

ZION LUTHERAN CHURCH, VALENTINE, NEBRASKA

1961: A YEAR OF DECISION AND DIVISION

Bill Bader
Church History
Prof. Fredrich

2-25-81

Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Library

11831 N. Seminary Drive. 65W

Mequon, Wisconsin

Many congregations suffer some type of set back in the course of their history. Some of these reversals are mild set backs in the development of the congregation while others threaten to completely alter the course that the congregation had been following. Zion's Lutheran Church in Valentine, Nebraska experienced a reversal of the latter type on January 8th, 1961. At that time the Valentine congregation went through the same turmoil in regard to the Church of the Lutheran Confession that many other Wisconsin Synod churches experienced. The struggle in Valentine resulted in a division in the congregation.

This surely was not an uncommon occurrence during this unfortunate period in our Synod's history. Every congregation that went through such a division has its own unique story to tell. Zion's Lutheran Church is no exception. It is the purpose of this paper to tell its particular story and examine the effect this division has had on the development of the church since that time.

In order to get a clear picture of the split which occurred on January 8th, 1961, it is necessary to look briefly at some of the significant events in the congregation's history prior to that date. Mission work was done in and around Valentine intermittently from the year 1915. For a while things didn't appear to be very promising. Pastor Hugo Hoenecke worked for one year in the area and then was recalled. From 1919-1921, Pastor Theodore Bauer of Mission, South Dakota held services from time to time at one of the homes in town. Things were very slow from 1927 to 1933 during which time no services were held in Valentine at all.

Finally in May of 1933 Pastor Herbert Hackbarth, also of Mission, South Dakota, began to hold services every two weeks. It seems that the seed of the Word which had been previously planted had now taken root. Pastor Hackbarth

saw the potential for a new church and he persuaded the Mission Board that Valentine was a promising field. The result of his urging was that Hugo Fritze was called to serve as pastor of Calvary's Lutheran Church which was situated 20 miles north of Valentine. In addition to serving the Calvary congregation, Pastor Fritze began holding regular services in Valentine. In the Fall of 1933 he was holding services every Sunday with the result that a congregation began to take shape.

October 7, 1934 marked the coming of age of that congregation. On that day Zion's Lutheran Church was organized and became affiliated with the Wisconsin Synod. At this time the membership consisted of six charter members with a total of 31 souls and 21 communicants.¹

The potential that Pastor Hackbarth had foreseen became very evident in the years following 1934. The work of preaching the Gospel flourished. From these humble beginnings the congregation grew to 105 souls, 18 communicants, and 18 voting members by the early spring of 1939.² By 1935 a church building and property had been purchased as a result of a loan from the old Nebraska District and the Church Extension Fund. The church was dedicated to the Lord's service on August 25, 1940. Soon after, in June of the same year, the Mission Board granted Zion's its first resident pastor. Pastor Fritze, who had helped organize the congregation, accepted this call to become the first resident pastor.

Zion's steady growth was accelerated even more by the presence of its resident pastor. In 1943, the Mission Board granted Zion's request for a Christian Day School. The enrollment of 37 children surpassed all expectations. By

¹Constitution and By-Laws, Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church (Valentine, Nebraska) 1972 p.18

²Statistic taken from short pamphlet written by Pastor E. Lindquist entitled Zion's Lutheran Church, Valentine Nebraska 1934-1964

1946 all of the congregation's debts were repaid and in the following year the congregation took responsibility for the entire salary of the pastor.

From 1946-1955 two more pastors served the Valentine congregation. During this period the congregation continued to grow numerically and in the process built a new school building. They had to borrow \$30,000 from the Church Extension Fund to erect the school. The new building was dedicated on August 31, 1952. The debt of \$30,000 became quite significant in the struggle that was still nine years away.

On November 20, 1955, Pastor Witt was installed as the fourth pastor of the congregation. The steady development of the Valentine congregation would soon be temporarily be reversed as a result of his position on the fellowship issue between Wisconsin and Missouri.

Of course, it was at this time that the problems between the Wisconsin and Missouri Synods were very evident. A number of South Dakota pastors were very adamant in their insistence that the Wisconsin Synod sever its ties with Missouri. The congregations in Mission and Winner would eventually suffer through the same kind of trouble that Valentine would. Since these congregations are within 80 miles of Valentine the atmosphere in the whole surrounding area was a tense one.

Pastor Witt didn't wait very long to tip his hand as to how he felt about Wisconsin's ties with Missouri. He felt very strongly that the Wisconsin Synod had waited much too long to cease fellowship with LCMS. Within two or three years after his arrival in Valentine he began to let his feelings be known to the congregation.

From the very start Pastor Witt had the support of several of the most influential people in the church. These people were some of the charter members

who were among the most active in supporting the church. I won't mention any names in this regard since it wouldn't serve any real purpose to do so. According to Pastor Karl Fuhlbrigge, pastor in Mission, South Dakota, at this time, Witt spent much time with this group that was sympathetic to his cause.³ They would eventually become the nucleus that would leave to form the Valentine CLC congregation.

With these people backing him, it seems that Pastor Witt felt he could win over the majority of the congregation. Most of the people I interviewed felt that Pastor Witt had at least two major reasons for wanting to take the whole congregation with him. The most obvious reason was that the church building and property would go with the main body of the congregation. Another, not so obvious reason, concerned the new school building which had been erected in 1952.

As was mentioned before, the CEF loaned the Zion congregation the \$30,000 to build the school. Since there was no real repayment contract and no interest charges at this time, the debt was easy to overlook. When Pastor Witt arrived in 1955, he also failed to make any attempt to pay off this debt. To the average observer it probably seemed that Witt merely suffered from the same lack of incentive that had previously been felt. However, ^{the} more involved ^{persons} could read between the lines and see another motive for neglecting the debt. If he could persuade the whole congregation to join him in his break then the Synod would be "stuck" with a new school building in the Sand Hills of Nebraska. It would have been next to impossible to start another mission in Valentine if all the members went with the split. The Synod would have no recourse but to sell the building. It might then be possible for Witt's group to buy it back for a price less than the original loan.

³ Letter from Karl Fuhlbrigge, Findlay, Ohio

Pastor Witt did not come right out and say that this was his intention in regard to the school. But he must have discussed the possibility with his followers. It was his supporters who were instrumental in drowning out appeals to repay the loan. One person commented that whenever he tried to bring up the subject of payment he would receive the reply, "Don't worry about the school, just let it go and we'll buy it back from Synod for maybe half the money!"⁴

With the church building and possibly the school on the line, Pastor Witt set out in earnest to win over the rest of the congregation. He began to "educate" the people quite regularly from the pulpit. Particularly during his last year in Valentine his sermons were "one track minded." At the same time he also conducted a long running series of mid week meetings that were geared to show the people the error of the Wisconsin Synod's ways. More than one person made the comment that they heard Romans 16:17,18 quoted many times.

Pastor Witt also began to make personal visits on individual families. Those that wouldn't go along with him were severely pressured. At times the family might be informed that they no longer had the true faith and were headed straight to hell. Even the most faithful members were not immune to this kind of "threat."

I think that Pastor Witt was a bit surprised by the amount of resistance that he encountered. One such example involved Mrs. Esther Hahn, the widow of one of Zion's former pastors. As Mrs. Hahn was cleaning the church one Saturday morning, Pastor Witt approached her and asked if she was on his side. He must have felt that since she had been married to one of the congregation's ministers,

⁴ Bruno Schleuter interview

she would automatically take the side of the present minister. When she made it clear that she had no intention of leaving the Wisconsin Synod, it must have been quite a shock to Pastor Witt.⁵ He must have realized that his following was not as large as he imagined.

In addition to educating his members, Pastor Witt also let his fellow pastors in the Nebraska District know how he felt. In the 22nd Biennial Convention of the Nebraska District he and Pastor Arthur Clement (of Broken Bow) issued an official statement, the last part of which reads as follows:

By far the majority of the pastors in our midst say that the marking and the avoiding are simultaneous; indeed, that we mark for the very purpose of avoiding. Over against several pastors who have consistently maintained over the years that there is room for admonition (a time element) between the marking and the avoiding, we have publicly, through our various District resolutions, stated that the position of this minority group is unscriptural. And yet, by the inaction of our District (i.e., our failure to avoid the Missouri Synod, whom we have time and again marked) we are following the very false principles we have condemned. "If the trumpet give an uncertain sound, who shall prepare himself to the battle?" (I Cor 14:8). "He that hath my Word, let him speak my Word faithfully." (Jer 23:28). "But be ye doers of the Word and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves." (John 1:22)

Out of love of the truth... out of love to the District and the Synod at large, we declare:

1. That the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod has broken the fellowship between us. That the Prophet Amos of old declared "Can two walk together, except they be agreed?" (Amos 3:3). We recognize the termination of all fellowship.
2. We protest the action of our District as unscriptural, since it permits a time element between the marking and the avoiding. God asks of us who have marked the Missouri Synod that we also avoid the Missouri Synod. This we ask of our District in all humility.
3. Should it be that our District and our Synod fail to recognize that the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod had disrupted the fellowship by "its persistent adherence to unionistic practices," (cf. Synod resolution of 1953), they will leave us no alternative but to apply to them II Thes. 3:14-15; Rom 16:17,18; and Titus 3:10.

⁶ We, the undersigned, are constrained by love for the truth of God's Word to have no further fellowship with the Missouri Synod and to declare that our relationship with our own Synod and District is to be in a state of confession.

Herbert Witt
Arthur Clement

⁵ Interview with Mrs. Esther Hahn

⁶ Proceedings 22nd Biennial Convention Nebraska District (assembled at St. ... 1960) p. 25

This statement gives one the impression that Pastor Witt would stay in the Synod if only it would soon break with Missouri. That is not the impression he left with George Shem, one of Zion's lay men, in one of Witt's personal visits. Mr. Shem recalls that when he told Witt to wait for a while because it looked like Missouri and Wisconsin would break in the coming summer, Witt replied, "That's all the more reason for Zion to break with Wisconsin now. If we wait any longer we won't have any reason to do so later!"⁷ It seems that Pastor Witt had already decided he didn't want to have anything more to do with the Wisconsin Synod.

At any rate, things began to move quite rapidly. There was only a six month period of time from the District Convention to the fateful day of January 8, 1961. On that day everything came to a head. Pastor Witt evidently felt that the time was ripe for confronting the congregation with a decision. Despite the scattered resistance he had met from some individuals he must have felt confident that the majority of the congregation would still go along with him. As a result the annual voter's meeting of January 8, 1961 has gone down as the most unusual in the congregation's history.

The church records, oddly enough, are very brief in their account of that voter's meeting. Therefore, I had to rely on several first-hand accounts of what transpired. The meeting began like every other regular voter's meeting. But it didn't take very long before the discussion to center on the fellowship controversy. Pastor Witt became increasingly agitated and declared, "This is the day we split!" Tempers flared on both sides and the arguments became long and drawn out. Since no progress was being made, someone (no one seems to know for certain, several names were mentioned to me) made a rather peculiar but

⁷Interview with Mr. and Mrs. George Shem

decisive motion. The motion was that the meeting recess for fifteen minutes so everyone could cool off. After the recess those who wanted to stay with the Wisconsin Synod would come back inside the church. Those who wanted to go with Pastor Witt would stay out.

It was a relatively warm afternoon so that the men could step outside for some fresh air. While they were outside Pastor Witt circulated among those men whom he knew were with him. True to the motion, he and his followers didn't return to the church but resumed their meeting in the parsonage. One might call that parsonage meeting the beginning of the CIC in Valentine, Neb. Roughly one third of the congregation followed pastor Witt. A statistic will be included later.

Meanwhile the rest of the men went back into the church and began to pick up the pieces. New officers had to be elected and a call meeting set up. Also another meeting was planned with Pastor Fritze, the District president. Pastor Karl Fuhlbrigge would serve as Zion's vacancy pastor.

The events of January 8th were probably not that startling to the well-informed member of the congregation. But one can imagine the confusion of many of the average person who simply did not realize what was "pulling off." All they knew was that their pastor had left them and taken many of the most active members of the church with him. In the days following there would be uncertainty about many things. Rumors circulated to some people that the school would now automatically close down. Many were simply left asking, "What now?"

The effect of the break up on everyone involved was not unlike other areas that experienced the same kind of split. The whole affair left a bitter taste in everyone's mouth. Friendships were shattered and family relations strained. Several people that I interviewed felt a natural reluctance to speak of this period in their churches history for fear of reopening wounds. One of the

unfortunate consequences in regard to the whole community was that people outside the church simply had no concept of what was going on. This may have given a rather distorted view of the church to some outsiders.

In his zeal for severing ties completely, Pastor Witt applied Rom. 16:17, 18 to every chance meeting in daily life. People would no longer speak to each other on the street. Pastor Witt himself would cross the street or turn his head in the Post Office in order to avoid contact with one of his former members.

Some of these situations would have been humorous if they weren't based in such bitterness. On the lighter side, one member of Zion tells the story of how he was employed by the contractor who built the GLC church. The lot on which the church was being built was adjacent to the home of one of the ladies who had gone with the split. Every morning she would come out of her back door to work in her garden. When she did so the worker would make a point of saying "good morning" because he knew the woman quite well. True to Pastor Witt's exhortation to "mark and avoid" she would scurry back into the house at the sound of his voice. The workman once told Pastor Waage (present pastor of Zion) with a twinkle in his eye, "That woman never did get her garden put in that year."

The effect of the break up on the congregation from 1961 to the present is a rather ironic one. When Pastor Witt left he didn't take the majority of people* but, as was mentioned before, he did take some of the best supporters of the church. He had once told Mrs. Hahn that he would take "the center of the

* The Statistical Report for 1960 shows 360 Baptized members and 185 communicants, 47 enrolled in school.

The Statistical Report of the WELS for 1961 records a drop to 207 baptized members and 135 communicants, 23 enrolled in school.

pie." It's almost as if some people felt that the Zion congregation wouldn't survive such a split. But the irony is that they did much more than just survive.

The very fact that many of the stronger members left the church served to strengthen the remaining people. They saw what had to be done and they joined together to accomplish it. A good example of this kind of participation involved the Ladies Aid. Women who had never been involved in it decided to give it a try. In like manner, all the church organizations revamped themselves and became functional again.

Within six months after the break Pastor Edward Lindquist accepted the call to Valentine. During his four years of service the congregation recovered its former stability. The annual statistical report for 1962 shows a healthy increase for 1962. The number of baptized souls jumped to 243. From this time on the congregation increasingly realized the potential that had been in their midst all along.

In 1966 Vicar Paul Soukup initiated a special drive to liquidate the school building debt. With everyone working together the building was paid for by 1969. Two years later Zion went self-supporting. Within the last ten years the congregation has undertaken and completed a number of projects. In April of 1971 a new parsonage was built and dedicated.

The biggest project involved the building of a new church. At a special voter's meeting on February 2, 1975, the bid of \$89,883 was accepted. Construction began on April 4th, 1975. The building was finished and dedicated on December 7th, 1975. Two years later, in November of 1977, the building was paid for and the mortgage burned.⁸

⁸ Pamphlet for Dedication, Zion Lutheran Church Wisconsin Synod
December 7, 1975.

Last year the congregation voted to undertake an extensive remodeling program for the school building. A new roof was built and the entire exterior rebricked. When the outside was complete, volunteers refurbished the entire interior also. (cf. Northwestern Lutheran, March 2, 1980 p.78)

Zion Lutheran Church has indeed resumed the steady progress that it was familiar with prior to 1961. On the other hand, the CLC is not exactly growing or adding on. One of the families who recently returned to Zion from the CLC says that the membership has stayed the same or even lost a little.⁹ There may be an occasional baptism or new member through marriage. But he could not recall any adult confirmations. In contrast to this, six young men were confirmed in the Zion congregation while I was home at Christmas time. Pastor Waege is quite effective in his evangelism.

Since the WELS and CLC congregations exist in the same community, one might ask what their relationship is to one another at the present time. Although the feelings were very bitter at first, it now seems that 20 years has made some difference. Pastor Waege made the comment that he feels the best way to handle the situation now is to let things ride and simply be friendly to everyone he comes into contact with. He remarked that it is now possible for him to occasionally make light of the past events with members of the CLC. This is something you definitely couldn't do a few years ago. In some families the wounds of twenty years ago are still there. Only time will heal completely.

Because there are still some hard feelings and wounded pride between people who were originally participants in the controversy, a total reconciliation is not very likely. At least not in this generation. In the future the possibility may exist. I know that is the prayer of many people today.

⁹Interview with Bill Hartgrave

Overall, as I look back on the research and the personal interviews necessary for this paper, I feel that I learned several important lessons along with the historical facts. One is that pride and the unwillingness to back down can be a very dangerous thing. The unwillingness to say, "I was wrong" or "I'm sorry" has left scars on both sides that will last a life time. Another is the danger of being so obsessed with an issue that a person carries things to extremes. It was not my intention to judge Pastor Witt's actions in this controversy. In the opinion of Bill Hartgrave and others, Pastor Witt was a very fine pastor. The final thing is a lesson in the mysterious way in which God works. In light of the development of the congregation since 1961, it is very evident that God used this trying experience to refine and strengthen the members of this church so that they might better carry out the work of Christ's church.

Bibliography

List of personal interviews:

Mrs. Esther Hahn

Mr. Bill Hartgrave

Mr. Bruno Schleuter

Mr. and Mrs. George Shem

Correspondence:

letter from Pastor Karl Fuhlbrigge

letter from Pastor Paul Soukup

Pamphlets:

Dedication pamphlet (for new church) for Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church, Wisconsin Synod

Constitution and By-Laws for Zion Lutheran Church, 1972

Zion's Lutheran Church, Valentine Nebraska, 1934-1964 (a brief history written by Pastor Edward Lindquist.

Synod sources:

Proceedings 22nd Biennial Convention, Nebraska District, Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (assembled at St. Paul's Lutheran Church, Norfolk, Neb. July 12-15, 1960.

Statistical Report of the Wisconsin Ev. Lutheran Synod for 1960
" " 1961
" " 1962