

**KEEPING OUR YOUNG PEOPLE WITHIN THE CHURCH:
THE SUCCESS AND FAILURE OF THE WALTHER LEAGUE**

by

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Introduction

"The importance and necessity of serious and systematic work among the young people of our church has been the subject of much careful thought and effort at all times in the history of our synod."¹ This statement was made in 1922 but it is one that needs to be valid in every age and time in the church.

Our world threatens all of us with its temptations to tear us away from the hope of salvation we have alone in Jesus Christ. Historically, the Lutheran Church in America has taken care of its very young through its Christian school training. But that leaves the years after the grades, the teenage years and beyond into young adulthood. These years cause children to go through many changes. Changes that are not only physical but also emotional and spiritual. Sometimes these years cause the faith of our young to be lost as they experience questions about life and its meaning. Therefore it is of utmost importance that the meaning for life and the meaning of life after this life be strongly reinforced among our youth.

This importance of work with youth was the overriding reason for the existence of the Walther League. In its constitution of 1893, Article II--Objects, Number 1 says, "The object of this association shall be to assist, through the societies and under the auspices of the respective congregations, and the leadership of the pastors, in keeping our young people in the Church."² The Walther League is probably the best example of an church youth organization which carried out this purpose. As this paper will try

to demonstrate, we have received much and can learn much from the tremendous contributions which the Walther League made to the area of youth ministry.

Nevertheless, youth work has never been very well documented since it is something that, at its best is mostly action and not words. "Interestingly enough, very little church history has been attempted from the perspective of the young or about ministry of and to the young....there's little in print in our circles outside of Walther League Manuals and promotion materials."³ What material we do have shows us terrific strides made by the Walther League in many areas, but as was stated above, the League originally had as its number one purpose the title of this paper--keeping our young people within the church. As the work of the Walther League is examined, I will seek to evaluate the League's effectiveness in carrying out this purpose.

The history of the Walther League divides itself into roughly six periods. These periods of the development of the Walther League can be compared to the life of a human as he or she grows from conception through birth to grow into old age. I will examine each of these by first looking at significant A. Events and Trends that occurred during each period. Then I will discuss lasting contributions (both positive and negative) which were made during each period. Finally, I will evaluate the Walther League's effectiveness in carrying out its original purpose of "keeping our young people within the church".

I. Before 1893--Conception

A. Events and Trends

"The need for identity was served by precise, logical, and articulate orthodoxy....And 'keeping our young people within the church' was a logical and facile slogan for youth ministry."⁴ This

statement is of course true today but it was especially true back in the middle of the nineteenth century. At that time the Lutherans of the young Missouri Synod were in a country which was totally different from the one they had left in Germany. There they had been under the influence of a state church but in America, they were faced with a religious climate that tolerated all kinds of religions. There was a tendency, which we can understand, for these Lutherans to remain somewhat introverted in society. They had their own language and the precious gospel message of Jesus Christ in a world that was strange and different.

C. F. W. Walther, as a leader of the young synod, saw the importance of working to keep the youth of the church true to what they had learned from childhood. This of course needed to be done on a congregational level, but he also saw the advantages of youth organized on a synod level. "As early as 1851, Dr. Walther in *Der Lutheraner* voiced his appeal to all young men's associations to organize into a synod wide federation."⁵ In his own congregation, youth work in the Missouri Synod had its beginning. On May 7, 1848, Trinity Lutheran Church, of which Walther was senior pastor, organized its "Juenglingsverein". Pastor Johann Buenger was its supervisor and it had the purpose to lend "support to needy students preparing for the ministry." Walther's appeals in *Der Lutheraner* were effective because by 1855 there were 23 young men's groups and some of these had formed into a kind of synod-wide federation "but no record of the federation is found after 1856. From 1859 to 1883 the periodicals contain one short article concerning youth."⁶ So the work among youth was being done and interest definitely existed in the Missouri Synod.

There were also other groups of youth who were interested in forming into larger organizations. In 1844, the Young Men's

Christian Association was formed and its counterpart, the Young Women's Christian Association came together in 1866. Both of these organizations were stimuli to the formation of the Walther League in the Missouri Synod. And they are only examples of a general trend that occurred in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Many groups tried to form youth organizations in connection with their church bodies.⁷ Some met with success others failed. Within the Missouri Synod several attempts were made but none succeeded until the Walther League formation in 1893.

The reason that failure occurred was because there existed among the congregations of the Missouri Synod strong feelings against such an organization. "The leadership of the churches, especially parish pastors, did not favor interchurch organization of youth. They feared encroachment on congregational rights and interference with synodical work."⁸ But in spite of these feelings, the need for youth organization was felt and acted upon.

The formation of the Walther League was the result of this action. Trinity Lutheran Church of Buffalo, NY sent out a circular letter in 1891 asking for interested youth societies to respond. By 1893, they had received enough responses to act. The idea of a synodical youth organization had been conceived and now it was time for it to be born.

B. Significant Contributions

The contributions of this period were the fact that Walther and others saw the importance of a synodical youth organization. Sufficient ground work was done in order to create the desire to form such an organization. It was because of the foresight of men like Walther that the Walther League came into existence. It is for this reason that the Walther League chose the name of Walther as its own.

C. Effectiveness with the Purpose

As for the effectiveness of "keeping our young people within the church", this era was effective in that it saw the importance of this work. It also realized that a youth organization was the answer. The synod in general did not see this but there were those who saw the importance of reaching out to the needs of youth and trying to meet those needs as the best way to keep them within the church. This period's effectiveness lies in its creation of a positive attitude toward meeting the needs of youth.

II. 1893 to 1917--Birth and Childhood

A. Events and Trends

The Walther League was formed on May 23, 1893. At a meeting in Buffalo, NY, delegates from twelve societies came together in response to the circular letter sent out by Trinity. Delegates were from all over the Missouri Synod (Buffalo, New York City, Brooklyn, Milwaukee, Fort Wayne, Dallas, Detroit, Rochester [NY], and Danbury [CN]). H. C. Gahwe, from Trinity, Buffalo, was elected as the first president of the organization. The *Walther League Messenger* (at that time called the *Vereinsbote* was adopted as the official periodical of the organization. It had been started by the group in Buffalo and it became a significant advantage for the League. "From the outset the league had the advantage of a magazine...Originally called *Der Vereinsbote*, it became the *Walther League Messenger* and influenced young and old for more than 70 years."⁹ More about the *Messenger* later.

In 1894, the official emblem of the Walther League, the ten point star seal which appears on the cover, was adopted. In this same year women were admitted to the membership and the German language was abandoned.

By 1900 there were fifty societies which had been organized

into five districts (Indiana, Milwaukee, Cleveland, New England, and Southern California). At their convention that year they chose the motto, "Pro Aris et Focis" (For Altar and Hearth) to show their focus on upholding the church and family among the youth.

Growth was slow during these first years because the Walther League was not readily accepted by the majority of people in the Missouri Synod. "The Walther League grew slowly, for despite its firm support by a few pastors and laymen, many others looked on the youth movement with skepticism."¹⁰ These people didn't want their youth going out to work with others and becoming "worldly". This wasn't a well founded fear at that time because in reality it was needed to some extent in order to allow for a beginning of a realization of the need to reach out to the world instead of being satisfied to keep the truth to themselves. But in the future, this fear of worldliness would become not just a fear but the reality for the Walther League and also become its down fall.

Through its entire life, the Walther League had a desire to put faith into action. And it got its first real start at this in 1904/1905. It was at this time that the organization began its support of Wheat Ridge. Wheat Ridge was a tent colony sanitarium for the cure of tuberculosis which had been established in 1904 by a group of Colorado pastors and laymen. It was located a few miles from Denver. Almost from its beginning, the Walther League gave its support to Wheat Ridge. In 1905 they donated funds to put up Tent #1 and thus began a long history of support.

In 1910, because of the slowness of the growth of the organization, the field secretary of the Walther League, Mr. F. A. "Pap" Klein, began a campaign of expansion by using word of mouth to the constituency of the synod and by also marshalling

the power of the *Messenger* of which he was the editor. He met with some success but true growth wouldn't begin until the next stage of the life of the Walther League. Also in that year support of Wheat Ridge was strengthened by the beginning of the Wheat Ridge Christmas Seals program. Through this program, large sums of money were able to be sent to the sanitorium.

B. Significant Contributions

There were several contributions in this period of birth from 1893 to 1917. The foremost would of course be the constitutional statement of purpose for the organization as "keeping our young people within the church."¹¹ With this purpose as number one, the Walther League could and would become a very helpful and effective arm of the Missouri Synod and the Synodical Conference in the area of helping the youth.

Another positive contribution was the *Walther League Messenger*. Through this magazine, the Walther League had a voice to speak to youth and also an aid to those who would be leading youth. Later the *Messenger* would be used to communicate useful material for Bible study, activities, and other youth oriented material. This would at times be done very effectively and at other times not so effectively. Nevertheless, the *Messenger* was a great tool for the Walther League to be able to use.

The inclusion of women was something that was ahead of its time in that day. It was a positive contribution from the standpoint that there is no distinction between the sexes when it comes to the need for the gospel and also the need to be reinforced in the faith by that gospel. The inclusion of women showed perception of the needs of young women as being the same in respect to the message of the church as that of young men.

Still another positive contribution of this period is the

abandonment of the German language by the Walther League. Although German was a part of the heritage of these youth, they were becoming more and more Americans and as a synod-wide organization stretching across the country, retention of the German language would have been a hinderance to the work which the newly born organization was trying to carry out. A result of the departure from German was that it helped the youth to break out of their heavily German Lutheran communities and to stretch out into the new scene in America. It would be in this field that they and subsequent generations would have to live their faith and witness to it. The combination of dropping German in organizational work and the mere fact that the Walther League was a national organization helped to bring the people involved from being an introspective group of orthodox Lutherans to becoming bearers of the truth to a nation which needed that truth.

One final contribution was the beginning of charity work with the support of Wheat Ridge. An ongoing theme for the Walther League was "knowing and doing". In other words, faith was put into action. The beginning of work like that done at Wheat Ridge was a fine example of faith showing itself in Christian love.

C. Effectiveness with the Purpose

In evaluating this period of birth and childhood of the Walther League in the light of the purpose of "keeping our young people within the church", it is clear that those leading the Walther League were concerned about carrying it out. They were the ones who included it in the constitution. But good ideas don't do anyone any good unless they are converted into positive action. I believe that this kind of action was taken during this period. The encouragements to individual congregational societies to join the

Walther League and the good material which was presented in the *Messenger* all helped to carry out the purpose. Also the involvement in work such as Wheat Ridge gave the young people an opportunity to put their faith into action by service. The Walther League was definitely off to a good start in its life.

III. 1917 to 1935--Adolescence and Youthful Vitality

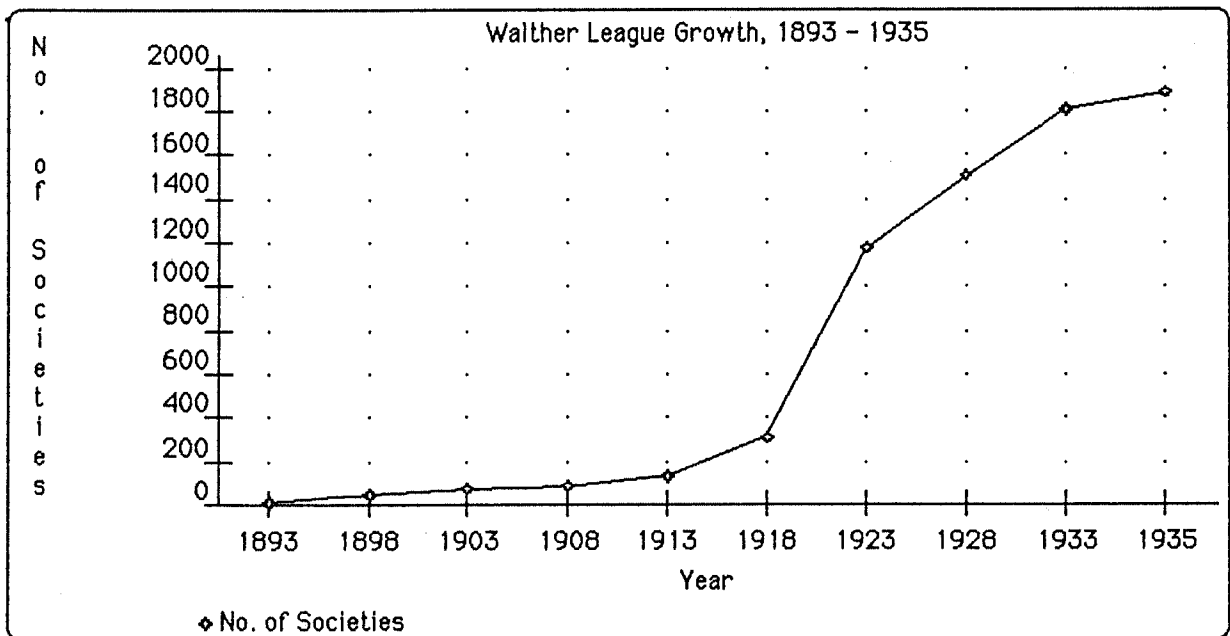
A. Events and Trends

In 1917, an event took place which brought tremendous changes to the Walther League. That event was the United States' involvement in World War I. In connection with the war, the Missouri Synod formed the "Lutheran Church Board of Army and Navy". This board had the charge of caring for the men of the Missouri Synod who were serving in the military. This was done primarily through the work of pastors who served near military bases and who also served as chaplains.

The way in which the Walther League became involved was through its own "Board for Army and Navy" which was established at the Walther League convention held in Fort Wayne that year. This board worked under the direction of the synod board and through this work, the Walther League "strengthened its program for service and made many new friends."¹² The League offered to help the synod board and was given the task of raising \$5000 which would be used to produce and distribute literature to the men who were serving in the military. Within only a few months the League had already raised \$15,000 and in 1918 they raised \$10,000 more for this project. This had two results that were very important in the future development of the Walther League. First, "it made the League realize what it could do by united effort, " and "the thousands of testaments and prayer books with the stamp of the Walther League, the tens of thousands of pamphlets,

Lutheran publications, sermonettes, and other literature which were sent to the training camps by the Walther League made many pastors who served in the camps enthusiastic supporters of the organization."¹³ This contribution by the Walther League was the push that was needed to overcome the hesitation and concern that many in the Missouri Synod had about the youth movement. After the war, the number of individual congregational societies who joined the Walther League skyrocketed.

This can be seen in this chart of the number of member societies from 1893 to 1935:



The great increase in the number of societies is clearly evident after 1918.

Beginning after the war, the Walther League began a time of phenomenal growth and maturing which was like the growth and maturing that takes place in the teenage years of a human being. At the 1918 convention, E. H. Engelbrecht was elected president of the Walther League and F. A. Schack was elected treasurer. Both of these men were enthusiastic promoters of the organization.

They contributed to rallying the new support behind the Walther League which was now found out in the Synod. By 1920, the Missouri Synod recognized the Walther League and it also formed the Board for Young People's Work. This board would remain in a very background kind of role for many years. The Walther League would be the main force in youth work within the Missouri Synod and the Synodical Conference as well. The role of the BYPW wouldn't really come into its own until the major changes in Missouri Synod youth ministry which took place in the late 1960's.

But growth didn't only take place in outward expansion or in fund raising strength. Growth inwardly also began to come into full swing during this era from 1917 to 1935. In 1920, Walter A. Maier, the future voice of *The Lutheran Hour*, was called as the first full-time executive secretary of the Walther League. He also was the editor of the *Walther League Messenger*. It was under his direction as editor that the magazine experienced its greatest growth both in subscriptions and in quality as a periodical for Christian youth. It contained a wide variety of material from articles dealing with current events from a Christian perspective to articles on travel, short stories, human interest stories, and many more.

While on the subject of periodicals produced by the Walther League, two others must also be mentioned. The first is the *Bible Student Quarterly*. This magazine had as its purpose to make "every Leaguer...become a Bible student."¹⁴ It started publication in 1922 under the editorship of Theodore Graebner of Concordia, St. Louis. Each issue contained 12 lessons for the quarter with interpretation of the text under consideration and also material to guide discussion which was pertinent to the times. The second periodical to come out of this time was the *Workers' Quarterly*. It

was begun in 1929 with Erwin Umbach as its first editor. It was intended to be a guide for the individual society in the congregation to improve its program. It was described--

"It appears every three months as a practical manual on all phases of youth activity. It is a handbook of suggestions for the society on all regular and special projects of the Walther League program."¹⁵

It contained helps for the development of leadership in the individual society as well as Bible study helps, activity suggestions, book reviews, and the like. Through these periodicals and other publications by the Walther League, the national organization became sort of a clearinghouse for information regarding all aspects of youth work and material for carrying out that work.

In 1919, Wheat Ridge, because of expansion in its needs, decided to construct a permanent hospital facility and found the cost to be \$200,000. The Walther League came with its support of the project and over the next few years they raised \$225,000. The new hospital was dedicated on August 7, 1921. This underlined the confidence the League had in its ability to do great things as a united group. By 1927, the support to Wheat Ridge by the Walther League was such that the entire facility was deeded to the League in that year.

The Walther League also grew in other areas of service that were innovative. One of these was their travelers' welfare program. In this program, whenever a League member would be traveling, moving, or for some other reason going away from their home congregation, the League would see to it that the person's name and other pertinent information was passed along to the pastor in the community to which the individual was going. This was an early effort at formal membership conservation. Still another area of growth in service was the establishment of

hospices in various large cities where the Walther League had member societies. These hospices were places established where travelers in the increasingly mobile society of the twenties could stay for very reasonable rates, when, for example, looking for employment in the cities. Other areas of service in which the Walther League had involvement included its purchase and development of the camp at Arcadia, Michigan in 1923, its instituting a school of correspondence under the directorship of P. E. Kretzman in 1926, its donation of 2500 books to the law library at Valparaiso University in 1929, and a donation of \$50,000 in support of the Lutheran Hour which was just getting its start in 1930 as well as support sent to Russian refugees who were entering Canada. Also in 1930, they paid for the addition of a women's infirmary and chapel at Wheat Ridge.

So that it is not thought that the Walther League was only involved financially during these years of growth and vitality with projects that were rather far removed in a way from the primary work of the church, the League was also a strong supporter of the mission work of the Missouri Synod. "The Walther League supported one third of the foreign missionaries of the Missouri Synod in the 1920's."¹⁶ This involved the support of twelve missionaries and thirty native workers and students.

B. Significant Contributions

There were several noteworthy contributions made by the Walther League during its years of adolescence and vitality. Among these were the ideas behind the travelers' welfare program and the hospice system. The programs as such became outdated but the concept is very praiseworthy of being concerned about Lutherans as they move about during their lives and then doing something to see that they are taken care of both spiritually and

physically.

The fact that the Walther League national organization became a place where every local society could go for information and ideas in working with youth was also a positive contribution. Each local society could only come up with so much material for its work. But with the publication of the Walther League's periodicals and all the other material which it made available, the Walther League became a real asset to the work with youth in the Missouri Synod and the Synodical Conference.

But I feel the biggest contribution which the Walther League made during this period of its history is its promotion of Bible classes. Walter A. Maier was the key man in this area. Through the work he did in the *Walther League Messenger*, and through the promotion that he did of *The Bible Student* and *The Workers Quarterly*, and by the other encouragement he gave, he brought the idea of the Bible class to life. And this was not just Bible class for youth. These periodicals were also used by many, many others. In the final analysis, to a great extent we owe the Bible classes we have today with all of their soul strengthening study in the Word of God to Walter A. Maier and the Walther League. A quote from the 1947 report of the Missouri Synod Board for Parish Education bears this out. "There are now more than 3000 Bible classes in Synod. For this growth from insignificant beginnings we owe a debt of gratitude...to the Walther League for the initial impetus given to Bible study classes..."¹⁷

C. Effectiveness with the Purpose

In the history of the Walther League, the era from 1917 to 1935 was really a time of growth and a learning of potential. Like an adolescent, the League was filled with a vitality and that vitality was used quite effectively to achieve the purpose of the

League. The young people of the Missouri Synod were being kept in the church as much as we can tell from our perspective today. The phenomenal growth of the League in the 20's shows an apparent enthusiasm on the part of Missouri Synod youth for the programs, activities, and Bible study which the group had to offer. Along these same lines, the work in Bible study surely also worked to carry out the purpose of "keeping our young people within the church". Numbers aren't what tell us who was helped by the work of the Walther League on their road to eternal salvation but we do have the Lord's promise, "...My word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it." (Isaiah 55:10) And this promise tells us that the young people were kept in the church and in the faith through the application of the Word of God through these Bible classes and the other use of it by the programs of the Walther League.

IV. 1935 to 1945--Adulthood and Reorganization

A. Events and Trends

In 1933, the Walther League at its convention in Chicago passed a resolution authorizing an overall reorganization of the structure of the League. Because of the tremendous growth of the movement in the number of member societies and because of the lack of standardization on the part of the those societies with the program being presented by the national organization, the League determined to bring the individual congregational societies and the Walther League together through a streamlining of the program. The feeling was that "the international society exist(ed) to serve the local society."¹⁸ In addition to this there was a feeling of urgent need on the part of the leadership of the Walther League that they were not serving the young people of the League properly along the

guidelines of the central purpose as seen in this quote from the introduction to the new 1935 *Walther League Manual*

"The cesspools of the city have welled over into the country. Broadway and Main Street flaunt the same superspectacle from Hollywood. The same dance bands blare on Michigan Boulevard and on Highway Five. It must be clear, even to the most casual observer, that a much closer contact with the generation exposed to these conditions is not only desirable, but supremely necessary. To warn is not enough. That is merely negative. There must be a substitute of positive, Biblical, spiritual values for the twisted and distorted values of a materialistic and lustful world; for the dance--healthful recreation; for the motion picture--cultural activities; for the lust for gold--the far and shining horizons of Christian service."¹⁹

This quote shows that the problems faced by the planners of the Walther League in 1935 were the same kinds of problems we face with youth of today. We might smile at the way this urgent need was expressed and at some of the specific issues which were of concern to them, but in the end the question remains the same-- "Who's going to get our young people, the world or the church?"

Part of the streamlining which was undertaken took form in the publication of the first *Walther League Manual* in 1935. In this manual was included everything about the League from history and its constitution to the new ideas for organization on the congregational level which it was trying to encourage. This new organization was summed up with a keyed organizational chart (cf. Appendix A). The chart shows quite clearly what they were trying to do. Underneath the executive board which was supervised by the local pastor, each congregational society was to divide all its activities into two areas--Christian Knowledge and Christian Service. The great theme of the League as it is set forth in the 1935 *Manual*, was that the Christian shouldn't just study the Word of God and then keep his faith all to himself. But he is also to put

that faith into practice by performing Christian service.

The area of Christian Knowledge was deemed very important.

"It is the duty and privilege of the local congregation to offer our young generation a program which cannot be gotten anywhere else. It needs first of all a program in which knowledge of the Bible and the principles of Christian faith and life are clearly and interestingly set forth. It is always better to begin young peoples' work with small numbers rather than with low ideals."²⁰

The old work done through *The Bible Student* and *Workers Quarterly* was continued as well and the faith building articles in the *Messenger*. To these were added a new idea for the increase of Christian Knowledge under the title of Topic Studies. These had an emphasis on informality to encourage expression of ideas, problems, fears, etc.²¹ The initial step toward Topic Studies was the list of topics known as the "Forty-eight Topics". These were prepared as a study series in commemoration of the 100th anniversary of the arrival of the Saxon Fathers. They covered various aspects of the Christian life under the four headings of (1) the world, (2) the church, (3) the local congregation, and (4) personal life. (for a more detailed list cf. Appendix B).

But the big emphasis which came with the reorganization was the idea indicated in the title of O. P. Kretzman's book, *Knowing and Doing*. In the introduction to the 1935 *Manual* it says, "To make our society work effective, knowledge must be translated into action. Knowing must become doing."²² And so from 1935 to 1945, there was more emphasis than ever before on putting faith into action through the agency of the Walther League. It was felt that a lack of action would lead to a lack of faith.

"The Walther League of the future will recognize that the greatest enemy of the church in our day is not a hostility of blatant unbelief, but of coldness and indifference. It will decline to make any further concessions to those who seem to believe in a passive Christianity

which does not express itself in life....Too many of our young people have perhaps succumbed to the idea that their faith and hope are treasures to keep in the secret recesses of their mind and heart and not to be held up before the world as a flaming banner and a badge of honor."²³

And so the Christian Service division strongly came into the fore. Local societies were to try and do all they could to plan and carry out effective programs of Christian service in their local communities as well as participate in the service activities of the overall League. Some of these national and international activities included the Choral Union (org. 1934) which encouraged the singing of Christian music by youth. Another was the Quest for Talent which was designed to encourage members to use their God given talents more and more in the expression of their faith. Along the same lines of promoting the Christian life, a new publication appeared on the scene in 1937. It was called the Cresset. It was designed to be "a review of literature, the arts, and public affairs."²⁴ Its first editor was O. P. Kretzman of Valparaiso University and he remained its editor until well after its publication was overtaken by the University itself, which still publishes it today in much the same format.

Another noteworthy item of this era was the new youth building, which was constructed by the Walther League in Chicago and dedicated on September 20, 1942. The headquarters of the League had been moved to Chicago from Milwaukee in 1922.

At this point a word about the geographical structure of the League is in order. The Walther League was divided into districts which by this time approximated those of the Missouri Synod. These districts were further broken down into what were called "zones". These zones were the immediate grouping with which the individual societies associated and their purpose was the "promotion

of the Walther League program among the societies within the territory."²⁵ On the zone level, annual rallies would be held and in this way Leaguers would be able to meet and get to know members of the League outside of their own congregation and thus get a bigger picture of the world than they had at home.

Another thing that needs to be mentioned is the effects which the Second World War had on the activities of the Walther League. During the war the League contributed \$2000 in 1941 for the men in the service and in 1943, in connection with their golden anniversary, they gathered \$120,000 for devotional material to be sent to those who were serving.

But the war took its toll on the Walther League in a manner of speaking. Up until World War II, the Walther League had been made up of young people from grade nine up through college age. They had even had two divisions--Junior and Senior Walther Leaguers. But because of the war and the young men which it took from the pool of candidates for the Walther League, and because of the vast changes which the war brought to our society in the United States, the young people of college age were no longer interested in the Walther League and it lost them from its ranks in droves. Compensations were attempted with little success and so after the war the Walther League became mainly a high school age oriented movement. But more of this in the next section.

B. Significant Contributions

The contributions of this era, 1935-1945, include the expanded emphasis on "knowing and doing" in the scriptural sense. This was a step forward which hindsight shows us was one on which the Walther League later stumbled. Nevertheless it encouraged programs which got the youth more involved and active. The organization and their own societies were becoming something that

they could call their own and this was definitely an encouragement for them.

The addition of the Topic Studies was another feature of this period which was definitely a positive contribution. It allowed for a more open discussion of items pertaining to the young Christian's life and again it got him or her personally involved. This fresh approach to the study of Scripture was a useful addition.

C. Effectiveness with the Purpose

In the area of carrying out the purpose of the Walther League during 1935-1945, I fear that the organization was beginning to get too big for its britches. The emphasis on service in the period was good and I believe those who promoted it had the scriptural principles of faith and its consequent fruits at the heart of their plans. Sadly however, as we will see in the next period of 22 years this focus on fruits of faith was warped into the ideas of social gospel. But did this emphasis as the leaders of the Walther League during the 30's and 40's envisioned, serve the purpose of "keeping our young people within the church"? I think that it did to some extent. The Topic Studies added a fresh approach to the study of scriptural principles for Christian young people. Although the Word of God does not change, it is still a sin to bore people with it. The reorganization helped to streamline the flow of information from Chicago headquarters out to local societies. And the projects for study, begun in the earlier eras, still were in force. The work went on but there were rough times ahead both coming from the world outside and from within the Walther League itself.

II. 1945 to 1967--Mid-life Crisis

A. Events and Trends

In 1945, Walter A. Maier retired from editorship of the *Walther League Messenger*. This had its effect. "Ever since Walter

A. Maier...was persuaded to 'resign' from his position as editor of the *Walther League Messenger* there has been a gradual change in the theological, social, and political views expressed in the publications of the Walther League, the Missouri Synod youth organization."²⁶ This statement was made during the height of the internal problems the Missouri Synod was experiencing in the early sixties but subsequent history shows that to some extent it was quite true. Beginning in the mid-forties things did begin to change in the Walther League. Some of these were positive, but many were not.

One of the areas of change was in leadership and program. In 1941 Otto H. Theiss became the new executive secretary of the Walther League. Under his direction, many new projects were begun. He oversaw the construction of a new headquarters completed in 1942 at a cost of \$130,000 which was all donated by the League. In 1947, he led the League through the adoption of a new program organization chart which indicated a three-fold division of activity for the local societies. (cf. Appendix C) In 1949, a new manual for the Walther League was introduced called the *ABC of Youth Work*. Although it is a fine book, it didn't sell. And interestingly enough, he contributed the five point program for youth ministry which we in the WELS still use today. (The five points being [1] worship, [2] education, [3] recreation, [4] service, [5] fellowship) But the significant changes that occurred in leadership and overall program were not so easily seen. To get a handle on this, read the following two quotes which give some indication as to the direction Theiss and his successor (1952), Elmer N. Witt, were taking the Walther League.

"The next 14 years (after 1952) of youth ministry continued the move toward personal involvement and participation of youth in national

ministries of the League. And at the same time, it worked at stimulating increased adult leadership and support."²⁷

This quote shows that by 1952 there was a very strong emphasis on "personal involvement and participation" which in itself is not a bad thing if it is the result of the motivation of the gospel. But the Walther League was losing the idea that service was done as a fruit of faith and it was gradually drifting into the error of service motivated by a desire to help society and benefit one's self. The next quote shows this.

"Service to others because of Christ was the continuing tradition but **more emphasis** developed (during the 60's) on what that service meant to the one serving."²⁸

This trend toward the social gospel rather than the gospel of Christ continued through the fifties and sixties at a gradual pace until in the late sixties the Missouri Synod was forced to act. An example of the Walther League's social gospel is seen in the following statement made by Elmer Witt.

"...youth ministries must continuously work for reconciliation between people whom God loves and for whom Christ died. This is true of the divisions between fellow Christians, between the haves and the have-nots, between developed and developing nations, and between the races of men. Reconciliation is uniquely important in youth ministries as it confronts the alienation of youth from the churches and the alienation between the generations."²⁹

This and the Walther League's approval of the ecumenical movement³⁰ and other social issues of the day are the reasons for the heading of this period. During these twenty-two years the Walther League had a choice to make as to its future direction and as far as its original intent was concerned, I feel it chose the wrong one.

As was mentioned before, there was also a change in the

makeup of the Walther League. After the war, the League was forced to become basically high school age oriented. It did try to serve youth on college campuses with mediocre success but the majority of the work now turned to the high schoolers.

Changes occurred in the area of the Walther League's activities as well. In 1944, a new program was initiated called Lutheran Service Volunteers or LSV's for short. They were 5-day get-togethers held at boarding schools or camps during the summer. They were intended to train young people in leadership skills. They were conducted by three adult "faculty" on subjects related to worship, Bible study, and Christian principles for administration and recreation. They were described by Leonard Ramming, last executive secretary of the Walther League thus-- "These 5-day happenings were by the youngsters' own admission the most significant spiritual experience in their lives, and that was true for hundreds of kids."³¹ Other programs of this nature were also initiated. They included the Youth Workers Conferences (YWC's for short). These were two week conferences which were designed to train youth leaders for work in the parish societies. They were a cooperative effort between the Walther League and the Missouri Synod's Board for Young Peoples' Work. Two other programs which were begun and which had a mission emphasis were the Mission Builders who are described as a precursor to the Peace Corps³² and the Prince of Peace Volunteers which was to "provide a variety of volunteer opportunities for Christian youth in mission ventures stateside and abroad."³³

Things changed at Wheat Ridge in 1946. In that year the Wheat Ridge Foundation was formed. It began to reach beyond its work in the fight against tuberculosis.

"Wheat Ridge was celebrating victories in the long battle with T.B. and moving toward broader concerns of health, education, and welfare. The gathering of Wheat Ridge Christmas Seals contributions through the Walther League societies reached \$400,000 annually."³⁴

The Foundation continued the work with T.B. but it also began its work in training people to help in dealing with the social aspects of illness. Training of professionals in the field of medical social work took place in a program established at Cook County Hospital.

Other welfare and service efforts were also undertaken. In 1946 the Walther League cooperated with the Missouri Synod European Relief program. The Walther League also build a mountain retreat in Kuhling, China as a resort for Missouri Synod missionaries serving there. Beside this they supplied funds for the Brazil Walther League House in Porto Allegre, for the Potsdam Orphanage, and for a youth center in Wuchang, China.

The last significant change in activity to note from this period is the adoption of porportionate giving rather than dues in 1949. This was a very positive step toward the teaching of good Christian stewardship. The League also updated its periodical and changed it to Arena in 1964. It reflected the position of the Walther League.

Lastly, there were also changes in the status of the Walther League during these years. In 1947, the Missouri Synod officially recognized the Walther League. "Synod did not until 1947 in an official board report or by resolution state that it recognized the program of the Walther League as its program."³⁵ This statement is true because it is important to remember that the Walther League was not an organization that was within the Missouri Synod. Rather it was an organization which was affiliated with the synod yet outside of it and independent from it. In the end this lead to some serious problems.

It seemed the problems might be avoided. In 1963, the Missouri Synod resolved to begin a switch over of the main burden of youth work from the Walther League to the synod Board for young Peoples' Work.

"Pressed by drastic cultural, social, and economic changes in the sixties, the Walther League urged the Synod to assume greater responsibility for youth ministries while reserving a place for parallel movements and organizations. Years of preparation, largely by League leadership, led to the adoption of broad synodical youth ministry responsibility in 1963, detailed plans in 1965, and operation in 1967. Since that time the Board of Youth Ministry has carried the primary responsibility for local and interchurch youth ministry in the Synod. The Walther League has specialized as a youth-led, issue-oriented movement within Synod."³⁶

This switch over was largely engineered by Elmer Witt who served both as the chairman of the synodical board as well as the executive secretary of the Walther League.

B. Significant Contributions

During this period of the Walther League's life, the contributions which it made can be categorized as being both negative and positive. Theiss' five point program for youth work is something that we still see in the work with youth today. Things such as the LSV's and YWC's were great concepts that we in the WELS could easily adapt in our approach to youth ministry. The proportionate giving instead of dues also was a positive contribution.

But the negative "contributions" of the Walther League from 1945 to 1967 must also be noted. The emphasis on welfare and social work without keeping in mind the reason for such work is a dangerous thing to do. This kind of work ends up replacing the work of the church and the purpose an organization connected with the church should always keep central. The League's

approval of the ecumenical movement showed it to be on the left side of the divisions which were also entering the Missouri Synod.

C. Effectiveness with the Purpose

By the time the Walther League has gotten to 1967, it has forgotten most of what it had originally set out to do. The change to a youth-led, issue-oriented movement (made at the Purdue convention in 1968), began a total departure from the original purpose of "keeping our young people within the church". But it had begun years before when in the forties the emphasis slowly began to shift from knowing and doing the will of God to being concerned about the social and political issues of the day. In the difficult decision which the Walther League faced at its "mid-life crisis", it chose to follow its inclination into social gospel and forsake its original work of proclaiming the gospel of Christ.

VI. 1967 to the present--Retirement

A. Events and Trends

After the Missouri Synod "retired" the Walther League to assume its role as a youth-led, issue-oriented movement, things began to change rapidly for the League. The movement came into conflict with the Missouri Synod on various occasions. At the 1969 convention of the Missouri Synod, there was a proposal (not passed) to repudiate the Walther League for its social and political involvement.³⁷ And at the 1971 convention, the Walther League was again under fire as having "reflected impetuosity and a lack of maturity" with certain of its statements and actions, especially in its publication, *Bridge*.³⁸ Finally it was resolved by the 1973 convention of the Missouri Synod, "that the Walther League be encouraged to develop programs which are in harmony with the doctrine and practice of the Synod, and which provide avenues for youth to serve Christ and people..."³⁹ During these years the

League continued to get more deeply involved in the political and social issues of the day. In its new periodical, Bridge (started in 1969 after Edge, 1968 and Arena, 1964-1968), it openly supported and endorsed black activists in the civil rights movement⁴⁰, communist guerillas⁴¹, anti-Viet Nam protesting⁴², and the questioning of the inerrancy of Scripture.⁴³

The Walther League continued to be loosely affiliated with the Missouri Synod for a number of years after that. It adopted a new structure at the Purdue convention in 1968. It was "administered by a council of 12 young people (six elected in biennial conventions and six appointed) and counseled by six adult trustees secured from the Wheat Ridge Foundation Board of Directors..."⁴⁴ And to my best knowledge, the Walther League's structure today is a direct descendant of this one.

Today the Walther League basically consists of a group of seven people who administer the earnings of \$300,000 which was received from the sale of League real estate. These funds are at the date of this writing being used in three projects for vocational counseling which focuses on Christian vocation, namely, integrating the careers and the Christianity of young Lutherans. This is being done through the agency of the Lutheran Campus Ministry which carries on this work at seven universities in the East and also at the campus of Concordia, Bronxville, New York. The third project is operating with sophomores and seniors at Augsburg College.

B. Significant Contributions

The only real positive contribution of the Walther League during this period is the fact that it caused the Missouri Synod to reorganize and refocus its youth ministry as a division within the synod rather than a peripheral agency outside of it.

C. Effectiveness with the Purpose

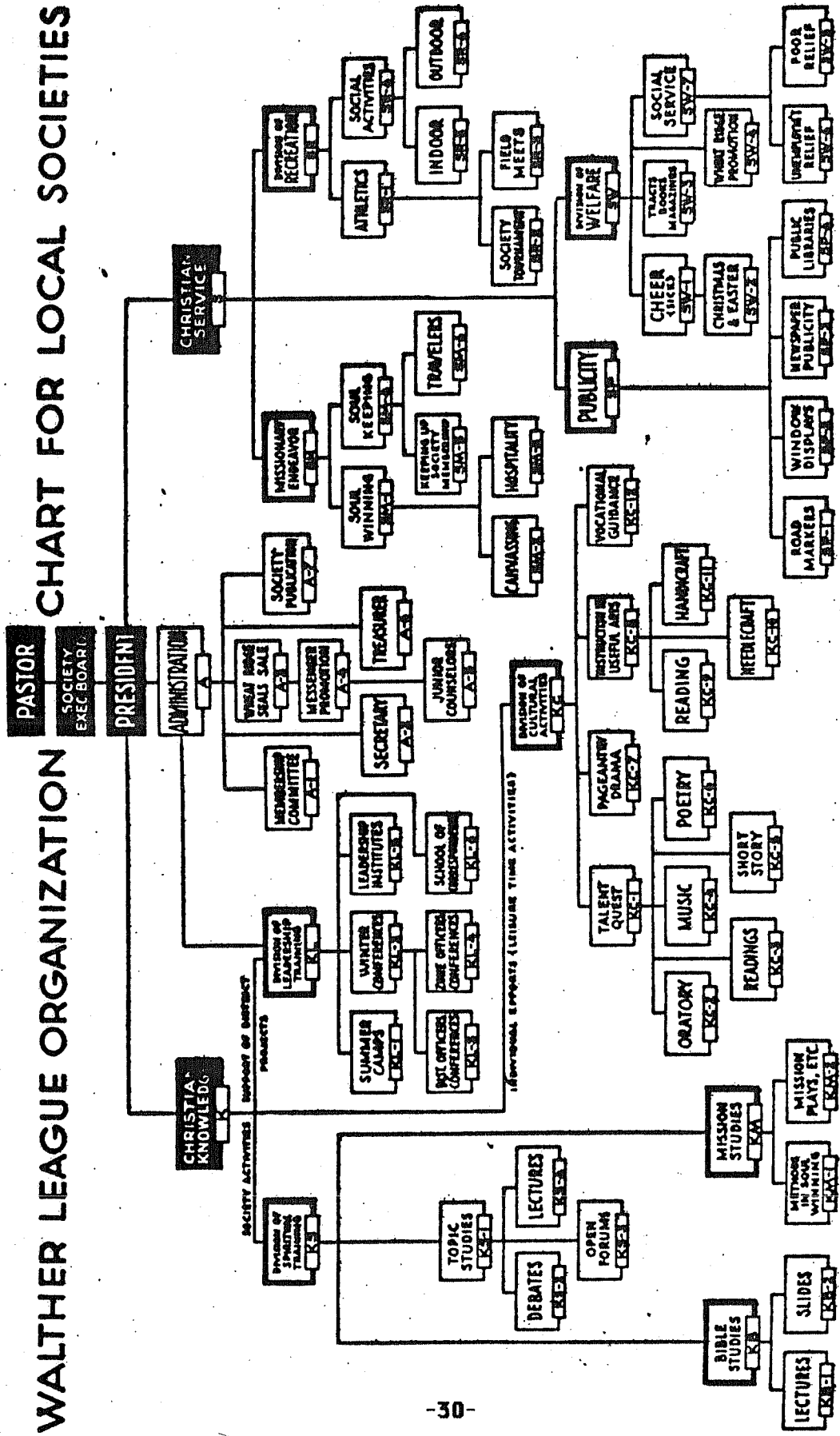
In the last years of the Walther League, it had no real desire to carry out the original purpose established in 1893. Reasons for this can be given. The times changed. the League changed. And it even admitted to its own change in the direction of its work. The problem was that it probably caused young people to fall away from the church through its involvement in social affairs and its approval of ecumenism and questions concerning the inerrancy of the Bible.

Conclusion

During its 75 years of life, the Walther League accomplished some tremendous things. It showed a great ability to innovate and change in order to continue to serve the needs of youth and to carry out its purpose of "keeping our young people within the church". But when the times continued to change more and more quickly and youth became more and more demanding; when the church was being faced with the subtle incursions of the social gospel; the Walther League lost its leading edge. At the mid-life crisis, it failed as many people do at that point. It gave into the temptation to follow the path of excitement rather than stick it out for the long haul. Many youth were kept in the church because of the work of the Walther League. But now, compared to its once vital youth, it is in its feeble old age. Its day is passed and the work of "keeping our young people within the church" must be carried on by others. May God give us the strength and guidance to always provide our youth with what they need so that they may remain true to the faith and inherit the eternal life won for them by Jesus Christ.

WALTHER LEAGUE ORGANIZATION

CHART FOR LOCAL SOCIETIES



JANUARY 1935
Theme: You and Society — Life in a Democracy.

FEBRUARY 1935
Theme: *You and Your Church — Why a "Synod"?

MARCH 1935
Theme: *You and Your Congregation — Why a Congregation?

APRIL 1935
Theme: You and Your Personal Life—You and Your Life.

MAY 1935
Theme: You and Society — Education.

JUNE 1935
Theme: You and Your Church — How Is Your Church Organized?

JULY 1935
Theme: You and Your Congregation — You and Your Pastor.

AUGUST 1935
Theme: You and Your Personal Life — You and Your Time.

SEPTEMBER 1935
Theme: You and Society — The Machine.

OCTOBER 1935
Theme: You and Your Church — How Is Your Church Organized?

NOVEMBER 1935
Theme: You and Your Congregation — How Is Your Congregation Organized?

DECEMBER 1935
Theme: You and Your Personal Life — You and Your Family.

JANUARY 1936
Theme: *You and Society — The Unemployment Problem.

FEBRUARY 1936
Theme: *You and Your Church — Your Church and Your Congregation.

MARCH 1936
Theme: You and Your Congregation — The Voter's Assembly.

APRIL 1936
Theme: You and Your Personal Life — You and Your Bible.

MAY 1936
Theme: *You and Society — Social Agencies.

JUNE 1936
Theme: *You and Your Church — Inner Missions.

JULY 1936
Theme: *You and Your Congregation — Your Mission Opportunities.

AUGUST 1936
Theme: You and Your Personal Life — You and Prayer.

SEPTEMBER 1936
Theme: You and Society — Social Agencies.

OCTOBER 1936
Theme: You and Your Church — Home Missions.

NOVEMBER 1936
Theme: *You and Your Congregation — Your Mission Opportunities.

DECEMBER 1936
Theme: You and Your Personal Life — You and Your Money.

APPENDIX B

The Forty-eight Topics

JANUARY 1937
Theme: *You and Society — Your Newspapers.

FEBRUARY 1937
Theme: You and Your Church — Educational Work.

MARCH 1937
Theme: *You and Your Congregation — You and Your Christian Schools.

APRIL 1937
Theme: You and Your Personal Life — You and Your Education.

MAY 1937
Theme: *You and Society — The Problem of Disease.

JUNE 1937
Theme: You and Your Church — Your Colleges and Seminaries.

JULY 1937
Theme: You and Your Congregation — Your Finances.

AUGUST 1937
Theme: You and Your Personal Life — Your Success.

SEPTEMBER 1937
Theme: You and Society — The Problem of Crime.

OCTOBER 1937
Theme: You and Your Church — Your Foreign Missions.

NOVEMBER 1937
Theme: You and Your Congregation — Your Personal Soul Winning.

DECEMBER 1937
Theme: You and Your Personal Life — Your Troubles.

JANUARY 1938
Theme: You and Society — The Problem of Peace.

FEBRUARY 1938
Theme: You and Your Church — Your Foreign Missions.

MARCH 1938
Theme: You and Your Congregation — Your Societies.

APRIL 1938
Theme: You and Your Personal Life — Courtship.

MAY 1938
Theme: You and Society — Your Radio.

JUNE 1938
Theme: *You and Your Church — Your Church Periodicals.

JULY 1938
Theme: You and Your Congregation — Your Liturgy.

AUGUST 1938
Theme: You and Your Personal Life — Marriage.

SEPTEMBER 1938
Theme: You and Society — Motion Pictures.

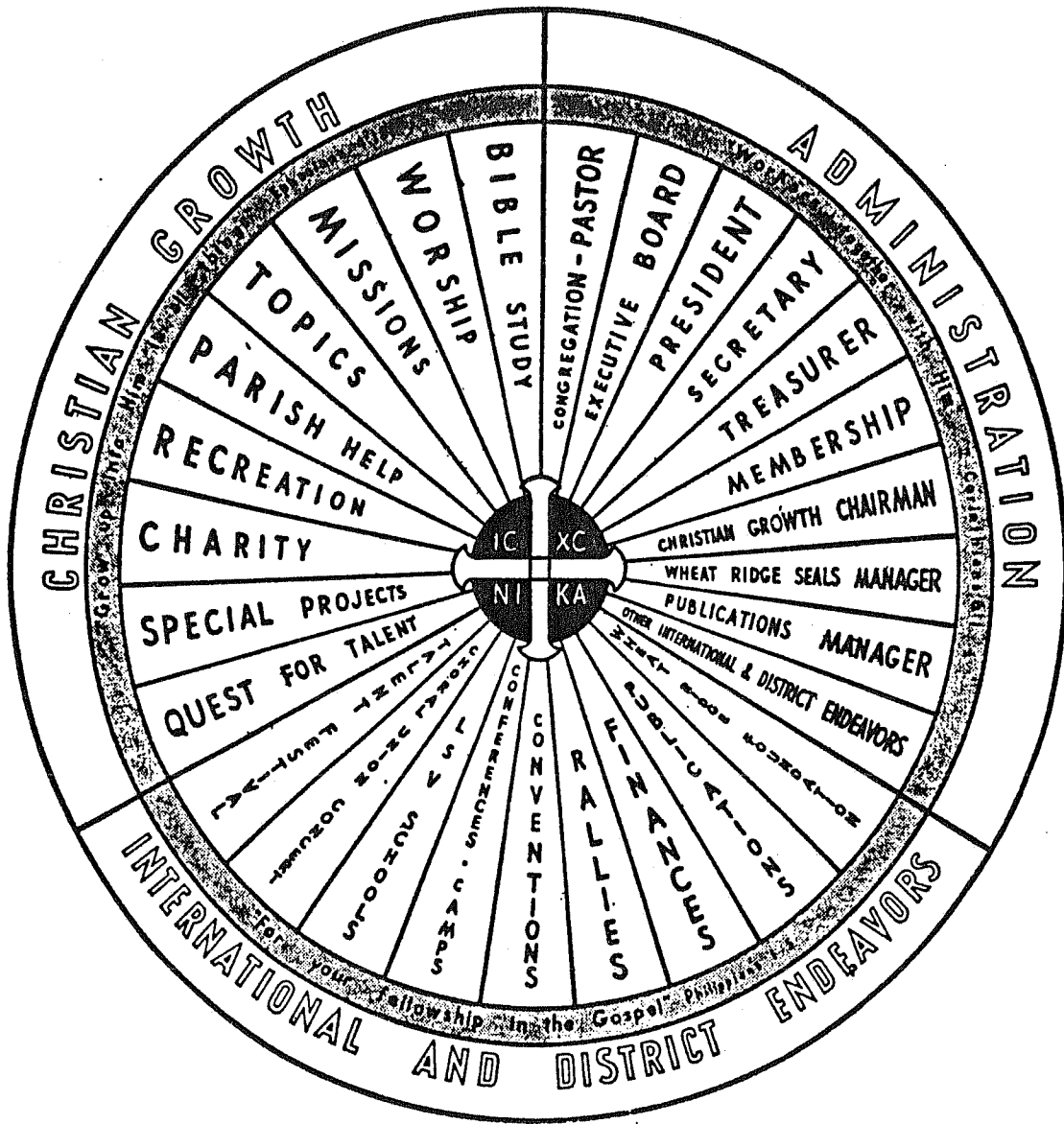
OCTOBER 1938
Theme: You and Your Church — Other Lutheran Bodies.

NOVEMBER 1938
Theme: You and Your Congregation — Your Music.

DECEMBER 1938
Theme: You and Your Personal Life — Your Recreation.

APPENDIX C

WALTHER LEAGUE PROGRAM CHART



CENTERED IN CHRIST

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- 2Walther League Manual, (Chicago: The International Walther League, 1935), p. 28.
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- 5Lawrence B. Meyer, Missouri in Motion, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1969), p. 56.
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- 9Ibid., p. 11.
- 10E. Clifford Nelson, The Lutherans in North America, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), p. 303.
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- 16Carl S. Meyer, Moving Frontiers, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1964), p. 309.
- 17Witt, p. 16.
- 18Walther League Manual, p. 42.
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- 20Ibid., p. 131.
- 21Ibid., p. 138.
- 22Ibid., p. 9.
- 23Ibid., p. 48.
- 24ABC of Youth Work, p. 48.
- 25Ibid., p. 158.
- 26"What Is Troubling the Lutherans?" News and Views, vol. 24 #27, (June, 1961), p. 21.
- 27Witt, p. 12.
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- 29Convention Workbook, 47th Regular Convention, Lutheran Church Missouri Synod, (New York, July 7-14, 1967), p. 260
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- 32Ibid., p. 21.

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35Ramming, p. 19.

36Witt, p. 12.

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38Convention Proceedings, 49th Regular Convention, Lutheran Church Missouri Synod, (Milwaukee, July 9-16, 1971), p. 182.

39Convention Proceedings, 50th Regular Convention, Lutheran Church Missouri Synod, (New Orleans, July 6-13, 1973), p. 194.

40Christian News, vol. 2 #48, (1969), p. 1.

41Christian News, vol. 6 #26, (1973), p. 14.

42Ibid., p. 14.

43Christian News, vol. 4 #14, (1971), p. 3.

44Convention Proceedings, 1971, p. 370.

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