

A Biography of Pastor John William Otto Brenner

Richard C. Schwerin

Senior Church History

December 11, 1976

1406 S. Pearl St.

New London, Wis 54961

Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Library
11831 N. Seminary Drive. 65W
Mequon, Wisconsin

As one may surmise from his name, Pastor John William Otto Brenner's ancestry is German. His grandfather, John G. Brenner, hailed from Beierthal in the Grand Duchy of Baden where he made his living as a wheelwright. One of the grandfather's sons, G. Philip Brenner, attended the Basel Mission House in Germany in preparation for the ministry. In 1862, G. Philip Brenner emigrated to America; he served congregations in Kenosha, Oakwood, Ixonia and Reedsville, Wisconsin, and finally at Sault Ste. Marie, Mich. He was very active in Wisconsin Synod affairs and served as a member of WELS's first Indian Mission Board. He was also the father of the sainted Pastor Theophil Brenner and Professor Frederick Brenner who served as professor at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary in Mequon from 1929-1940.

While Pastor G. Philip Brenner was serving the congregation at Oakwood, Wisconsin, his father emigrated to America along with another son, Karl G.F. Brenner. This son attended Northwestern College, Watertown, Wis., and the Teachers' Seminary in Addison, Illinois. Karl G.F. Brenner became the first teacher to be called by Bethany Lutheran Church, Hustisford, Wis., in 1870. He also taught at St. Peter's Lutheran Church, Fond du Lac, Wis., Trinity Lutheran Church, Neenah, Wis., and later became the first called teacher to Trinity Lutheran Church, Kaukauna, Wis. His eldest son was Chas. G. F. Brenner, who also became a teacher in Wisconsin Synod congregations and was the co-founder with Pastor Otto Hagedorn of the JUNIOR NORTHWESTERN in 1919. He later served as editor of this publication for 35 years.

The second son of Teacher Karl G.F. Brenner was John William Otto Brenner, who was born July 11, 1874, at Hustisford, Wisconsin. His mother was Barbara nee Werner; besides the two sons there were four daughters in this family. The second son attended St. Peter's Lutheran School in Fond du Lac, Wis., and then at an unusually early age he enrolled at Northwestern

College, Watertown, Wis. We say he enrolled at Northwestern at an early age because he had to return home from Watertown to be confirmed. When only 19 years old in 1893, he graduated from Northwestern College, and three years later he graduated from the Theological Seminary, then at Wauwatosha, Wis.

Upon graduation from the Sem in 1896, Pastor John W.O. Brenner served the dual parish of St. Paul's Lutheran Church, Cudahy, Wis., and St. John's Lutheran Church at New Coeln, Wis. He served these congregations from 1896 to 1908, and during this same period of time he also taught at the Christian day school at Cudahy. But this is not all. There was a Slovak Lutheran congregation in Cudahy without a pastor. Pastor Brenner learned the language well enough to serve this congregation and keep it alive until it finally got its own pastor.

In 1908, Pastor Brenner accepted the call to St. John's Lutheran Church, N. 8th and W. Vliet Sts., Milwaukee; he faithfully served this congregation until his retirement in 1958. During his long pastorate here, he was most active in district and synod affairs. In 1914, he and three other pastors founded the NORTHWESTERN LUTHERAN in his study in the parsonage at 816 W. Vliet St. The co-founders were Pastors Fred Graeber, the first editor, Hans Koller Moussa and J. Jenny. Pastor Brenner served as contributing editor until he was elected Synod President in 1933. Before his death in 1962, he was the last surviving co-founder of the old Lutheran High School which was located at 13th and Brown Sts., Milwaukee. During World War I, Pastor Brenner served on the synod's board which provided spiritual ministrations to our GI's and was required consequently to travel the country extensively for the board. He also was a member of the Board of Northwestern College for forty years and, in addition, he served on the Theological Seminary Board for many years. In 1925, he was in charge of the

Seminary Building and Debt Retirement Fund which resulted in retiring Synod's debt, building the Seminary at Mequon and also building at D.M.L.C. in New Ulm, Minn. A point of interest especially today is that the Seminary at Mequon was paid for completely at its dedication on Aug. 18, 1929.

During these earlier years in Milwaukee Pastor Brenner's parsonage had as regular guests, close friends, e.g., Professors Joh. P. Koehler and Otto Henkel; there were the Michigan men who led the Michigan Synod into joining the Wisconsin Synod, e.g., Pastors J. Gauss, E. Wenk, Bodamer, Binhammer, and the senior K. Krauss. Men from the Missouri Synod were also frequent visitors: Dr. Fuerbringer, Pfotenhauer, Graebner, etc.

At the 1933 synodical convention at St. Matthew's Ev. Lutheran Church, Milwaukee, Pastor Brenner was elected Synod President. Previously, he had received many calls extended to him from D.M.L.C. and N.W.C.; he also would have been called to the Seminary, but since he was a member of the Seminary Board, he was not eligible to receive a call from that institution. He declined all these teaching calls because he did not wish to be confined to the classroom. Instead, he preferred the wider sphere of the preaching ministry.

Pastor Brenner took office during the dreadful depression years. This fact, plus the fact that he had headed the debt drive and served as chairman of the building committee of Mequon, colored his administration. He wanted to incur no new debts. During these lean years the former synod treasurer, Mr. Theo. Buuck, would call Pastor Brenner after each mail delivery to give the amount of offerings that were trickling in from the various districts. Many a time Pastors Brenner, Leonard Koeninger and Paul Pieper would go through the agony of trying to get salary checks to the professors and missionaries. Sometimes the one group would be paid

one month and the other the next month. It was during this same depression that a moratorium had to be declared on mission expansion. This was the time when there were more than forty graduates from the Seminary who received no calls; some of these men never did enter the ministry.

These depression years caused Pastor Brenner to try to keep the Wisconsin Synod solvent, and above all, to recognize the responsibility of paying the salaries of the synod's professors and missionaries. He insisted that no new project be started before there were assurances that it would be adequately funded. This is an important point to consider because Pastor Brenner has been accused of exhibiting a lack of interest for mission work among people of another color. This criticism was directed against him at the time when there arose a rather frenzied movement in our circles that we must have "foreign" missions. Pastor Brenner's objection was not towards foreign missions but for the complete disregard of the very necessary considerations of funding and qualified manpower. His Christian day school at 8th and Vliet Sts. had black children before most of the other synod's congregations. Pastor Brenner canvassed the surrounding ghetto area again and again even in his old age. He also continued to live in the ghetto area until he retired because he felt that if his people were to come to church, Bible Class, choir, etc., then the pastor should also live in the area.

During his long tenure as Synod President, Pastor Brenner had no full-time secretary. When he did need secretarial assistance, he either paid such help out of his own pocket or accepted the volunteer work of a few Wisconsin Synod girls. While his son, Pastor John F. Brenner, was a student at the Seminary, he would serve as his father's secretary on the weekends. During the first years of presidency Pastor Brenner received no expense account and paid for the postage of official Wisconsin Synod bus-

iness and long distance phone calls out of his own pocket. The Board of Trustees later allowed him \$75.00/year, which was really about only half of the actual expense. He very rarely handed in traveling expense requisitions.

Pastor Brenner was an habitually avid reader. His chief interests lay in books on theology, education and history. He was well versed in all these subjects. His periodical reading was widespread not only in the secular field, but also in the religious due to the fact that he received the "exchange" publications of every major religious body. This "exchange" was carried out through the Northwestern Lutheran. Through this reading he was able to keep tabs on all the religious trends among the various denominations while they were unfolding.

Pastor Brenner spoke an excellent, highly professional German. He became well versed in English primarily through his reading. During the early years he tutored some of the older pastors in English so that they could begin English services in their churches. As mentioned before, he also had a reading knowledge and a limited speaking knowledge of the Slovak language. English words were intriguing to him; as a result, he wore out several dictionaries because of his desire to continue increasing his vocabulary.

The personal characteristics of this fourth president of the Wisconsin Synod were quite well known by many of his contemporaries. In his life the following order of priorities ruled: his God, God's Word, his church, and then his family. When he made decisions, he stuck to them. He had high principles. He could not stomach pastors whom he termed "waschlappen" dishrags, men who had no convictions and who were not firm in their ministry. He also detested politicking in church and synodical affairs.

His position regarding the synod presidency was also well known. He

maintained the policy: Kein Praeses ohne Amt. He felt that every president ought to be in the active ministry to be in touch with the joys and sorrows, the problems and battles of the active parish ministry. A president ohne Amt would soon lose touch with the "grassroots" of church life. President Brenner dreadfully feared a growing, top-heavy synodical structure because of the natural temptation to speak "von oben herab," i.e., to dictate from "headquarters!" If this were permitted to happen, he felt that the constituency of synod would soon lose control, and pure orthodoxy would consequently suffer.

Regarding his feelings about the Missouri Synod, it must be remembered that Pastor Brenner was well acquainted with Missouri men over many years. He saw the English District becoming bolder and bolder. In intersynodical affairs, Missouri men became experts at double-talk. They stole one congregation after another from the Wisconsin Synod when there were local problems for which these congregations were being admonished by the Wisconsin Synod. Missouri's leaning toward the American Lutheran Church was for him merely a matter of natural progression.

Pastor Brenner also had some very justifiable fears for the Wisconsin Synod. He detected an approaching combat fatigue. He was aware of men who did not have the fortitude to leave Wisconsin but still had strong inclinations towards Missouri's direction. He feared the cry, "We've contended for the gospel for so very long, let's be about extending it!" This cry arose often in quarters that fought the severance most vehemently because they really were not convinced of their own synod's stand. He felt that the adoption of methods common in the Missouri Synod such as stewardship "programs," evangelizing methods like Preaching-Teaching-Reaching, would soon lead to a neglect of purity of doctrine and practice.

At the other end of the spectrum, President Brenner's relationship

with Professor Edmund Reim, the former president of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, is a rather disappointing story. Pastor Brenner and Professor Reim were close friends, and in some ways Pastor Brenner felt responsible for Professor Reim's leaving the Wisconsin Synod. He felt this way because during the developing intersynodical problems, numerous meetings with Missouri became necessary. Problems grew, and meetings became more frequent. President Brenner relied on Seminary faculty members to represent WELS in these doctrinal matters. For that reason the Seminary faculty members had firsthand experience with the seriousness of Missouri's aberrations long before the rest of our synod. It became more and more difficult for these men to understand why the rest of our synod was not so quickly convinced of the seriousness of the intersynodical situation. Pastor Brenner felt that we must not only be patient with Missouri's grassroots' constituency but also with the WELS counterpart as well. In fact, Pastor Brenner was instrumental in slowing down the move to sever fraternal relations with Missouri because he did not feel that all our people were sufficiently informed. Shortly before Professor Reim left our synod, he visited Pastor Brenner. On this occasion Pastor Brenner sought to impress on Professor Reim that as an educator, he should realize that it would take time to lead WELS people to the facts and then to digest them. Since he was in the heat of the battle, Professor Reim knew for years where Missouri was headed, but the rest of WELS did not have that opportunity. Professor Reim had set his time-table, and that time-table which he had set dictated a break when he declared it. His attitude included chiding Pastor Brenner for not being "faithful to the Word." Professor Reim's attitude and closed mind saddened Pastor Brenner a great deal.

In June, 1958, Pastor Brenner retired from the public preaching ministry. Thereupon, he decided to move to Bay City, Michigan, in order to be

near his only grandchildren. He bought a modest home on 410 S. Alp St., and became a member of his son's congregation, St. John's Ev. Lutheran Church. He declared that he was now a layman and refused to interfere either in synodical matters or in Pastor John Brenner's congregation. He laid down the firm request that at his death he was to receive a "layman's" funeral. He wanted no string of "synodical dignitaries" eulogizing him, and he wanted a simple committal service in Milwaukee.

Early in the afternoon on Sunday, September 30, 1962, Pastor John William Otto Brenner passed away at the age of 88 years, 2 months and 19 days. The funeral service was conducted on Tuesday, October 2, by Professor Conrad Frey, and the committal service was conducted by Pastor Ray Wiechmann with interment at Graceland Cemetery in Milwaukee. Immediately surviving Pastor Brenner were his wife, the Miss Anna Raether whom he married on August 19, 1916, his daughter and son.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Lehninger, M. (Ed. Chairman). Continuing In His Word. Milwaukee, Wisconsin:
Northwestern Publishing House, 1951.

Information given to me by Pastor John F. Brenner, 595 W. Jane Street,
Bay City, Michigan, 48706.

VIEWED ONLINE IN FULL MEMORY
WEB ARCHIVE OF THE
MICHIGAN ARCHIVE