

A BRIEF OVERVIEW
OF THE
INFLUX OF A SUBSTANTIAL
FINNISH MINORITY
IN THE WELS

Senior Church History
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The German roots of the Wisconsin Synod are well known. The WELS has traditionally been a German church body, compiled mostly of members with German last names. Of course, there are many Wisconsin Synod people whose ancestry is not German. Especially today the synod is a haven for anyone who holds dear all the truths of Scripture. Individuals of all different heritages hold membership in the WELS. But with the exception of Blacks and the Apaches, we generally do not find a large concentration or sector of these individuals in the WELS. There is not a substantial concentration of French, English, or Russian last names in the membership of the synod. Some nationalities are represented in larger amounts. For instance, there are many Norwegian and Swedish names scattered throughout the synod. But still this does not constitute a giant concentration.

There is somewhat of an exception, however. In a quiet unnoticed corner of our country known as the Upper Peninsula of Michigan there resides a heavy concentration of Finnish Americans. These are proud, honest and caring people. Last year the writer spent his vicarage year in Eagle River, WI. near the Michigan border. He was suddenly introduced to these people and to their ways and wisdom. But an even more enjoyable experience was the realization that a rather substantial group of these people is Wisconsin Synod. A

question arose. How did so many of these people find their way into the WELS? Finland is traditionally Lutheran. But other traditionally Lutheran countries like Sweden and Norway seem to have had most of their descendants placed in their own synods, such as the old Augustana or the ELS. There are many Swedish and Norwegians who are WELS. But there are so many Finns in the WELS that it appeared that there must be more to the story than individuals joining a German church body one by one. The object of this paper is to explore this question: How did the Wisconsin Synod become so blessed as to have in its midst such a substantial concentration of Finnish Christians?

As one drives east out of Rhinelander, Wisconsin on Hwy 8 he immediately passes through a beautiful section of woodland. The road curves gently through stands of hardwoods located on sloping, rolling hills which are occasionally broken by abrupt wooded ravines. Occasionally the driver catches a glimpse of a lake in the background. Locals who would know say that if one wants to know what Finland looks like, that's where he should drive. However, the scenery east of Rhinelander is not unique to Oneida County. Much of the Upper Peninsula of Michigan shares the same beautiful landscape. Perhaps it is no accident that so many Finns chose this area as their home.

It certainly was no accident that so many Finns left Finland. In the years following our civil war Finland was struck by famine. Thousands of Finnish farmers were forced

to live elsewhere in order to feed their families. In the late 1800's many came to America. Most all of them settled in the northern parts of our country. The majority of those came to Upper Michigan and the Arrowhead Country of Minnesota, the land between Lake Superior and Canada. In the U.P. they found plenty of work in the copper and iron mines. The area was booming. Recent immigrants, mining and forestry companies and real estate companies tried to encourage more Finns to come to America. For a time most had no trouble finding work. Unfortunately those who were enticed to come by the promise of inexpensive farmland had a rougher time of things. The growing season is a little too short for many crops. If a person drives through northern Wisconsin and Michigan today he finds land once cleared growing again into woodland. Isolated farm buildings lie in ruins surrounded by trees. Occasionally one finds apple trees growing wild in the woods, descendants of abandoned orchard attempts. Today the mining business has also declined. Economically things are hard once again. It is here that most American Finns have lived and live to this day.

The people themselves are somewhat of a mystery. Their heritage is unclear. Some of their physical characteristics are mysterious. Many Finns have almost oriental facial features combined with blonde hair and blue eyes. Their language seems to be almost unrelated to that of any of Finland's neighbors. We will notice that this language

barrier would affect them religiously in the new world as they often found it hard to assimilate into established Swedish, German, or Norwegian church bodies.

As is always the case, immigrating peoples bring their religion with them as they enter a new country. From our point of view this has been to America's betterment or detriment. In the case of the Finns we find both good and bad. The religion of Finland was and is nominally Lutheran. The types of Lutheranism in 19th century Finland ranged from the far left to the moderate to the confessional. Basically these three factions of Lutheranism eventually sprang up in Northern Michigan as well. There was also a fourth faction that could be mentioned briefly. Many Finns who lived around the turn of the century and into the mid-1900's were communist sympathizers. They were atheists who actively opposed the state church in Finland as well as the Finnish Lutherans in America. They organized disturbances and even assassination attempts against Lutherans in this country. But now they are basically a defunct group and for our purposes we will ignore them.

In our search for the roots of WELS Finns we should instead look more closely at the three Lutheran factions which were transplanted in the U.P.. These are the left wing Laestadians, the state church moderates, and the confessional Lutherans.

The history of the Laestadians in Finland is well documented in a WLS church history paper by Donald Main

(1985) entitled "Will the Federation Continue". Lars Levi Laestadius was a Swede who carried out his ministry in the mid-1800's in Finland. At that time the Lapland area in which he worked was experiencing a real sanctification problem. Basically Laestadius came in as a charismatic revival leader and gathered somewhat of a cult following. The brand of Lutheranism which sprang from his teaching was characterized by heavy law preaching, mandatory conversion experience, non-liturgical emotional worship services and almost complete lay leadership. Basically he was a Pentacostal who kept the Small Catechism and Luther's name. This church body went as far as to say that only Laestadians were in the Invisible Church. The following quote is from a Swedish Laestadian in a letter to a LC-MS Finnish American in 1987:

The Apostolic Lutheran churches in USA have rejected the pure doctrine of Laestadius and that is why they have lost the Holy Ghost. There are many awakened souls, however, who try to walk the narrow way. But they do not understand the divine doctrine perfectly. That is why I cannot give you any addresses to visit in USA to get correct knowledge about living Christianity.

In 1871 these Laestadians established the first Finnish Lutheran church in America. This happened after a group was excommunicated (or withdrew depending on whose viewpoint is taken) from the Norwegian congregation it had joined. This took place in Hancock, MI. The members were somewhat

fanatical in worship, leaping over chairs, clapping, and shouting out whenever the spirit moved them. (Historical Survey, Skaates)

The Laestadians became a prominent Lutheran group in Upper Michigan. Today they exist in various splinter groups such as the Apostolic Lutheran Churches and the Association of Free Lutheran Congregations. Most have by now found their way into ELCA. As were their predecessors, they are Lutheran in name only. However, they are not defunct, as the afore mentioned letter demonstrates, nor is their influence. In an extremely small crossroads town in the U.P. known as Bruce Crossing there are two churches. They stand across the street from each other. One is a WELS church and the other an Apostolic Lutheran congregation. This is a non-liturgical, charismatic Laestadian church. Many older Finns in our congregations have Laestadianism somewhere in their heritage. As one preaches or administers Holy Communion to them he can notice their enthusiasm and an occasional "Praise the Spirit" is sometimes vocalized. In summary, Laestadianism still exists in small groups, in ELCA and in the heritages of many a Finnish-American's Lutheran faith.

The second Finnish Lutheran group to arise in this country was basically made up of members from the homeland's state Lutheran church. These are the founders of the old Suomi Synod. Its founding can be traced to 1890. The site was Trinity Church in Calumet, MI. (We are now getting close

to some Finnish WELS history - more on this later). Trinity stood for Norwegian, Swedish, and Finnish. These three peoples held shares of ownership in the building, each having their own congregations and pastors. (Skaates) In 1896 Suomi College and Theological Seminary was founded. The college is still in existence in Hancock. The seminary has since moved and merged and been absorbed into the University of Chicago. Today Suomi is a two year college which had been under supervision of the LCA and presumably is now under some sort of ELCA direction.

As for the synod, they found the company of like-minded Lutherans in the LCA. Now they too are part of ELCA. This puts them under the same tent as many of the same Laestadians whom at one time they had tried so hard to avoid. Unfortunately the doctrinal deterioration of the groups in ELCA has caused most of them to forget their important differences.

The third group is the one that interests us the most. It is the group of confessional Lutherans who constituted a small part of the state church in Finland. They held to the Book of Concord and translated much of it and some of Luther's writings into Finnish. These people had a deep desire for fellowship with like-minded Christians in America. Their language barrier, however, proved to be a hinderance. Their doctrinal convictions and their dislike for Suomi's hierarchial structure kept them out of that body. The main difference between these people and the

Synodical Conference was the issue of women's suffrage. Variance with Scripture is never excusable. However one might understand their misinterpretation realizing that the Finnish society is somewhat matriarchal in nature. Women seem to be involved in most all forms of their society's decision making.

Eventually this substantial group of confessional Christians was able to seek each other out and they formed what became the National Evangelical Lutheran Church. It was formed in Wyoming in 1898, but the chief impetus came from the U.P. and especially from Calumet. This is where Trinity of Calumet comes into the picture. National Church promoters had previously purchased the part of the building owned by the Swedes. This created an odd situation. The Suomi Synod and the National Church were owners of the same building. Eventually the Suomi Synod sold their share to the confessional Finns. This congregation became the ancestor of the present National Lutheran Church in Calumet, a congregation whose name was the same as that of the synod of which they were a part. This congregation will be discussed later in more detail.

The National Ev. Lutheran Church had a rocky beginning and history. Right after the turn of the century the new synod, plagued by finance problems and by harassment by the atheists, sought possible refuge in the Suomi Synod. Suomi would not accept their lay-trained preachers unless they were further trained. This led to the establishment of a

small National Church seminary in Ironwood, MI. Pastor A. E. Kokkonen whom we will soon meet as a key figure in the Calumet congregation's history was a graduate of this seminary.

Fortunately the Suomi merger never took place and instead the National Church went into fellowship with the LC-MS in 1923. In 1938 a National Church man became a professor at Springfield and head of the Finnish department there. From then on National Church pastors were Springfield trained.

As the Synodical Conference began to break up, the National Church found themselves at a crossroads. Because of an unfortunate misunderstanding in which the ELS refused to pray with the National Church during merger talks, these Finns bounced from possible merger with the ELS to dissolution and full membership in the LC-MS in 1963. The National Church is now a part of that church body.

It appears that not all of the congregations joined the LC-MS, however. The 1957 "Directory of Stations of the National Ev. Lutheran Church" lists 71 congregations in the U.S. and Canada and Australia. Of these, 21 can be accounted for in the LC-MS yearbook. At least one appears to have joined the Lutheran Church of the Reformation. The others are unaccounted for, at least by their original names. Either they dissolved or joined other synods at that time. Three exceptions do exist, however. Hebron of Toronto, Bethany of NYC, and National of Calumet chose to

remain independent congregations. Dr. Skaates notes in his paper that Pastor Kokkonen of Calumet advised his people against the LC-MS merger as "embarking on a very big ship with a very big leak". Another pastor who remained independent was Rupert Efraimson who had served in Toronto and was at the time the head of the tiny Confessional Lutheran Church in Finland.

This brief overview of Finnish-American Lutheranism shows how Finnish Lutherans moved from groups of separate identities into membership of larger bodies. Officially most all of them are accounted for in groups other than the WELS. So the question of the origin of a heavy concentration of Finnish WELS members is still unanswered.

Perhaps much of the answer may seem obvious. Many Finns lived in the U.P. and they simply joined the WELS churches that were near them. That's why virtually every congregation in the U.P. and in northern Wisconsin towns has Finnish members. That may be true. But we must remember that most Lutheran groups before World War II were very nationalistic in the sense that they retained their original languages and served basically only people of that language. Even after English became the norm, these nationalities stuck together. Therefore it must have taken a little extra conviction and courage for so many Finns to join the WELS.

In 1948 a congregation was begun in Phelps, WI. by Pastor Fred Bergfeld of Bruce Crossing Michigan. Before him, Wisconsin Synod circuit riders had traveled through the

U.P. and northern Wisconsin serving WELS members and doing mission work among the unchurched working in the area. Like his predecessors, Pastor Bergfeld did the same in the sawmill town of Phelps. Of the 33 family names listed as original members of St. John's of Phelps, at least 9 of those names are Finnish. Today there are many more than that. That's at least one third of the congregation. Similar situations exist across the U.P. Such percentages even prompt Pastor E. Ahlswede of St. John's to try and learn bits of the difficult Finnish language via cassette tape as he drives throughout his parish in the Northwoods.

It seems as if three basic factors account for these kinds of numbers. One would be just plain mission work. As the circuit riding missionaries worked in the U.P. a majority of people with whom they crossed paths were of Finnish descent. Most all of these would have had Lutheran backgrounds, mainly in the state church. If language was not a barrier, they would have been good mission prospects.

A second factor would be the religious convictions and doctrinal concerns of many which led them to the WELS. We have noticed that the chief difference between the confessionally minded National Church and the Synodical Conference was that of women's suffrage. It is likely that many Finns took a Synodical Conference stand. What occurred probably more frequently, however, was the occasion of a WELS church being within reach while a National Church was not. Certainly in the early years Finnish worshippers would

have felt more comfortable in the Finnish church. But in those days of slow travel and in the hard wild country of Upper Michigan, reaching the National Church was not always possible. In 1957 they only had 11 congregations in the U.P., and there were many areas where WELS churches were accessible whereas National Church congregations were not. Therefore many confessional Finns joined the WELS during the first half of this century.

A new influx of Finns into the WELS also occurred and is occurring during the second half of the century. This is the time period of the Finnish synod break-ups. It would have been chiefly National Church people who would have had an interest in the WELS. We noted that their Springfield connection with the LC-MS led them into that body during the collapse of the Synodical Conference. At that time the National Church dissolved as most of them became Missouri Synod. But we remember that not all of the congregations joined. Some of them dissolved and their members joined other churches. Conscience at that time caused many National Church people to join WELS congregations.

All of this history led in general to the substantial Finnish element in the WELS today. But due to rather recent history we can move from the general to the specific and observe a 4th and very significant influx of Finns into the WELS.

This history involves National Lutheran congregation in Calumet, Michigan. This congregation, which bears the same

name as the synod to which it once belonged, was one of the most prominent churches in the National Evangelical Lutheran Church. Remember, however, that Pastor A. E. Kokkonen kept his people out of the LC-MS, the big ship with the big leak, in 1963. National Lutheran remained independent along with a congregation in Toronto and Bethany of NYC, a Finnish speaking group.

Pastor Kokkonen, as mentioned earlier, was a graduate of the small National Church seminary in Ironwood. He retired after 50 years in the ministry in July of 1971. Twenty-eight of his years were spent at Calumet. He began as a pastor in Red Lodge, Montana (there he was the victim of a murder attempt by the atheist faction) and served in Ohio and New Jersey before coming to Calumet. (Daily Mining Gazette, 7/71) It was his leadership and adherence to confessionalism which kept the congregation on the right track through hard and trying years. He took no steps toward bring his people into the WELS. However, he did make it known once that if something should suddenly happen to him a WELS pastor should be contacted to assist the congregation. A later pastor of National, the Rev. Mark Hannemann, recalls that Rev. Kokkonen had so indoctrinated his people against the LC-MS that they developed an "anti-any synod" attitude. Perhaps this partly accounts for their long independence. Toward the end of Rev. Kokkonen's ministry the congregation experienced considerable decline in membership and attendance. The budget was in rough

shape. Pastor Kokkonen didn't even have a car. But as his time there drew to an end, another key figure in the Calumet story came upon the scene in the person of Dr. J. Michael Skaates.

The late Dr. Skaates was a professor at Michigan Technological University of Houghton, MI., about 20 minutes south of Calumet. According to Pastor Hannemann's recollection, Dr. Skaates and his wife moved to the U.P. from Ohio where they were members of a Columbus area church in affiliation with the WELS. According to Dr. Skaates' memiors, they immediately began to look for a doctrinally pure church. They found this to be difficult since at that time the big ship of Missouri was showing the effects of its big leak warned about by Kokkonen. The Skaates family chose not to involve themselves with the LC-MS. Then in 1967 Skaates saw an advertisement for a Reformation service at National Lutheran of Calumet. He attended and found the confessional church for which he had been looking. ("Memiors of the Copper Country", Skaates)

At the same time as the Skaates family joined National, Dr. James Gerdeen also joined. He too was a professor at Mich. Tech. His background was in the Lutheran Free Church. At this time Pastor Kokkonen was giving consideration to retirement and suggested that confessional Lutheran churches be invited to present themselves to National for review. It was becoming evident that their independance would not be able to go on forever. The ELS was invited, as was the

WELS. Pastor Theodore Sauer spoke on behalf of the WELS. Gerdeen also saw to it that a representative from the Association of Free Lutheran Congregations came and presented a "hard sell on the Free Association". (Skaates' Memiors) The congregation then saw Gerdeen as a wolf in sheeps clothing. Remember that the Free Association was one of the havens for the old Laestadians. Instead the congregation called Rupert Efraimson, another independent Lutheran. Gerdeen in turn left and subsequently founded the Maranatha Free Lutheran Church of Chassel, MI. in the summer of 1971.

Pastor Efraimson was a graduate of Springfield's Finnish program, class of 1952. He served various U.F. congregations before serving in Toronto from 1957-1959. From there he had gone to Finland, serving there until 1970. He was living in Florida when he received the call to National. (Daily Mining Gazette, 8/2/71) Under him the congregation began to bounce back from its previous decline. He has been described as a very competent and energetic man.

During his pastorate the WELS began work in Houghton in connection with a campus ministry at Michigan Tech. To assist in this effort Dr. Skaates left the Calumet congregation and took up membership in Houghton. But when asked about the events which led National into the WELS, Efraimson credits Skaates with being the main connection. Dr. Skaates has recently died, but not before writing down in detailed form his recollection of the time he spent at

National Lutheran of Calumet. Much of the information in this paper concerning those years was gleaned from his memoirs which were graciously made available by Mrs. Ellen Skaates who still resides in Houghton. Incidentally, Pastor Kokkonen was called home in 1972. Mrs. Kokkonen now resides in Duluth, MN.

As the story continues, however, National Lutheran was moving closer to the WELS. A critical turning point came in 1977 when Pastor Efraimson received a call to serve the handfull of Finnish speaking people who made up the independant congregation in New York. He declined the call. Yet he decided that planning should begin for the time when he would no longer be there to serve. He began to steer his people's thinking toward the Wisconsin Synod.

In the same year, 1977, he received the call to New York again and this time he accepted. The congregation rents a building on Manhattan. They have a co-op apartment building in the Bronx where Efraimson, a lifelong bachelor, lives. He wears a white collar as he walks the streets of his tough neighborhood. He still serves this group today. He knows the congregation will one day dwindle away. He seems to be a very dedicated man and it sounds as if he wishes he could see his congregation through to the end. However, now in his 70's, he may soon retire.

With the departure of Efraimson, the congregation in Calumet saw the calling of a WELS pastor and formal fellowship with the WELS as the best option. The

congregational minutes of this time period provide the subsequent history. District President Voss, Pastor Sauer of the district mission board, and Pastor Berg of the Board for Home Missions met with the congregation to discuss such an arrangement on Nov. 14, 1977. The people voted to remain independent and call a WELS pastor who would also serve the campus ministry in Houghton. Peter Prange of Kokomo, IN. was called. Thomas Trapp of Iron River was called as the vacancy pastor. After Prange declined, Trapp was called. During this time Marcus Liesner, retired from North Trinity of Milwaukee, moved to Calumet as a temporary pastor. Trapp also declined and on Feb. 6, 1978 Mark Hannemann of Corvallis, Oregon was called.

Pastor Hannemann recalls the decision to accept the call as a hard one. He said all of the externals balanced themselves out. He had a nice new house in Corvallis, but Calumet was close to his in-laws. He was glad about that because he didn't want to think about anything but the call. When he considered the long inner struggles and the need for confessional shepherding of the Calumet people he was compelled to accept the call. Hannemann was then the first German WELS pastor of this all Finnish congregation.

Hannemann served there from April of 1978 to December of 1984. He now serves in Crivitz, WI.. He also served the mission and campus ministry in Houghton which was difficult for him and not always appreciated by his congregation. Houghton now has its own pastor in the person of 1986

graduate Robb Raasch. It wasn't until 1984 that National Lutheran of Calumet joined the Wisconsin Synod and thus became the only member so far of the old National Ev. Luth. Church to enter the WELS. Their 300 baptized members added greatly to the already substantial number of Finnish WELS Christians. Pastor Hannemann recalls that the decision was difficult for them because of their years of independence and their strong anti-any synod mindset. But we in the WELS are fortunate to have them in our midst and to be able to serve with them in God's Kingdom here on earth.

Pastor Richard Voswinkel is their present pastor. He is a 1980 graduate of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. He provided much useful information for this paper which he located in his congregation's records.

The history of Finnish Lutheranism in America is fascinating to study. The battle for the truth was fought as much on the Finnish front in the U.P. as it was anywhere else. Confessional Lutherans experienced a loss with the break-up of the National Lutheran Church. Even so, many Finns refused to compromise the truth. The Wisconsin Synod has been greatly blessed by the influx of those people. Will the WELS be joined by any more Finns? God only knows. Regretably this writer did not trace the subsequent history of Hebron of Toronto. In New York City Pastor Efraimson is thinking of retirement. He has been in close contact with our WELS pastors there. He directed his people toward the WELS once. Will he do it again? When asked if he was

satisfied with the subsequent history of his former congregation in Calumet, he replied that he was comfortable and confident that the people were being cared for according to the truth of God's Word. From a WELS point of view, the Wisconsin Synod is all the richer.

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