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A HISTORY OF THE FORMATION OF THE TWELVE WELS DISTRICTS

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The history of the districts of the Wisconsin Synod is one that follows a path of growth and expansion. It is filled with many untold stories of people going out to share the Word of God across our country. This history seeks to gather the circumstances that led up to new districts being formed as we sought to oversee the Lord's work.

As we begin a new millenium there is discussion over whether some of the current districts within our synod should be broken down into additional districts. This summary of the past district formations may help to guide those decisions.

The First Districts

In 1892 the individual synods joined in their work in a federation called the *Allgemeine Evangelisch-lutherische Synode von Wisconsin, Minnesota, Michigan und andern Staaten*. The Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Michigan Synods started this federation and were joined by the Nebraska Synod when it formed in 1904. Within this federation cooperative work was pursued in publication, missions and worker training. Each synod maintained its own oversight of other areas and its own administrative structures. The cooperative work took some time in getting organized and running. The planned theological journal did not see its first issue until 1904 when the *Theologische Quartalschrift* appeared and there was not always agreement on the setup for worker training, particularly from the Michigan Synod concerned over closing their seminary. Early cooperation was more along the lines of the federation adopting as their own the

work an individual synod already had going. The church periodical Gemeinde-Blatt and school journal Schulzeitung were now shared. The Apache mission, which Wisconsin had been planning, was now adopted by the federation.¹

By 1917 this federation progressed into the formation of the single synod that we have today. There was a "realization that the limited joint efforts...were proving so beneficial that they ought to be enlarged."² It also seemed natural since pastors had been taking calls between the various synods as if they were one. The federation had also served to establish true doctrinal unity. Fredrich points out that unlike other Lutheran mergers of the time, the Wisconsin merger was "created without any tensions in the doctrinal area."³

The 1917 merger brought the greatest development toward the district arrangement we see today. The four synods were divided up into six districts. The previous Michigan, Minnesota, and Nebraska synods now became districts. However, Wisconsin was divided up into the three districts that it is today--the Northern, Southeastern, and Western Wisconsin Districts. Wisconsin was ^{much} quite larger than the other synods and the division brought greater equalization in the numbers of pastors, congregations, and members represented within each district.⁴ The basic structure of districts within a single synod was set. However, this arrangement of six districts would see a division into eight within the next few years.

¹ E.C. Fredrich The Wisconsin Synod Lutherans p.93-105

² *ibid.* p.130

³ *ibid.* p.119

⁴ Wisconsin Synod Prodeedings, 1919, p.

The Pacific Northwest District

In 1895 St. Paul's Church of Tacoma, Washington joined the old Wisconsin Synod. This congregation originally began in 1884 when seven families organized a German Lutheran church and called a Pastor Wolff of the Ohio Synod.⁵ Thought was given to simply refer them to the Missouri Synod, which was already active in the area, but after two visitors were sent by the synod it was recommended that the congregation be allowed to join and that two or three other pastors be sent there as well.⁶ The third pastor to serve in Tacoma heard there were some Lutherans looking for a church in the north central part of the state and in 1905 Grace was started in Yakima.

Between 1907 and 1918 various pastors came and went serving in the congregations and doing exploratory work. Four of these pastors held the first conference for the area in November of 1910.⁷ Both the pastors of the congregations and specific exploratory pastors went out to find Lutherans throughout Washington, Idaho and Oregon. In 1912 the first Wisconsin Synod church in Idaho was started in Lewiston, but was later closed. After some previous exploratory work, Oregon was entered in 1916 by a Seminary graduate assigned to the town of Joseph. At the time of the 1917 merger there were 9 pastors serving in Washington and Oregon. But the work had been slow and was affected by a constant turnover. "It was difficult to get anyone but a Seminary graduate to come into the western mission field,"⁸ and many often soon accepted calls back to the mid-west due to marriage, family or financial considerations.

⁵ Gary Bode "The Early History of the Pacific Northwest District" p.1

⁶ J.P. Koehler The History of the Wisconsin Synod p.196-197

⁷ William Lueckel History of the Pacific Northwest District p.6

⁸ *ibid.* p.8

With the 1917 merger discussion arose about what to do with the congregations in the northwest. These congregations had previously been under the supervision of Wisconsin, but now they were looking at what the best arrangement would be. Pastor William Lueckel, who had been the graduate assigned to Oregon, wrote in his History of the Pacific Northwest District concerning this decision:

All the missions of the new Joint Synod were now conducted under the supervision of the District Mission Boards. The missions in the Northwest, however, presented a problem. They could have been combined with Dakota-Montana missions of the Minnesota District. Dakota-Montana became a District Synod in 1921. It was also suggested that the western Missions be assigned to the Nebraska District. The old familiar proposal was also heard again, "Turn the entire western mission field over to the Missouri Synod." While these various plans were being considered some one made the suggestion that the western missions become a District Synod. It was an astounding suggestion and the missionaries and churches in the West will be forever grateful to him who made it and to the Joint Synod for adopting it. No doubt the fact that F. Soll was exercising a stabilizing influence in the western missions had a bearing on the adoption of that suggestion.⁹

So in 1918 the congregations begun out of Washington were formed into the Pacific Northwest District. Synod President Bergemann journeyed to Grace, Yakima for the constituting convention held August 18-21, 1918 at which Pastor Fredrich Soll was elected the first district president. A district treasury was set up to help cover the travel expenses of the delegates and to cover the costs of a district newsletter the Evangelist. The numbers in the newly formed district at the time were 7 pastors and 447 communicant members.¹⁰ In 1920 they also formed their own Mission Board. The districts of the Wisconsin Synod now numbered seven.

⁹ *ibid.* p.11

¹⁰ *ibid.* p.13-14

Dakota-Montana District

As noted earlier by Lueckel, the area of North and South Dakota and Montana also was examined soon after the 1917 merger of the synod. Pastor Karl Sievert records that the work in this area had been initiated from the Minnesota Synod during the 1880s and by 1887 Pastor R. Volkert was working out of Redfield, South Dakota. Preaching stations began to be established often with the first services being held in sod huts. Many German-Russian immigrants had settled in the Dakotas who brought with them a mixed background of Lutheranism, Russian Orthodox mysticism, pietism, and an interest in revivalism.¹¹ The work was apparently often difficult and not many people were interested in what the Lutheran church had to offer.

As the railroad went west the settlers followed. And so did the missionaries. Work first progressed into the western Dakotas. Then in 1912 the first exploratory visit to Montana was made by a Pastor Hopp, who "did some preaching and baptizing there and then reported that Montana might offer fine mission opportunities to the Synod."¹² The early work in Montana mainly involved the rural activity of Pastor F. Wittfaut who traveled from ranch to ranch in his Model T and ministered to the needs of each family individually. He held some services in schoolhouses, but never had his own church building. In 1933 the first church was built in Circle, Montana.

Karl Sievert's Dakota-Montana history gives insight into the process of this area becoming its own district:

The development of the Dakota-Montana mission fields had extended into such great areas that the missionaries as well as other members of the

¹¹ Karl Sievert "Preaching the Gospel on the Dakota-Montana Prairies" p.5

¹² *ibid.* p.7

Minnesota Synod respectively requested and advised the formation of a new district.

This was not the result of a spontaneous action in 1920, the year the district was organized. As early as 1912, a newly formed conference of the Minnesota Synod had been organized at Lemmon, South Dakota, under the leadership of Pastor William Pankow. And even then the thought of forming a new district was noticeable, if the minutes of the conference in those early years may be believed. And when, in 1915, the first constitution for the Northwestern Lutheran Synod (that was the first name proposed) was drawn up, the creation of a district in the Dakotas was projected. In the constitution of 1917 the division of the Minnesota District was proposed. The fruition of these plans came in 1920.¹³

On June 25, 1920, at its district convention the Minnesota District split and a new district was created. "On that day 23 pastors and 6 lay delegates, all of them Minnesota District members attending its regular convention, held a meeting of their own and voted the Dakota-Montana District into being."¹⁴

The resolution at the Minnesota District convention suggesting this division set forth the following reasons:

1. much travel time and money would be saved when it came to attending conferences and larger meetings;
2. the area would have officials of its own, living in the field of labor;
3. a more stable ministry would ensue, on the grounds that pastors tend to stay in their own district.¹⁵

Travel time was great for those who had to travel by horse and car on primitive roads from the west. Money was an issue as well, even though railroads occasionally let clergy travel for free or at least at a reduced fare. This argument would be repeated in the formation of other new districts for years to come. Even when planes reduced travel time, the money issue was still pointed to.

¹³ *ibid.* p.8

¹⁴ E.C. Fredrich "The Minnesota District's First Fifty Years" p.16-17

¹⁵ *ibid.* p.17

Likewise, the argument for leaders in the field of labor would be raised again and again regarding other districts as different cultural atmospheres were observed in the different parts of the country and also over the desire for closer and more frequent contact. In this way it would often be felt that those making the decisions were better informed and able to more readily see when urgent action was called for.

In 1968 Prof. E.C. Fredrich reflected in his Minnesota District history essay on the third argument saying: "Even though time may not have fully validated the last of those reasons, the District division has not harmed the mother District and it has been beneficial to the daughter."¹⁶ And in fact, while the direct administration was separated, encouragement and support would still come from the mother district. "Even during its first decade Minnesota could help the Dakota-Montana erect its own synodical school, which opened at Mobridge in 1928."¹⁷

The statistical report in the synod's 1921 convention proceedings reports on the numbers in Dakota-Montana's first year as a district. There were 27 pastors, 58 congregations (27 independent and 31 synod subsidized) and 22 preaching stations. The number of souls was 6,997 of whom 3,447 were communicant members. There were also many schools being operated almost exclusively by the pastors of the congregations.¹⁸ Within only 4 years of its existence the merged Joint Synod had expanded from six districts to eight. Although, most of the work in the areas of these new districts had been going on previous to the 1917 merger and the new district formation was almost inevitable.

¹⁶ *ibid.* p.17

¹⁷ *ibid.* p.17

Concerning the early years of this new district Prof. Fredrich wrote:

The exodus of pastors from the Dakota-Montana area may not have been arrested during the first decades of the district's history. In the mid-century years this comparatively small district would often claim the lion's share of the graduates of the theological seminary. The district learned to live with this problem and survive, even during the Depression.¹⁹

Within four years of the new district there were 20 more congregations and 5 more pastors. The number of souls had grown from 7000 to 8000. In an essay presented for the 50th anniversary of the district it was written: "It would seem, on the basis of these early statistics, that the formation of the new district had been justified. And the continued interest in, and support of the General Synod's entire program over the [first] fifty years of its existence fully confirms such justification."²⁰ And yet, the history of the Pacific Northwest and Dakota-Montana Districts "is not a record of large numbers or rapid growth, but of building and maintaining congregations in outposts, where Lutherans represent only a small part of the total population."

For the time being the organization of 8 districts was serving the purpose. However, the arrangements have always been questioned from time to time and suggestions made. The 1939 synod convention was asked to consider one of these proposals. A layman from Mason City, Iowa submitted a memorial suggesting the three Wisconsin Districts be made into four. In the 1940 Report to the Eight Districts a study committee reported that the arguments made were for geographical and economical reasons. The (2 man?) study committee also said they had considered effectiveness in administration. They submitted that "smaller districts are governed more easily than

¹⁸ Synodal-Bericht, 1921

¹⁹ E.C. Fredrich The Wisconsin Synod Lutherans p.142

larger ones; information is passed more quickly to the individual congregations; visitation can be carried out more frequently."²¹

But they were not convinced in this case that an additional district was justified. Regarding the geographical obstacles they stated that "regardless of division there will be such who at some time or other would have greater distances to travel to conference and synodical meetings."²² They felt there would be no savings economically since "new boards, new officials would entail additional expenses for travel to board meetings, General Synod meetings, Synodical Committee meetings, etc."²³ They felt the administration concerns were being handled by the formation of additional conferences within the districts. Also they pointed to the history of the standing arrangement. The previous work of forming new districts at the time of the 1917 merger had shown that "smooth administration of each District's affairs was attained only after a period of adjustment. A new arrangement would again disrupt such smooth functioning."²⁴ A final concern was that the rearranging might dampen mission spirit:

We feel it is wholesome and inspiring for each District to retain its own missions and with them their interest in them. Under the proposed arrangement the Western Wisconsin and Northern Wisconsin Districts would be shorn of the greater portion of their mission fields and the problems of these mission fields would then remain more or less their own.²⁵

For the time being there would remain eight districts. But the ball was already rolling for the formation of the next district--Arizona.

²⁰ Karl Sievert "Preaching the Gospel on the Dakota-Montana Prairies" p.9

²¹ Report to the Eight Districts, 1940, p.32

²² *ibid.* p.32-33

²³ *ibid.* p.33

Arizona-California District

Already in 1927 Arizona had begun seeking district status. This request was renewed in 1937 when several memorials came before the convention asking new districts to be formed in both Arizona and Colorado. Arizona had been a conference of the Southeastern Wisconsin District. In addition to the Apache mission work, "white" congregations had been started in Arizona without any competition from other Lutheran churches in the state for many years. However, that had changed by 1932 when the U.L.C.A. and the Missouri Synod both had congregations in the state. In the plea of 1937 the Arizona Conference cited that while the Apache work had "been widened out, the work among the white population [had] actually been contracted, and this despite the fact that Arizona [was] rapidly developing."²⁶ They felt the Apache work had benefited from more direct supervision both by a specific executive committee overseeing it and by a superintendent in the field. Likewise, they felt this mission always had a strong representation of supporters at the Synod convention.²⁷

However, there was usually no one representing the white congregations of Arizona at the Southeastern Wisconsin District meetings and only occasionally at the Synod conventions. Both the pastors and the laymen of the congregations were unable to take an active part in the work by their presence at meetings. They also pointed out the recurring argument that there was "difficulty involved in administering the white fields from the great distance of Wisconsin."²⁸ The complaint was made that the administrative responsibility was being carried out by "men who in many cases have never visited

²⁴ *ibid.* p.33

²⁵ *ibid.* p.33

²⁶ Synodical Proceedings, 1937, p.56

²⁷ *ibid.* p.57

Arizona, and at best can have no intimate knowledge of the circumstances and conditions prevailing in Arizona."²⁹ They weren't necessarily accusing the administrators with fault. Some felt it was "clearly impossible to expect the officials...to familiarize themselves with conditions and circumstances in Arizona."³⁰ These had been the years of the Depression and travel costs were no doubt monitored carefully. But likewise they felt it was "impossible to give or to gain a true picture of needs of the field through the medium of reports and other correspondence, or even through the medium or personal representation."³¹

A new district seemed the solution. They suggested that "district organization will promote local interest in the work, abetted by a better knowledge of the needs of the field than can now be the case."³² In support they pointed to the success the Nebraska District and the Dakota-Montana District had in progressing by becoming their own districts.³³

The committee reviewing the Arizona and Colorado district requests at the 1937 synod convention gave the opinion that the time for these new districts had not yet arrived. This is not surprising since at the time Arizona only had 5 pastors and Colorado 6. However, they were conscious of the concerns and recommended that a solution would be to send a general missionary into each of these areas who would have more direct control in determining new fields under the mission boards. They also called for

²⁸ *ibid.* p.56

²⁹ *ibid.* p.57

³⁰ *ibid.* 58

³¹ *ibid.* p.58

³² *ibid.* p.57

³³ *ibid.* p.57

these conferences being represented at least once a year at the General Synodical Committee and the General Mission Board.³⁴

The suggestion for general missionaries was followed and in 1939 Pastor F. Stern, who had been a general missionary for the Pacific Northwest, accepted the call to serve in Arizona.³⁵ By 1942 Arizona became a separate mission district with its own mission board.³⁶ The work was blessed and the number of congregations in Arizona grew. By 1954 the numbers had grown enough for Arizona to become a new district. In its first year the new Arizona District was comprised of 27 pastors. There were 38 congregations organized into 4 conferences. These numbers incorporated those of the Apache missions and also included 2 congregations in Los Angeles, California. The baptized souls numbered 7,250 with 2,899 communicants. Thirty-two teachers served 1,001 children in the eleven Christian day schools. The work of the Wisconsin Synod had grown and a ninth district had been established.

The 1963 Establishing of Mission Districts

General missionaries were also made use of in other areas of the country. A blessing was that even during the four years of World War II there were 88 new exploratory missions started. Progression also came in 1942 with Arizona and Colorado becoming new mission districts. In 1955 the General Mission Board was divided into separate home and world mission boards.³⁷

³⁴ *ibid.* p.60

³⁵ E.C. Fredrich The Wisconsin Synod Lutherans p.211

³⁶ Synod Proceedings, 1941, p.78-79

³⁷ E.C. Fredrich The Wisconsin Synod Lutherans p.211

The synod convention in 1963 made some particular decisions that would have a long lasting effect on our synod's work. For one they called for a full-time chairman of the General Board for Home Missions. The resolutions also called for the country to be divided up into mission districts, each with its own mission board of pastors and laymen from the particular field.³⁸ Eleven such mission districts were proposed in the 1963 Book of Reports and Memorials.³⁹ A look at the suggested set up gives a foreshadowing of the future regular districts and how certain states ended up in the particular districts of today:

<u>Mission District</u>	<u>Area in 1963</u>	<u>Added Responsibility</u>
Pacific Northwest	Washington, Oregon	Idaho
California	California	Nevada
Dakota-Montana	N. Dakota, S. Dakota, Montana	(none)
Colorado	Colorado	Utah, Wyoming
Arizona	Arizona	New Mexico, Texas
Nebraska	Nebraska, S. Dakota, Iowa	Kansas, Oklahoma, Arkansas, Louisiana
Minnesota	Minnesota	Iowa, Missouri
W. Wisconsin	western and southern WI	Illinois to a boundary drawn by Hwy 47&24
N. Wisconsin	NE Wisconsin, U.P., Sault Ste. Marie	New York, the New England states
SE Wisconsin	includes NE corner of Illinois, which will serve as a corridor to expand	Indiana, Kentucky, Tennessee, Mississippi, Alabama
Michigan	Michigan, Ohio, Florida*	Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Delaware, Maryland, W. Virginia, N. Carolina, S. Carolina, Georgia

*It was recommended that Florida become a mission district in the future and that some of the southern states then become a part of it

³⁸ Synod Proceedings, 1963, p.160

³⁹ Book of Reports and Memorials, 1963, p.42-43

South Atlantic District

The past history of missions had mainly incorporated a philosophy of expanding into states adjacent to where the Wisconsin was already working. Washington was an exception, because there a previously established congregation had joined the synod. Arizona was also an exception because the home missions there had partly grown out of the Apache missions. The division of the entire country into mission districts in 1963 made it possible to begin work in any part of the country. Florida was one such move which "took more than a little doing and even some unorthodox practices."⁴⁰

The beginning of a congregation was pushed by Mr. Louis Ott, a layman from the Michigan District who served on the district's mission board. He had a winter home in Florida and recognized the opportunity for mission work there. The synod, however, was not supportive of this jump into a new area and were unwilling to assist in any exploration of possibilities. The Michigan District mission board sensed an urgency in starting the work. A different approach would have to be taken.

After serious deliberations the pastor members of the Board [K. Vertz of Owosso, H. Zink of Stevensville, and A. Baer of Adrian] agreed to approach their congregations to see if they would be willing to bear the expense of a mission survey in Florida. Without hesitation they too concented, and the exploration took place February 8 to 17.⁴¹

The results of this initial exploratory work was positive and a mission pastor was called to begin work in "Florida in general and St. Petersburg in particular"⁴² later in 1954.⁴³ A second congregation was started in 1957 and by 1962 there were four. "The growth was

⁴⁰E.C. Fredrich The Wisconsin Synod Lutherans p.212

⁴¹qtd. in E.C. Fredrich The Wisconsin Synod Lutherans p.213 (Michigan District Proceedings, 1954, p.67)

⁴² *ibid.* p.213

⁴³E.C. Fredrich The Wisconsin Synod Lutherans p.213

for the most part real mission growth, not just a service to transplanted Wisconsin Synod members. At Bay Pines[,Seminole] after eight years the congregation's roll contained only one family in ten that was of Wisconsin Synod background."⁴⁴

In 1973 the work in the southeast corner of the country had grown to the point that the congregations put in a bid to become their own district. The memorials sent to the synod convention again reveal the concerns and the arguments for becoming a district. Eight memorials were submitted from the Gulf-Atlantic conference and from individual congregations. In summary these stated:

1. A desire to relieve the Michigan District President and other administration of the district from some of their responsibilities, since work was spreading throughout the east coast.
2. A need to establish their own education, evangelism, and stewardship boards to address the unique needs of the area and to involve the laymen more.
3. A desire to improve identity, since members had a hard time identifying with Michigan and comprehending they were a part of the Gulf-Atlantic Mission District and of the Michigan District.
4. Again the "distance factor" was cited, including pointing out that it was a financial burden for the small congregations to send pastors, teachers, and lay delegates to conferences.⁴⁵

The 1973 synod convention concurred with the proposal to establish the new district. They agreed with the needs suggested and saw the new district would better serve the work there. The representatives of the Michigan District had given approval of the new district. The synod fiscal office had estimated that the increase in overall cost would be approximately \$4,500. It was decided to form a new South Atlantic District from the Florida conference with Tennessee also being included.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ *ibid.* p.214

⁴⁵ Book of Reports and Memorials, 1973, p.149-165

⁴⁶ Synod Proceedings, 1973, p.65

The 1973 synod statistical report showed the first year of the new district to include 20 pastors serving 21 congregations. There were 2,257 souls and 1,606 communicant members. In addition there were 11 teachers serving 277 students within 3 schools.⁴⁷ There were now 10 districts of the Wisconsin Synod.

South Central District

The first work in the area of Texas began when a group of former LC-MS members requested to be served by the WELS after seeing the false doctrine within the LC-MS congregations. There were several people in the Dallas area who were receiving subscriptions to the Northwestern Lutheran, some as a gift from their relatives. In August of 1962 someone had the insight to mail to each of these people a list of others who were receiving the magazine in the area also and they got in contact with each other. After some correspondence with Synod President Oscar Naumann, Pastor Diehl, who would later serve in Texas, and Pastor Immanuel Frey of the Arizona-California Mission Board flew to Dallas to meet with the group. They would soon form the first WELS congregation in Texas, Calvary of Dallas. In 1963 Pastor Robert Neumann, a former LC-MS pastor, accepted the call to be their first pastor.⁴⁸

Another LC-MS group in Edna, Texas would form a congregation in 1965. They had come into contact with Pastor Neumann through business contacts in Dallas and began to drive north for services. Soon they formed Redeemer, Edna and Pastor Neumann "drove 300 miles every Sunday to bring the Word of the Lord to this eager group. The group agreed to accept the assignment of a seminary graduate [which they

⁴⁷ Statistical Report of the Wisconsin Ev. Lutheran Synod for 1973, p.44-45

would do again several times in the years ahead,] and Seminary graduate Vilas Glaeske was assigned to serve them."⁴⁹ Pastor Glaeske soon joined Pastor Neumann in doing exploratory work throughout Texas. In the years to come many pastors would work together to start services in new areas.

In 1972 Texas became its own mission district within the Arizona-California District. At that time talk also already began of forming their own district. When the Florida Conference applied for district status in 1973, the Texas-New Mexico Pastoral Conference sent word in also. Since the overall plan for the south was being considered, the memorial from Texas stated that they felt "district boundaries should be determined on the basis of practical geographical size" and that "because of its size, Texas cannot practically be united with any state other than Oklahoma." Therefore they requested "that whenever future growth warrants the formation of a Southern District, it should include Texas and Oklahoma."⁵⁰ The memorial must have simply been considered by the committee working on the new district proposals that year, since it received no official action at the synod convention. But when the South Atlantic District was formed, Texas remained with Arizona-California.

By 1978 it was felt by some that the time had come for a southern district to be formed. Both the Arizona-California District, which Texas was a part of, and the Nebraska District, which Oklahoma was a part of, decided at their district conventions to recommend to the synod that a new southern district be formed.⁵¹

⁴⁸ Joel Gaertner "The Cry from the Mid-south: The Beginnings and History of the South Central District" p.1-3

⁴⁹ *ibid.* p.5

⁵⁰ Book of Reports and Memorials, 1973, p.162

⁵¹ Convention Proceedings AZ-CA District, 1978, p.71; Convention Proceedings Nebraska District, 1978, p.72-72

The committee at the synod convention, however, stated that although they shared "the enthusiasm of these congregations for district status," they considered "its formation at this time premature" and it was passed for their district status to "be delayed at this time." The concern expressed by the committee (and also a number of district presidents and synodical officials) was that it appeared there was "not sufficient pastoral strength to staff the 28 constitutionally mandated district offices." They also said the committee had received "no supportive data on the basis of which it could make an intelligent judgment, other than the memorials and visual geographic presentation." They did recognize that the proposed district would be "an opportunity for attaining cohesiveness and for gaining greater numerical strength" and encouraged more information to be brought to the 1981 synod convention.⁵²

A further resolution "adopted in the closing moments of the 1979 convention of the Synod called for the appointment of a joint committee of the General Board for Home Missions and the Conference of Presidents to study the matter of guidelines for the formation of new districts."⁵³ This committee brought forward a redistricting proposal which called for realignment involving almost every district of the synod, the establishing of a south central district and provisions for the North Atlantic District. Their rationale involved the following considerations:

1. The smallest possible number of viable administrative districts
2. Ample size of constituency, present and potential, for efficient administration
3. Similarity of cultural/religious backgrounds
4. Similarity of concerns/problems for congregational and district programs
5. Practical and economical geographical spread
6. Natural trade boundaries
7. Traditional synodical associations
8. Economical administration

⁵² Synod Proceedings, 1979, p.48-49

⁵³ Book of Reports and Memorials, 1981, p.218

9. Synodical objective of home mission outreach

They felt that the redistricting proposal looked not only at the present situation, but also at the "potential for future developments, especially as they relate to population trends and the possibility for growth in the various areas for the kind of ministry characteristic of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod."⁵⁴

The 1981 synod convention decided to have the redistricting proposal come before the district conventions before taking such drastic action.⁵⁵ There were mixed reactions that came back to the 1983 synod convention. Some districts were in favor of the redistricting. Others were opposed. Some offered additional redistricting suggestions.⁵⁶

In the end most things stayed as they were and the anticipated 11th and 12th districts were formed for the most part out of existing districts. Texas, Oklahoma, Arkansas and congregations in Louisiana west of the Mississippi River formed the new South Central District. Pastor Glaeske, who had started many of the congregations in Texas, was elected the first District President in October of 1983.

The eleventh district began with 34 pastors in 29 congregations. There were 4,289 baptized souls and 2,903 communicants. There also were 26 teachers serving 364 students in 11 schools.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ *ibid.* p.218-225

⁵⁵ Report to the Ten Districts, 1982, p.142-143

⁵⁶ Book of Reports and Memorials, 1983, p.214-226

North Atlantic District

It was at the same 1983 synod convention that it was petitioned by the Michigan District to form the North Atlantic District out of the Colonial Mission District to the east. Much of the discussion about the South Central District and the redistricting proposal also involved a study of whether the North Atlantic was a feasible district. Work in the area had begun in 1963 in Virginia and had grown out from there. The new district had been studied and discussed over the past 5 years and, in fact, it was the Michigan District itself that encouraged the Colonial Mission District to first consider seeking district status. Michigan stated they felt the Lord had blessed the congregations in the mission district "with sufficient manpower and maturity that they are now willing to assume responsibility for the supervision of doctrine and practice."⁵⁸

The North Atlantic District was formed. In its beginning year the district had 29 pastors serving 31 congregations. There were 3,570 souls and 2,518 communicants. Ten teachers in 5 schools served 112 children.⁵⁹

Conclusion

Throughout the formation of new districts within our synod there have been common factors and considerations. The arguments used in the past to guide decisions may or may not apply to decisions in the future. In a new age of connectivity and faster travel is distance still a factor? At what point is a new district beneficial or additional conferences serving the purpose? How wise is it to form a new district that will put

⁵⁷Statistical Report of the Wisconsin Ev. Lutheran Synod for 1983, p.2-3

⁵⁸ Book of Reports and Memorials, 1983, p.226

⁵⁹Statistical Report of the Wisconsin Ev. Lutheran Synod for 1983, p.2-3

additional district administration tasks onto mission pastors? Can circuit pastors be more fully utilized to supervise doctrine and practice? At what point is an additional district beneficial to serve the unique needs of an area? This study has looked at the historical events and situations leading up to the start of new districts. There is an entire additional study to be made of the early years of new districts and the challenges they faced. Some of these challenges have been mentioned.

As the Lord blesses our work and brings more people to know their Savior, we will have to use our best judgment on how best to manage and look over his flock. New districts may be inevitable. The much larger Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod has 34 districts at this time. Will we move towards that as we grow?

The history of our districts certainly gives us opportunity to give thanks to our God. He led our synod to go out with the gospel. He has blessed the work of many people. We can only pray that God will continue to bless the preaching and teaching of his Word until our Savior returns.

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