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*Moving Across Lines - A Perspective on
Bethlehem Lutheran's Change of
Synods*

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Change. Change is a difficult thing in all of our lives. Many of us dislike change and we spend much of our time trying to avoid it. We follow the same routines in order to avoid change or an interruption in our habits. We drive the same route to work or school, we listen to the same radio station, and we eat our meals at the same time most days to avoid a change. Change is foreign to our human needs. We like to have the security of knowing exactly how things are going to turn out or the security of being in a set pattern. Needless to say, the bigger the change in our lives or the bigger the stakes are the more stress is involved. I can look back to my own life. ~~The~~ “big” decisions of my family to move out of the house that we had grown up in to moving to a different town.

Nothing becomes more stressful than when the change that is taking place not only weighs on your physical life, but also your spiritual life. We know this from our own lives – the movement from the King James Version of the Bible to the New International Version. Just a few years ago, we saw the change in our synod to a new hymnal which brought with it many discussions on change. Which version of the Lord’s Prayer are we going to say? You mean to tell me we have to *sing* these psalms? Are you sure that we are supposed to be saying “Holy Spirit” instead of “Holy Ghost?” So you can empathize with Bethlehem Lutheran Church in Oshkosh, Wisconsin, when they didn’t just change their liturgy, but they moved across lines and left the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod and joined the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod. This paper will report the events that surrounded that decision and how it affected the people within the congregation. Much of the information for this paper came through an interview with Pastor Walter H. Moll. He is the pastor of Bethlehem Lutheran Church who led the

sheep under his care across the line – the line of standing solely upon Scripture or something far less valuable than that.

I. The Beginnings

The Lutheran church had come under attack in the early part of the 1900's when men like Herman Gunkel, Wellhausen, Bultmann, and many others questioned the authority and the integrity of Scripture. This type of thinking led to the infamous historical-critical method of interpreting the Scriptures. This method of interpreting Scripture was the new wave; the modern way of looking at things, but it also destroyed and ruined Scripture.

Although Bultmann's popular way of "demythologizing" Scripture was too radical for the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod (LCMS) to espouse, because it tore away at the heart of Lutheran doctrine, LCMS tried to retain their doctrine and incorporate the historical-critical approach to Scripture as modern way of looking at things.

Pastor Walter Moll graduated from Concordia Seminary in St. Louis in 1958, and he found himself in the midst of these subtle changes in his synod (LCMS). Moll said that he was aware that these changes were taking place even while he was in the Seminary, but as a student he concerned himself with the business of studies and languages. He said that he didn't pay much attention to the ripples of change because he thought that they were just ripples and not waves. Moll roomed across the hall from Herman Otten, who was busy publishing newsletters that thundered against what he perceived as drastic change within the Missouri Synod.

Moll was assigned from the Seminary to a small congregation in Omaha, Nebraska. He stated that while he was there, he was not cognizant of the extent of the doctrinal problems in the LCMS. In 1965 Pastor Moll accepted a call to Bethlehem and was installed as the pastor there. He recalls that it was about a year before he had a firm grasp on the problems that had evolved in the Missouri Synod. He gleaned most of his information from district officials, who kept him updated on the things that were taking place behind the scenes. It was during this time that Moll became seriously concerned about the direction that the LCMS was taking. He began to align himself with other conservatives in his district and throughout the synod.

II. Fellowship with The American Lutheran Church

Things were deteriorating in the LCMS for years. The Synodical Conference had
disbanded in 1961 when the Wisconsin Synod resolved to leave over doctrinal issues.

Wisconsin and
the ELS left
in 1963 +
the Synodical
Conference
disbanded
in 1967

The Wisconsin Synod spent years trying to right the sinking ship in the Missouri Synod.

After many failed attempts at correcting LCMS' doctrine, the WELS felt conscience-bound to leave.

Pastor Moll chose to stay in the Missouri^s synod at this time. He and other conservatives in his district and in the Synod resolved to stay and fight to bring their Synod back to the Scriptural moorings that they once knew. Pastor Moll and Bethlehem remained faithful to the Scriptures, which gives directions to break with those who continue in error, but they also thought that it was important to remain faithful to the Scriptural directive to admonish your brother.

Pastor Moll said that things really began to fall apart in 1969. There were some rumblings within the Missouri Synod by some people that the Synod should declare

fellowship with the American Lutheran Church in 1969. There was some question at this point, even before the resolution was on the table at the convention as to whether or not the American Lutheran Church held to the inerrancy of Scripture. Many within the Missouri Synod said the ALC had the same view ^{of} if Scripture as they ^{had} did, but evidence was presented otherwise. In an article from "The Christian News," Dr. Paul Jerslid, a professor at Luther College, in Decorah, Iowa, stated:

*"We who teach at Luther College cannot subscribe to scriptural inerrancy because of our knowledge of Scripture prevents us from making such a claim."*¹

The article goes on to speak about how the Missouri ^Synod had been given more than enough evidence to show that the American Lutheran Church did not hold to the inerrancy of Scripture. This should have led the brass in the Missouri Synod to declare that they could not declare fellowship with the ALC. The article in "The Christian News" goes on:

"Dr. Fredrik Schiotz, president of the ALC and the Lutheran World Federation, defends the position taken by Dr. Jersild in this address. Officials of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, who have been urging their synod to declare fellowship with the ALC, claim that the ALC insists on the doctrine of the inerrancy of Scripture.

Officials of the Missouri Synod have been given more than enough evidence to prove that many pastors and professors within the ALC reject the Scriptural doctrine of the inerrancy of the Bible.

A scientifically conducted poll published in the July/August 1967 TRANSACTION revealed that only 23% of the clergy in the ALC accepted the inerrancy of the Bible.

*The same poll said that approximately 76% of the Missouri Synod's clergy accepted the inerrancy of the Bible."*²

Despite all of this clear evidence that ALC did not hold to the inerrancy of Scriptures, the officials of the Missouri Synod had suppressed it, and the New York

¹ The Christian News, August 12, 1968, p. 5

² The Christian News, August 12, 1968, p. 5

Convention of the Missouri Synod in 1967 was misled into believing that the ALC upheld this doctrine. Pastor Moll wrote to the congregation in Oshkosh and explained to them the real issues between the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod and the American Lutheran Church:

“People are asking: What are the issues involved in the proposed fellowship with the ALC? Briefly, the issues are these:

- 1) *The inspiration and inerrancy of the Scriptures – There is much in ALC public doctrine today which conflicts with the historic loyalty to the Scripture and casts doubt on the faithfulness of God’s Word. E.g.:*
 - a) *‘The infallibility of the Scriptures is the infallibility of Jesus Christ and not the infallibility of the written text.’ (THE BIBLE: THE BOOK OF FAITH, p. 148, 1964)*
 - b) *In the BIBLE: THE BOOK OF FAITH (officially approved by the ALC Second General Convention in 1964), note these teachings:*
 - 1) *Pauline authorship of I & II Timothy, Titus and Petrine authorship of II Peter impugned (pp. 126, 127)*
 - 2) *Isaiah didn’t write Isaiah, Chapters 40-66 (pp. 43, 62, 76)*
 - 3) *Daniel didn’t write the book of Daniel (pp. 46, 77-78)*
 - 4) *Mosaic authorship of first five books of the Bible impugned (pp. 67-79)*
 - 5) *Historical factualness of Genesis 1-11 made doubtful (pp. 54-153)*
 - c) *Evolution is being taught in some ALC churches in preference to creation.*
 - d) *Dr. Fredrik A. Schiotz, ALC president, in his essay, THE CHURCH’S CONFSSIONAL STAND RELATIVE TO THE SCRIPTURES: ‘The ALC holds that the inerrancy referred to here’ (ALC constitution) ‘does not apply to the text but to the truths revealed for our faith, doctrine and life.’ (June 9, 1966)*
- 2) *The lodge issue – The Missouri Synod does not permit lodge members to join the church without first leaving the lodge. To hold membership in the church and in the lodge at the same time is to deny the Gospel of Christ. The ALC allows lodge members to join their churches with the provision that the pastors will make a real effort to convince the new member to leave the lodge after he has joined the church. ALC pastors frankly admit their efforts are often unsuccessful.*
- 3) *ALC membership in the Lutheran World Federation and the World Council of Churches, both of which are unionistic bodies. Any kind of pulpit and altar fellowship with the ALC would immediately place the Missouri Synod into the difficult position of being moved gradually toward membership in these organizations. All kinds of doctrinal aberrations are possible and evident in these unionistic groups.*

- 4) *The ALC is already, in many areas, engaged in practical fellowship with LCA. The ALC has on its Omaha Convention agenda for October, 1968, the intention to declare pulpit and altar fellowship with the Missouri Synod but also with the LCA. Yet the LCA has refused to participate in doctrinal discussions regarding fellowship. Since we never have been in doctrinal agreement with LCA, any kind of fellowship with the ALC would put the Missouri Synod in the unfortunate position of being automatically linked in one way or another with the LCA.*

These are basically the issues at stake. Do we really think we can declare fellowship with so many unresolved issues? Have we any right at all to declare fellowship with a church body which is so dominated by anti-Scriptural teachings and practices?"³

Moll and the congregation acted on what they perceived to be a chasm that separated the two synods. Moll drafted a statement of confession that was mailed out to approximately 5,000 churches throughout the Missouri Synod to be signed by those who agreed with their position.

Pastor Moll also drafted a resolution that was to be brought to the convention floor in Denver asking that the Missouri Synod rescind fellowship with the American Lutheran Church. *in ? fellowship had not yet been declared* Because Moll was a pastoral delegate to the convention at Denver in 1969, he was the one who brought the resolution to the floor of the convention. He recalls the irony that he was doing the presenting to the convention because he was positive there were men more capable than he. He couldn't figure out how the unknown Walter Moll was the one who ended up with this job. He thought that there were other men, who were more well known, who were in positions of authority who could do this better than himself (Pastor Moll chose not to name these men). These men had backed Moll and other conservatives when they had meetings to discuss the problems involved in fellowship. However, when it came to the conventions and the conservatives would get

³ Pastor W.H. Moll, *The Real Issues Between the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod and the American Lutheran Church*

up to speak, all the Synod officials who had been on their side would vacate. Pastor Moll said that they had a deal with the officials: they would get up and bring the resolution, and the officials would then stand and support them. That never happened. When the liberals refuted Pastor Moll, he found no public support from the influential conservatives. The conservatives were hung out to dry. It seemed like it was a simple case of the officials wanting to save face instead of standing up for the truth. Moll remembers seeing those officials later and asking them what happened to them and never receiving a straightforward answer.

Moll also recalls being extremely saddened by the remarks of Dr. Preus at the convention in Denver. Preus was a candidate for presidency in the LCMS and at a meeting with the conservatives before the convention had voiced the opinion that he was against fellowship with the ALC. However, he went on record at the convention saying that if he was elected president he could live with fellowship with the ALC. Moll had this to say about the convention to his congregation in its monthly newsletter:

“Several observations need to be made about the decision of the Denver Convention to declare fellowship with the ALC. This decision clearly split the Missouri Synod, after a ballot vote of 522 to 438. We are beginning to hear reports of congregations and pastors leaving the Missouri Synod. Quite a number of congregations are in a state of protest or have clearly voiced their objections to the fellowship, stating that they will have no part of it. Some congregations are holding off doing anything until Dr. Preus makes some kind of formal announcement; then they will decide their course of action. Then there are congregations and pastors who are drifting along on the fence, not knowing exactly what to do, and hoping that something will change. And of course there are some who opposed fellowship before Denver, but now suddenly decide they have no choice but to take part in it; they try to defend themselves by saying that ‘the synod has spoken.’ Of course, one could always ask: Is man’s first loyalty to the Lord and His Word or to a synod, which is a human organization?

No matter how you look at it, this declaration of fellowship with the ALC was made without foundation in the Scriptures or the Lutheran Confessions or even the constitution of the Missouri Synod.”⁴

⁴ W. H. Moll, *The Denver Decision*, Bethlehem Lutheran Church Newsletter, July 1969, p.13

So the conservatives had lost their fight with the liberals at the Denver convention. Pastor Moll went back to his congregation saddened by what he saw take place at the convention. He was also saddened that his District President had said the following: "Since the Lord's will had been established through the vote, don't make waves – even if you don't want to go through with fellowship with the ALC." Moll began working right away. On July 23, 1969, Bethlehem adopted a "Declaration of Our Position" where they resolved:

*"That we continue to give clear and uncompromising testimony to The Faith of the American Lutheran Church, and that we stand firmly on the Holy Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions, and declare ourselves not in fellowship with the American Lutheran Church, and thus refrain from practicing altar and pulpit fellowship."*⁵

By declaring that they were not in fellowship with the American Lutheran Church, Bethlehem was also declaring that they were not in fellowship with the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod.

III. The 1971 Milwaukee Convention

Bethlehem continued to keep its members informed of the situation in the Missouri Synod. A resolution was submitted at the October 1970 Voter's assembly, it passed and was submitted for action at the January 1971 annual congregation meeting. The resolution stated and resolved:

"That we encourage our congregation to greater faithfulness to the Word of God through the regular worship and Bible study, and that we endeavor to keep ourselves and our congregation properly informed about the conditions in the church and the Synod, and that if the 1971 convention of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod does not rescind fellowship with the American Lutheran Church, and does not terminate our Synod's membership in LCUSA (Lutheran Council in the U.S.A.), then we as a congregation shall withdraw our membership in the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, and finally that we as a congregation

⁵ Bethlehem Lutheran Church of Oshkosh, Wisconsin, Inc., *Declaration of Our Position*, July 23, 1969

*shall apply for membership in a Lutheran church body which adheres to the Biblical and Confessional standards of the historic Lutheran Christianity.”*⁶

During the two years that separated the Denver Convention (1969) and the Milwaukee Convention (1971), Pastor Moll kept the people of his congregation informed about the theological problems in the Synod, the problems that had sprouted at the Missouri Synod Seminary in St. Louis and the investigation that was taking place into an accusation of some professors teaching false doctrine, and the problems of fellowship with the American Lutheran Church. Moll accomplished this with congregational meetings that he named “Meetings for Concerns.” All members of the congregation were invited to attend these meetings to ask questions, receive answers, and keep themselves informed. If a member of the congregation happened to miss a meeting, he would be mailed a summary of the meeting.

As the Milwaukee convention approached, Bethlehem submitted three resolutions to be approved in Milwaukee. These resolutions were signed on January 17, 1971 at the annual congregation meeting. The resolutions stated:

*“That we respectfully request the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, in convention at Milwaukee, Wisconsin, in July 1971, to rescind or suspend fellowship with the American Lutheran Church, and that no further declarations of fellowship be made until the differences in doctrine and practice between the two synods can be resolved so that a true and God-pleasing unity can exist on the basis of the teachings of the Holy Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions. That the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, in convention assembled at Milwaukee, Wisconsin, in July 1971, withdraw its membership in LCUSA (Lutheran Council in the U.S.A.). That we support our Synod president in his investigation of the St. Louis Seminary, in order that doctrinal discipline may be restored, and that renewed confidence may be placed in those who train our future pastors.”*⁷

Pastor Moll was not a delegate to the 1971 Milwaukee Convention of the Missouri Synod, but he did attend part of it. He states that he was shocked by what was

⁶ Bethlehem Lutheran Church, *Resolution*, October 1970

said there. The way that people had corresponded with him made him think that they had come to their senses and were willing to admit they were wrong and return to the foundations of Scripture, but all along they were just saying those things to pacify the conservatives in their Synod to keep them from leaving. The events that took place at the Milwaukee convention forced the hand of the members of Bethlehem and their pastor into action. They were left to do what they stated they would do if the Synod failed to pass the resolutions that they had brought before them: Move across lines.

Pastor Moll wrote an evaluation of the Synod convention that was circulated among the members of Bethlehem so that they would be informed about what took place there. He also included some evaluations from others:

“It might be edifying to let others summarize the Milwaukee Convention: Christianity Today, the non-Lutheran, non-denominational journal of evangelical theology said; ‘The church may have moved a shade to the right from its position at Denver two years ago. But overall, the important victories went to the theological moderates.’ (the liberals, who often call themselves moderates)

The New York Times: ‘Most observers do not expect the intervening period (between Milwaukee and New Orleans) to be pleasant, and it is quite possible that two more years of wasteful in-fighting will effectively eliminate the Missouri Synod as a serious force in American Protestantism.’

Time Magazine said: ‘As it turned out, the conservative drive was stopped by a narrow margin. Moderates retained control of Concordia’s board, which should avoid any threat of purge in the seminary for at least two years. As for the resolution on doctrinal formulations, the delegates voted 485-425 for a curiously schizophrenic compromise. It retained the conservative preamble and ‘whereas’ sections of the right-wing resolution, but substituted a moderate version of the resolution proper, simply asking – not requiring – church theologians to ‘honor and uphold’ doctrinal statements of church conventions.’

The Lutheran Sentinel (of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod) said: ‘While the theme ‘Sent to Reconcile’ was used as a watchword throughout the convention, there were at the end of the convention irreconcilable differences existing which were still ‘as broad as heaven and earth.’

The Northwestern Lutheran (of the Wisconsin Ev. Lutheran Synod) said: ‘Some observers opined that the outcome was in effect a draw. But when orthodoxy is at stake, a draw is always a victory for those who favor doctrinal pluralism. The ultimate tragedy of Missouri is that many of conservative mind

⁷ Bethlehem Lutheran Church, *Request to Synod*, January 17, 1971

*have learned to live with their opponents without seeing the necessity of separation. This is tantamount to an accommodation to the key thesis of the moderates, namely that there is room for two theologies in one church. God would have his children to understand that there comes a time when love's actions speak louder than love's words. Those who are committed in principle to the idea of a divided theological house may weary of words, but they will not be moved by them. It may be significant that the original meaning of the Latin word arena is sand. The convention at the Arena indicated that Missouri is trying to stand with one foot on the Rock, but with the other planted on sand, blithely oblivious to the warnings of Scripture that a house divided against itself cannot stand. Our hearts ache for her.'"*⁸

IV. *The Internal Struggle*

With the proceedings of the Milwaukee Convention, Bethlehem was left to its decision. Pastor Moll remembers that he and others within the congregation were afraid of what might happen if they stayed in the Missouri Synod. They wondered if they would eventually fall away from the Scriptural foundation that they had fought so earnestly for and were clinging to up until that point. They wondered what would happen if they had to call another pastor. Would he be a conservative or one of the self-proclaimed moderates?

There were also those in the congregation who found it hard to leave something that they had grown up with all their life. It was hard to leave the Missouri Synod. Pastor Moll said it was hard on him because he realized that if all the conservatives left the Missouri Synod nobody would be able to straighten them out. But he felt as if he had done all he could to have them realize the error of their ways and it did no good. Moll recalls one lady in his congregation telling him that if he left the Missouri Synod, he and his entire congregation would end up in hell. She held to the misconception that there was no salvation outside the Missouri Synod. He was glad to report that he spoke to her

⁸ W. H. Moll, *An Evaluation of the Synod Convention*

about that and assured her that she and everyone else who has faith in Jesus Christ would be in heaven no matter what church body they were in.

Moll said that most of the other LCMS pastors in the area were sympathetic to the plight of Bethlehem, but did not encourage him to take his congregation out of the Synod. In fact, they advised against it. He also did not receive any public support from the Wisconsin Synod or the Evangelical Lutheran Synod. They encouraged him privately but could do nothing publicly.

V. Moving Across Lines

At the Voters' assembly on September 12, 1971, the resolution on the table was whether or not to leave the Missouri Synod. The District president, Barth, was in attendance and pleaded with the congregation to stay in the Synod. But Moll and most of the members felt that it was impossible to listen to his arguments when he had not supported them publicly on any of the issues. Although there was much heated discussion, the vote proved to be decisive. *The Oshkosh Northwestern* reported:

“By a vote of 101 to 29, Bethlehem Lutheran Church of Oshkosh withdrew from The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod at a special meeting of its Voters' Assembly Sunday, September 12.

Bethlehem's pastor, the Rev. Walter Moll, cited reasons for the break with the Synod: 1) the continuing doctrinal deterioration of the Synod; 2) the Synod's decision to continue fellowship with the American Lutheran Church in spite of doctrinal disagreements; 3) the Synod's continuing membership in the Lutheran Council in the U.S.A. which has involved the Synod in unionism and internal dissension; and 4) the general breakdown in doctrinal discipline within the Synod in recent years.

Bethlehem Church is the fourth church in Wisconsin to sever relations with the Missouri Synod. Other congregations which have already taken this action are Holy Trinity Lutheran of Okauchee, Trinity Lutheran of rural West Bend, and St. John's Lutheran of Watertown, the largest church in the South Wisconsin District.

The Bethlehem congregation will remain independent while exploring opportunities for joining either the Evangelical Lutheran Synod, the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, or the Federation for Authentic Lutheranism.”⁹

The congregation decided to remain independent for the time being and appointed a committee to look into the various Synods and make a recommendation. Moll recalls that most people were in agreement with the decision and he felt that they were well informed and able to make an educated decision. He said that one of the best things about the situation is that both he and the congregation knew that nothing was being done in haste and that they had taken their time in making this decision. There were about 50 people who did leave the congregation and went to other Missouri Synod churches in the area. However, Pastor Moll was happy to report that 20 of them returned to Bethlehem within a few months.

The committee that had been assigned to evaluate the synods was ready to make the recommendation that Bethlehem join the Evangelical Lutheran Synod because the closest ELS church was in Clintonville. However just days before the vote, Pastor Moll began to realize that many people were still coming to him with questions about the ELS, even after they had been presented with much material about the ELS. Finally, it was discovered that if Bethlehem voted to join the ELS, a number of people would leave to join Martin Luther Church, a WELS congregation. Martin Luther and Bethlehem were in close proximity and had close relations together for years and they didn't want to ruin the close relationship.

On January 16, 1972, at the annual Voter's Assembly the congregation voted to join the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod. The colloquy meeting was a very simple procedure. Pastor Oscar Naumann, president of the Synod, Professor Wilbert

⁹ *The Oshkosh Northwestern*, "Oshkosh Church Leaves Synod," September 13, 1971

Gawrisch, and Pastor Karl Gurgel sat in on the meetings. They told Pastor Moll that they had been tracking the progression of Bethlehem and that they saw no problem with admitting them to the Synod. *The Oshkosh Northwestern* reported:

“At the annual Voters’ Assembly on Sunday, January 16, Bethlehem Lutheran Church, 1206 Ontario Street in Oshkosh, joined the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod.

*In the words of Bethlehem’s pastor, the Rev. Walter Moll, ‘We are very please to be a congregation of the Wisconsin Synod here in Oshkosh. We rejoice to have part in the united voice of authentic confessional Lutheranism which has characterized the Wisconsin Synod in this area and across the nation. The Wisconsin Synod, together with the Evangelical Lutheran Synod, continue their courageous leadership in evangelical, confessional Lutheranism. Their firm stand in doctrine and their zeal for missions is recognized not only in America but in Lutheran circles throughout the world.’ Other Wisconsin Synod churches in Oshkosh are Grace, Martin Luther, Faith, and Immanuel.”*¹⁰

Through the years of trouble and heartache, the members of Bethlehem held firm to the Word of God, as did their pastor, Walter Moll, who led them across lines and yet kept them clinging to the true, unalterable line, God’s Word. We can say, just as is the case with every saint, Pastor Moll and Bethlehem congregation are where they are simply and purely by the grace of God!

Special thanks to Pastor Walter H. Moll for his help with all of the information he brought forth in an interview on March 18, 2000.

¹⁰ *The Oshkosh Northwestern*, “Church Joins Wisconsin Synod,” January 18, 1972