 1918, the WELS collected \$9,956.08.<sup>17</sup> By Feb. 1, 1919, the Board had received a total of \$559,239.79 from members in the Synodical Conference.<sup>18</sup> The Board had projected a need of between \$75,000.00 to \$100,000.00/year back in 1917.<sup>19</sup>

These sums were very considerable for that day. One may be tempted to ask, "Why didn't we let the government also take care of the spiritual needs of our boys through the military chaplaincy program?" This question brings up a subject which will receive greater treatment before, during and after WW II. At the time of WW I, the Missouri Synod's Board for the Army and Navy was involved in the government's military chaplaincy program to some extent. By 1917 the Board had four Missouri Synod chaplains.<sup>20</sup> WELS too had a chaplain, a Pastor Schliesser.<sup>21a</sup>

But there are always problems whenever one gets involved with co-operative spiritual undertakings involving individuals and groups outside one's fellowship. In WW I our boys needed God's pure Word first even if many other desirable services had to be sacrificed.<sup>21b</sup> The Synodical Conference did not join with the National Lutheran Commission for Soldiers' and Sailors' Welfare, and organization of the liberal General Synod. Although we were called nonLutheran and nonAmerican, our defense was that if it was okay to work spiritually with the General Synod during war, then it was okay to work spiritually with them at any-time. There were some external matters where we did work together, for example in the setting up of worship service schedules.<sup>22</sup>

Late in the war, Oct., 1918, the war department of the government suddenly excluded all camp pastors from training camps. They said that since the soldiers

had to train under conditions similar to those in Europe and since the volunteer camp pastors wouldn't be there in Europe, the soldiers in training would have to get used to having only the military chaplain around. The Synodical Conference protested, so did the Baptist. Catholics were not affected by it.<sup>23</sup> To what extent this hampered our work, I'm not sure; the war ended about a month later.

At the height of our activity, Nov. 1, 1918, the Synodical Conference had 62 camp pastors and 100 camp "missionaries and local pastors."<sup>24</sup> After that activities wound down rapidly and the Board made plans to close May 1, 1919.<sup>25</sup> During the war, more than 80,000 hymnals and prayer books were distributed, plus 12,000 New Testaments, 425,000 sermons and 260,000 tracts.<sup>26</sup>

Although the work had been difficult, the Word had gotten through!

## II. WORLD WAR II

The history of WELS effort to minister to our servicemen and women during WW II is covered in some detail in "A History of Spiritual Services for Military Personnel" published by the Military Services Committee of the Special Ministries Board in Oct., 1982. We may summarize the activity with two facts: 1) A bigger war required a larger effort and 2) this was primarily a WELS effort.

It was a bigger war, it was a longer war, it lasted almost four years. The total number of WELS names in the files of the Spiritual Welfare Commission by the end of the war was 22,205. At the end of the war 364 WELS members were listed as "killed in action" or "died in service." Our wounded were over 1,100.

The numbers of men and women serving already in early 1941 were over 1000 and scattered throughout our country in some 175 camps and bases. It was obvious that an extensive mailing system would be required to reach all of our people on any kind of regular basis. Names and addresses had already been requested in 1940; by the time war broke out, there were over 2000 names being sent spiritual literature such as meditations and sermonettes. Northwestern Lutherans were mailed through the local congregations. On Jan. 30, 1941 the "Spiritual Welfare Commission" of the Ev. Lutheran Joint Synod of Wisconsin and other states was formed in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. This agency would co-ordinate efforts until taken over by the Specialized Ministries Board in 1970.

The names grew at a rate proportional to U.S. involvement in the war. WELS pastors worked full-time in the camps when concentrations of WELS members made the work feasible. Pastor A. Sydow served Fort Lewis in Tacoma, Washington; Rev. Erwin R. Scharf was called to serve the camps of Beauregard, Livingston, Polk, Claiborne and the air bases of Alexandria, North Camp Polk, and De Riddler all in Louisiana. Pastor Frederic Gilbert held WELS services at Camp Douglas for soldiers in the Wisconsin National Guard and German POWs at Camp McCoy (in

1944 he served members of the U.S. naval base at Camp Farragut, Idaho). By the end of 1942, we had 22 pastors serving congregations near the camps, naval stations, and airfields who also ministered to our servicemen.

By March, 1944 the picture had changed. The file names had multiplied to some 17,000, but the stateside camps and bases had become relatively deserted. This reflected the large concentration of U.S. forces in Europe and the Pacific. Mail became the primary method of spiritual outreach. We make note of the fact that throughout the war, it was primarily a WELS ministry that took care of our men. We co-ordinated with Missouri's Army-Navy Board in 1941, so as not to duplicate efforts but Missouri was deeply involved in the government's military chaplain program. The whole matter of military chaplains had been studied and restudied even before the war broke out. Although the matter was restudied in the Synodical Convention at Saginaw, Michigan in Aug., 1941, the Wisconsin Synod refused to participate in the military chaplaincy program.

The problems centered around the doctrine of the "divine call" and "fellowship" principles. We saw a violation of the separation of church and state as well as a doctrine of Scripture when the government is involved in "calling" pastors, paying them, sending them to a place decided by the government, and terminating their call. The church calls pastors not the government.

We also saw dangers of being forced to practice "unionism" with Lutherans as well as others of whom we were not in fellowship. The matter of being obligated to give a Christian burial to an unbelieving soldier was an obvious example. Although the government manuals did have many fine statements designated to protect the consciences and practices of military chaplains who originally were pastors in the denominations, the very fact that a military chaplain is "called" to serve a particular base or command is going to lead to unionism since most of the personnel in that command will probably not be of his denomination.

Of course all this would pose no problem to a liberal, broadminded, ecumenical pastor, but to a pastor committed to God's word in all its truth and purity, neither adding or subtracting from it, and compelled to point out deviations from that word as well as refusing to join in prayer and worship with those who do not hold to all Christian truths, that pastor will have a hard time remaining true to Christ's word when he works with and along side of priests, rabbis, and pastors of denominations in error as well as servicemen of the Mormon, Christian Science, Unitarian, and other non-trinitarian persuasions. Military chaplains in practice can promote only the, "we are all God's children; we are all essentially of one faith" religion our government by nature must promote.

Missouri countered by saying that the military chaplaincy spells "opportunity" to reach out to non-Lutherans with the Gospel. The military chaplain, then said,

basically never has to go against his conscience. But Professor Erwin Scharf (WELS) who had opportunity to talk with some Missouri Synod chaplains during WW II noted that these chaplains were often unhappy. One of these chaplains was requested by his commander to arrange for "cards and girls" for the boys. Another who tried to minister to Missouri Lutherans in other companies soon found himself "transferred" to a remote camp with few men. Being "liberal and broadminded" has its price.

Yet Missouri itself in its own manual for its military chaplains urged its chaplains "to provide a spiritual ministry to all men and women placed in their charge".<sup>27</sup> Missouri practiced unionism with Lutherans of other liberal synods. Prof. Scharf noted how open communion was practiced by Missouri for example at the Darge Lutheran Center set up by the non-WELS synods in Alexander, Louisiana. Missouri's manual states,

"In exceptional situations, where a member of one group earnestly seeks admission to the Lord's Supper conducted by a representative of the other group, the individual case in each instance will be considered by the pastor concerned. It is agreed that in such cases particular synodical membership of a Lutheran in the armed forces shall not be a required condition for admission to the Lord's Supper."<sup>28</sup>

It would be beyond the scope of this paper to go into more details and arguments listed by each side for their position. Missouri today uses military chaplains and WELS uses civilian chaplains to serve their members.

This writer served in the Air Force from 1970 to 1980. I have had experiences with the military chaplains during that time so I was to a certain extent able to evaluate both Missouri's and WELS from a personal point of view. Out of curiosity (not for worship) I did attend an occasional military service especially when I was stationed in Thailand.

My basic comment is what many WELS servicemen said, "You come out with about as much as you go in with." In other words, there just wasn't much spiritual benefit. The Episcopalian chaplain talked about doing what we can to bring peace to northern Ireland, the middle east, and Southeast Asia. He never mentioned Christ. One Sunday night a visiting chaplain spoke of "once saved, always saved" and decision theology." The Missouri Synod chaplain practiced open communion. Although there were some good things said and although I was happy anytime a chaplain spoke of Christ as our Lord and Savior from sin; nevertheless, as a rule the general military worship service is mostly moralizing, some false teachings, or maybe a little Gospel rolled together. Basically, you come out with about as much as you go in with, usually with much less. But back to WW II...

We have seen how we took the lead in taking care of our own. Not the government, not Missouri Synod, not any other Lutheran body but WELS ministered to WELS military people. But lest we be labeled as snobbish and self-centered, we ought to mention that the WW II mailing ministry went out to all who asked to have their names put on the list. Many of these were buddies, acquaintances, or relatives of our servicemen not necessarily of WELS or even Lutheran background.<sup>29</sup>

Our mailings reached even WELS POWs in German camps and to WELS civilians involved in the war effort away from home.<sup>30</sup> They went to Apache Lutherans, to WELS Army and Navy nurses, in short to anyone who got their name on the list. Our servicemen contributed \$2,254.15 to the Spiritual Welfare Commission to help with the outreach.

Once the war ended, although the mailing effort naturally wound down, WELS pastors continued to work with the 1,100 sick and wounded scattered in some 304 different hospitals and localities. We continued to send literature to members who stayed in the service.

Though the work was difficult, the Word had gotten through!

### III. VIETNAM - our most unpopular war

But these were to be the years of the WELS civilian chaplains. A total of seven pastors were granted leaves of absence at various times to service our servicemen in Vietnam from 1965 to 1972. Recall that by 1940 we had determined not to participate in the government's military chaplaincy program. But that did not mean we were not concerned for our servicemen and women in this new war zone.

The Spiritual Welfare Commission now known as the "Lutheran Spiritual Welfare Commission" began in 1965 to send pastors, one at a time, to Vietnam usually for about a one year tour.

Luther M. Voss:	1965 - 1967
Erwin Scharf:	1967 - 1968
Frederic Gilbert:	1967 - 1968
Melvin Schwark:	1968 - 1969
Waldemar Hoyer:	1969 - 1970
Roland Ehlke:	1970 - 1971
Karl J. Otto:	1971 - 1972

These Pastor/Civilian Chaplains would receive lists of names and APO addresses sent in to the Lutheran Spiritual Welfare Commission from pastors, families, and men themselves. Once the civilian chaplain arrived in Saigon, they would mail out a circular letter to all the names informing the men of their presence and requesting the encampments where each soldier was stationed. At the peak of the



war Chaplain Hoyer for example had names of about 800 WELS members. As the replies came back, the chaplain would then plan one or two day excursions to the various bases and attempt to meet the men personally. Pastor Voss made trips to Tan Son Nhut, Cholon, Cam Ran, Nha Trang, Dalat and others for example.

The chaplains would arrange for a place to be at a base and set up a time for a communion service. Those who could made it. But if the men came early or late the chaplain would still minister to them.

In between these excursions, the chaplains held weekly services in their hotel rooms or some place more churchly like the French Reformed Cathedral in Saigon. Chaplain Scharf reported an average of five men at each service for eight weeks. The men were invited to come anytime, even to stay overnight. They could listen to tapes of Christian music sent from our colleges and seminary, they could visit with the chaplain, talk over problems, and receive strength from God's word. The chaplains would write to all the men but it wasn't possible to meet all of the men, those stationed on ships for example or in remote encampments. Since our members were scattered the length and breadth of Vietnam, it was impossible to reach every one (although Chaplain Scharf did see over one third of our boys). And just because the chaplain came to a certain spot didn't always mean the soldiers could take off just to see him. Addresses continued to change frequently as they do in any war. Chaplain Scharf urged our people at home to write in all changes immediately; it was frustrating to search for a soldier who was sent home months ago.

The work was done under dangerous circumstances. Chaplain Scharf reported, "During the day we travel pretty much where we want to go to visit encampments. But as soon as darkness sets in, the war is on. One is careful to be in one's hotel room by 6:30. The bewildering thing is that many of the Vietcong who fight by night against us are right in our city by day. They go unrecognized. Every once in awhile someone is mysteriously killed right here in the city, and no explanation is ever forthcoming. At nightfall the war is all around us. From my hotel room I always see the night sky full of flares and often my room shakes with the rumble of explosion."<sup>31</sup> Chaplain Gilbert got caught in the 1968 TET Offensive and was placed under civilian arrest by our embassy officials for his own protection. Mrs. Roland Ehlke had trouble proving she was the wife of her husband, Chaplain Ehlke.<sup>32</sup> Then in the early 1970's with the troop withdrawals, finding the men became even more difficult than before.

But the work was carried on. The men braved hardships and dangers too as they tried to get to the chaplain's meeting places. The men were grateful for a church that went to all the cost and effort to send a pastor all the way to Southeast Asia, just for them. Some of the men shared their spiritual literature especially "Meditations" with their fellow soldiers and a sergeant donated a four-

track stereo tape recorder for use at the worship services.<sup>33</sup> Chaplain Ehlke reported watching a fatally wounded G.I.'s eyes light up after hearing John 3:16.

A word or two ought to be said against the charge that a civilian chaplaincy wouldn't work. Not only did it function but it earned the respect of many base commanders and others who realized the care we had for our own. The military establishment was co-operative as they provided transportation, information, and the use of military chapels to our chaplains whenever possible. The government co-operated with the chaplains without telling them what to preach and teach. Chaplain Scharf even received an I.D. card for travel authorized by General Westmorland.

After our troop withdrawal from Vietnam, our civilian chaplaincy was not abandoned; instead the Lutheran Spiritual Welfare Commission (now put under the newly created Special Ministries Board) began sending civilian chaplains to Europe where we have always had a relative concentration of our members serving in the military. Since this is a peacetime phase, my report will not include it but before I close, there are still a few things to be said about Southeast Asia.

We had pulled out of Vietnam by the end of 1972, but our government was still supplying air support to friendly forces fighting communists in Cambodia. I was stationed in Thailand in late 1973. The Lutheran Spiritual Welfare Commission by my request sent me a list of names of all WELS members at my base. I tracked down as many as I could find. Most were not interested but there were two others besides myself who got together for weekly Bible readings and prayer using one of the rooms in the base chapel. We received "Meditations", sermonettes, and Northwestern Lutherans from Synod and tapes from home congregations. We were not large but the fellowship was very close. I add these remarks to show how Synod helped servicemen even when there was no longer a civilian chaplain in Southeast Asia.

Conclusion:

The situation has not changed much since 1972. We have been sending a WELS civilian chaplain to Europe, in particular Germany because although the U.S. is not at war, there still are a large number of U.S. military (and civilian) personnel stationed in Germany and all over Europe. Our civilian chaplains minister to as many WELS members as they can. In 1973, there was a list of about 200 names of WELS servicemen and women in Europe.<sup>34</sup>

The military chaplaincy remains unionistic. In 1982, a military chaplain by the name of Hiers "bitterly attacked the convictions of a group of Independent Baptist crewmen and issued a 12 page tract against them, labeling them a "cult" and chiding them for their "fractious fellowship."<sup>35</sup> Missouri Synod remains deeply entrenched in the military chaplaincy program.

From our first civilian chaplain, a man by the name of Killian, in the Civil War<sup>36</sup> to civilian Chaplains Tim L. Johnston and Lee A. Neujahr in Europe, WELS has demonstrated a caring love for our men and women in the uniform. The Word is getting through. All praise and thanks to God!

## ENDNOTES

- 1) Prof. Erwin Scharf, March 3, 1975
- 2) The Northwestern Lutheran, Vol.4, pg 185
- 3) Ibid, Vol. 4, pg 142
- 4) Ibid, Vol. 4, pg 188
- 5) Ibid, Vol. 5, pg 17
- 6) Ibid, Vol. 5, pg 31
- 7) Ibid, Vol. 5, pg 17
- 8) Ibid, Vol. 5, pg 17
- 9) Ibid, Vol. 4, pg 197
- 10) Ibid, Vol. 4, pg 160
- 11) Ibid, Vol. 5, pg 69
- 12) Ibid, Vol. 4, pg 185
- 13) Ibid, Vol. 4, pg 188
- 14) Ibid, Vol. 5, pg 78
- 15) Ibid, Vol. 5, pg 190
- 16) Ibid, Vol. 4, pg 190
- 17) Ibid, Vol. 5, pg 64
- 18) Ibid, Vol. 6, pg 39
- 19) Ibid, Vol. 4, pg 185
- 20) Ibid, Vol. 4, pg 188
- 21a) Prof. Erwin Scharf, March 3, 1975
- 21b) The Northwestern Lutheran, Vol. 4, pg 195
- 22) Ibid, Vol. 5, pg 31
- 23) Ibid, Vol. 5, pg 163
- 24) Ibid, Vol. 6, pg 39
- 25) Ibid, Vol. 6, pg 39
- 26) History of Spiritual Services for Military Personnel, WELS Military Service Committee, Oct. 1982, pg 2
- 27) Manual for Lutheran Chaplains in the Armed Forces, Missouri Synod, pg 3
- 28) Ibid, pg 15, #8
- 29) The Northwestern Lutheran, 1944, pg 116
- 30) Ibid, 1943, pg 345
- 31) The Black and Red, Oct. 1967, pg 65
- 32) The Northwestern Lutheran, 1970, pg 371
- 33) Ibid, Vol. 54, pg 394
- 34) Ibid, 1974, pg 310
- 35) Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly, Spring 1983, pg 145
- 36) Prof. Edward Fredrich, 1985

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Also used were the letters, pamphlets, and tracts found in the Verticle File of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary library under Chaplaincy and Chaplain Correspondence. and a personal interview with retired Prof. Erwin Scharf of Northwestern College.