

Banding Together in Their Lord

The Effect of the LCMS – WELS Split On
the Arizona-California District of the
WELS

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As he stood outside Jerusalem just moments before ascending into heaven, our Lord Jesus Christ gave this command to his disciples and his Church: “Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”¹ The Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod began to carry out that great commission in the American Southwest during the early 20th century. This was a mission field which was still in the process of being tamed by civilization. The workers were few, but determined and rooted in the Word of God. They banded together in the face of obstacles and setbacks. A tumultuous relationship existed between the called workers of the WELS Arizona-California District and those of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. This paper will focus on both their initial cooperation and the aftershock effect on their work due to the split between the two sister synods.

For the members of a Synod located in the heart of the Midwest, Arizona and California might as well have been on the other side of the world in the late 19th century. Little was known about these areas other than heat, rugged terrain, and Indians. There were people who made these exotic locations their homes, however, and they needed the gospel. “Synod’s first mission explorers, Henry Koch and Theodore Hartwig, came to Arizona in 1892.”² These men made the Apache reservations the focal point and headquarters of their ministry. The Lord blessed the work of the WELS in Arizona over time. Encouraged by the success of the Apache missionaries and the rapid growth of cities such as Phoenix and Tucson, the Synod sent more ministerial

¹ Matthew 28:19, New International Version.

² Charles E. Found, *The Cradle and the Crucible* (Unknown: Thoni and Rosenow, 2003), 1.

candidates into the field. Congregations were established throughout the state as groups of Lutheran men and women gathered together and requested pastors from the Synod.

The WELS members in Arizona, however, became very accustomed to irregular and infrequent worship opportunities. Despite pleas from the pastors of the district to the calling boards, manpower was still very limited in the area. Communication between two congregations could be difficult as well. These two difficulties are evident in this anecdote about Pastor Christian Albrecht and his arrival in Arizona.

On his first visit to the congregation in Warren, to become acquainted with the people and the area, he was directed to stop at the home of one of the parishioners. He arrived with a note of introduction from Pastor Sitz. The note was quite simple and to the point. It read: 'The bearer of this note is Pastor Christian Albrecht, a graduate of our theological seminary in Wauwatosa, Wisconsin. Kindly receive him as your pastor.'³

Young mission districts generally face a number of obstacles and logistics problems. The Arizona-California district in its infancy was no different. The pastors in Arizona were certainly pleased with the blessings of God in their congregations but had a sense that the situation could be even better. Charles Found describes the situation in 1927:

It was almost impossible to provide necessary supervision over a field [the WELS synod] knew little about. Knowledge and wisdom drawn from past experiences did not exist. There were few parallels which could be drawn from the work among the Apache people. The result was that the men in Arizona felt themselves neglected and frustrated. What needs and opportunities prevailed in the area were not understood or appreciated by those in charge back in Wisconsin.⁴

In 1927 the WELS pastors in Arizona applied to the Synod in order to receive district status.

Such a designation would mean more attention, communication, and workers for the area

³ Found, 35.

⁴ Found, 39.

provided by the Synod leadership. The men in Arizona hoped that the WELS administrators would take ownership of the work in their region after understanding its importance. The realization of their district hopes, however, would not come in the immediate future.

The presence of LCMS congregations in Arizona alternately assisted the WELS pastors and complicated their work. There existed between the two Synods a type of “gentleman’s agreement.” Each Synod refrained from opening a new congregation in an area where the other synod had already established one. “By general consensus ‘Missouri did the towns and [Wisconsin] did the country.’”⁵ Though this agreement was created in order to avoid geographic disputes between the church bodies, it also provided plenty of tension. Michael Doyle, an LCMS historian, describes WELS pastor Gustav Harders as having “wrestled’ the gentleman’s agreement not to enter Arizona from the California Mission Board of the Missouri Synod.”⁶ Pastor David J. Valleskey describes the situation from his perspective: “For many years there had been sort of a “gentleman’s agreement,” never written down, that WELS would work in AZ and LCMS in CA. LCMS broke that agreement many years before WELS did. There are a lot of WELS people who moved to CA before the split who became LCMS because there were no WELS churches out here. But finally in 1950 WELS started work in CA.”⁷

The territorial disagreements erupted in 1937 in regard to a Missouri mission in Yuma, Arizona. The WELS pastors in the state were under the impression that Arizona belonged to the

⁵ Mark E. Braun, “Tale of Two Synods” (PhD diss., University Bindery, Inc., 2000), 46.

⁶ Michael J. Doyle, *Feed My Sheep: A History of the Hispanic Missions of the Pacific Southwest District, The Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod*. (Upland, CA: Dragonflyer, 2006), 358.

⁷ David Valleskey, e-mail message to author. November 21, 2010.

Wisconsin Synod for its mission work. When the LCMS undertook efforts in Yuma, the WELS pastors were not pleased. After meeting together they sent a memorial to the WELS Synod Convention concerning the matter. They described the situation and made this request: “We ask you to open negotiations with the Missouri Synod to have Yuma, Arizona, (now served by a pastor of the Missouri Synod) incorporated in our Arizona Conference.”⁸ The delegates of the 1937 WELS Synod convention would consider and respond to this request.

After addressing this memorial, the WELS Synod officially replied that the body was not aware of such an agreement between the two synods. Their rationale was that a verbal contract between individuals could not be thought of as binding upon the church bodies as a whole. The administrators of the WELS felt as though the matter had been brought to an appropriate close. The men and women of Arizona, however, could not help from feeling as if their requests and pleas had been ignored once more.

The situation in Arizona became even more complex with the rapid success of the Missouri Synod in that state. There were areas that had been designated by the WELS as spots for future work because they simply didn’t have the manpower to cover them. As the presence of the LCMS grew, these “future WELS” areas were swallowed up by newly established Missouri congregations. This, of course, did nothing to alleviate tension between the two sides.

The pursuit of district status on the part of the men of Arizona and California could only truly be described as “dogged.” They continued to regularly send memorials to the Synod at convention. They hoped that representatives from Wisconsin could make a trip to the region to

⁸ Found, 46.

witness firsthand the effect that the gospel was having on the people there. Part of the frustration on the part of the called workers in Arizona was the rationale for the continued rejection of their requests. Synod leadership reasoned that the area did not merit consideration for district status due to the small number of called workers there. Yet in every memorial the men of Arizona sent they were pleading for more ministerial candidates to help with new fields.

All of these memorials to the Synod were not going completely ignored, however. Several conventions between 1927 and 1937 developed proposals for further study on mission work in the Southwest. "Arizona had long been considered as of minor importance as a mission field for almost thirty years. Synod was becoming aware of the need to do what it could to explore and possibly expand into the field."⁹ Following the 1937 Synod Convention resolutions concerning the Arizona-California District began to be carried out. Two men from the WELS General Mission Board had visited both Arizona and Colorado. They found that the area was ripe for mission work and recommended that two missionaries be called, one for each state. This recommendation was then adopted by the General Synodical Committee. This action was a tremendous step forward in the relationship between the future Arizona-California district and the Synod at large.

The growth of wartime industry led to population spikes in the state of California. The development of better and faster cars made travel to the area a more realistic dream for the average American. This rush of people to the west coast included plenty of Lutheran people who

⁹ Found, 49.

decided to remain in the state even after the end of World War II. Appeals for pastors from Wisconsin Synod Lutherans in California reached the ears of Synod leaders in Wisconsin.

The administrators of the Missouri Synod understood as well the rising need for called workers in response to the rapid growth of cities such as Los Angeles and Hollywood. Richard T. Du Brau explains their thinking at the time: “The factor which President Behnken finds most challenging is to keep pace with the stupendous growth of the area. The fact that over 1,000 people a day establish residence within the geographical limits of the Southern California District presents its own peculiar problems.”¹⁰ The situation needed to be addressed by both synods.

When viewing the long and intimate connection between the WELS and the LCMS, it may seem odd that these two church bodies never merged into one. If prominent Missouri theologian C.F.W. Walther had achieved his vision, the two synods would have united. Mark Braun elaborates on this situation:

Following Missouri’s recognition of Wisconsin’s orthodoxy, Walther sought to persuade congregations belonging to the various member synods of the Synodical Conference to relinquish their Synodical affiliation, in order to form united state bodies. Wisconsin initially expressed enthusiasm for such a plan, hoping it would aid in the ‘more powerful unfolding of the gifts and powers’ given to the church.¹¹

Wisconsin eventually objected to Missouri’s assertion that such a union was the only proper way to proceed and any other option would be disorderly. The leaders of the WELS also feared that their synod would be swallowed up in such a union with only the LCMS truly remaining. For

¹⁰ Richard T. Du Brau, *The Romance of Lutheranism in California* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1958), 188.

¹¹ Braun, 38.

these reasons the WELS and the LCMS remained separate church bodies but intimately connected.

The prayers of WELS Lutherans on the west coast were answered in 1949. When the Synod met in convention that year, they decided that the time was right to send missionaries to serve in California. Pastor Frederick Knoll and Pastor Armin Keibel were sent to the state in February 1950. As opposed to the tense relations between the WELS and the LCMS in Arizona, the work in California was done in a spirit of joyful cooperation. Neither side felt as if the other was encroaching upon their territory.

The pressure to cover this geographically massive state with its exploding population made the called workers of both synods appreciative of the help. The work of Missouri, however, far surpassed that of the WELS in regard to sheer numbers. "In 1950 there were 250 Missouri Synod congregations attempting to serve the ten and a half million people in California. In California it would be many years before the Wisconsin Synod would have congregations spaced within fifty miles of each other."¹²

The Wisconsin Synod, having witnessed the success and establishment of new missions and congregations in the Southwest was encouraged. There were 20 established congregations in 1953 that belonged to the Arizona Conference. The Wisconsin Synod met in convention at Watertown, Wisconsin on August 12, 1953. A committee was assigned to study the most recent memorial of the Arizona Mission District. They responded thusly: "Your Committee No.14 has carefully considered the petition of the Arizona Mission District for district status. Your

¹² Found, 75.

committee has weighed the pros and cons and recommends to Synod that this request be granted.”¹³ The men of Arizona and California had finally attained their goal pursued for over 40 years. They now belonged to a full district of the WELS Synod and enjoyed the privileges and assistance that came with that designation.

On June 15, 1954 the Arizona-California District met for the initial convention at the East Fork Mission near Whiteriver, Arizona. The enthusiasm and expectation of the men in attendance is evident even in the convention proceedings. President E. Arnold Sitz reminded the men in his opening service sermon that “nothing is required in us beyond faithfulness.”¹⁴ Yet even with this optimism a significant portion of the meeting focused on the quickly deteriorating relationship between the LCMS and the WELS. The Union Matters Report provides a snapshot of trouble on the horizon, especially in regard to an LCMS doctrinal document entitled “Common Confession”:

The union Committee, Pastor Arthur A. Guenther, chairman, reported that on matters concerning the “Common Confession” the word “inadequate” stood out. Approval was expressed for the earnest attempts made to find a God-pleasing unity. But the committee was sorry it saw no agreement on the various doctrines under consideration in the “Common Confession,” and that its inadequacy would become evident upon the probable union of the ALC with the rest of its Conference.¹⁵

As a result of the particularly tangled relations between the LCMS and the WELS in their areas, the men and women of the Arizona-California District watched this situation with anxious

¹³ Found, 88.

¹⁴ 1 Corinthians 4:21, New International Version.

¹⁵ Robert, Hochmuth. Union Matters Report. In *Proc. of 1954 Arizona-California District Convention*, East Fork Mission, Whiteriver, AZ, 3.

hearts. President Sitz added his own final comments to the Union Report and indicated that the issue of military chaplaincy revealed “a different spirit”¹⁶ between the LCMS and the WELS. The floor committee assigned to respond to this report expressed thanks to God that serious attempts had been made between the two Synods to reach a God-pleasing unity and sorrow that no unity on doctrinal statements could be reported yet. The 1954 Arizona-California District Convention included many earnest prayers for the faithful return of its sister Synod.

With the discussions between the LCMS and the WELS heating up, the response of Missouri to the charges against it by Wisconsin was the focal point of the 1956 Arizona-California District Convention. Current WELS President Oscar J Naumann was even on hand to provide accurate information regarding the talks. His tone was upbeat but tempered: “President Oscar J. Naumann, chairman of Synod’s Standing Committee on matters of Church Union, stated that the Committee was pleased with the change of attitude by the Missouri Synod at St. Paul last June and certain resolutions relating to our charges, but acknowledged that much which still offends stands between us.”¹⁷

Missouri had rejected joining the Lutheran World Federation by a wide margin. They had dropped the Common Confession as a legitimate document on which to base union. Yet, as the LCMS willingly agreed, there were still important doctrinal differences that needed to be

¹⁶ Robert, Hochmuth. Union Matters Report. In *Proc. of 1954 Arizona-California District Convention*, East Fork Mission, Whiteriver, AZ, 3.

¹⁷ Robert Hochmuth. Summary. In *Proc. of 1956 Arizona-California District Convention*, East Fork Mission, Whiteriver, AZ, 3.

addressed. President Naumann concluded his address by urging the members of the district to practice patience since Missouri still desired the former unity of spirit.

President E. Arnold Sitz's report included one disheartening matter. It was noted in the "Transfers Out" portion that two pastors has transferred into different districts of the Missouri Synod. President Sitz's overall message, however, was inspiring and instructive. This is evidenced by the floor committee response to his report:

The president touched upon numerous items in his report. Of these it will be profitable to remember: 1) In days of darkness and difficulties we can always remember that the Lord with His powerful Word is with us and will remain with us; 2) All of our efforts in the Church must be prefaced by repentance, and love for the Savior; 3) We should extend our outlook and efforts, so that we think the kingdom on a level broader than the local. At the same time we should be concerned with the conservation of our available manpower.¹⁸

In the face of uncertainty and the likelihood of emotional division President Sitz focused the District members upon the God-given task at hand and the God-given gift of his Word.

Excitement abounded at the 1958 Arizona-California District Convention. Progress in talks between the LCMS and the WELS may have been slow and almost stagnant, but the WELS mission fields in the Southwest were experiencing tremendous growth. The Home Missions Report paints the picture wonderfully:

Arizona-California calls: "Come over and help us." Cities of 3,000, 8,000, and 12,000 populations have no Lutheran Church. A city of 35,000 has only one Synodical Conference Church. We need at least two men for the San Francisco Bay area and could use six there very profitably for the LORD's work. San Diego and Orange County should have at least one man. In Arizona a new missionary to serve several smaller places should

¹⁸ Theodore Sauer. Floor Committee Response to President's Report. In *Proc. of 1956 Arizona-California District Convention*, East Fork Mission, Whiteriver, AZ, 20.

be granted. These are only the most essential needs of this most rapidly growing area of the United States.¹⁹

The Convention took note of the success with which God had blessed them in the two years since their last meeting. Several reports, though, lamented the lack of candidates being sent to the District. Promising mission fields were being neglected since pastors were unavailable to serve them. The District had asked for permission to open five new fields yet only one had been opened. Despite this disappointment, God was blessing the faithful work of his people.

The address of President Sitz took the opportunity in his report to praise God for his gifts despite the turmoil between the LCMS and the WELS:

It is a remarkable evidence of God's blessing that despite the impact of the disturbance in the Synodical Conference upon our Synod we have progressed. It is true there have been defections not a few in number because of disagreement with the Synod's stand in this grave matter. Yet we have gained numerically. Our work is spreading into California, Florida, Illinois, Ohio, Iowa and Texas.²⁰

The WELS called workers in this District had resolutely gone about their work while the doctrinal battles were waged around them. They found strength in one another and in their God.

The second major point President Sitz made in his report was the need to look forward to the future of missions. His vision consisted of three key points. The first was that the Synod focus on new fields while established congregations worked on starting schools. His second point was the prayerful pursuit of finding men to serve those new missions. Finally he desired the identification of men whom God had blessed with the talent for organizing missions and

¹⁹ Armin C.E. Keibel. Home Missions Report. In *Proc. of 1958 Arizona-California District Convention*, Grace Ev. Lutheran Church, Tucson, AZ, 14.

²⁰ Armin C.E. Keibel. President's Report. In *Proc. of 1958 Arizona-California District Convention*, Grace Ev. Lutheran Church, Tucson, AZ, 14.

calling them to do exactly that. The Floor Committee assigned to respond to the President's Report offered this excellent reminder: "The Lord is still at the helm, steering the ship of the church over the towering waves and through the shoals towards the final haven of rest."²¹ This young District never lost its zeal for evangelism or its confidence in God throughout these turbulent times.

It would have been impossible, however, for the attendees of this Convention not to address the most pressing Synod issue at hand: the continuing discussions between the LCMS and the WELS. The official Wisconsin Synod essay on "fellowship" was read followed by the hearing of the official position on the topic from the Missouri Synod. The issue of Missouri's approval of the Boy Scouts was discussed as well. The thoughts of those in attendance were summarized by the Floor Report on Doctrinal Matters – Church Union:

Grave issues pertaining to Church Union continue to confront the church in general and our Synod in particular. Conservative, Bible-centered Lutheranism is under relentless attack. A spirit of compromise is running rampant in the visible church. Thus, we, who cherish the pure Gospel of our Lord Jesus as the source of our Spiritual life, are sincerely concerned.²²

The delegates recognized the urgent need to return to the Holy Scriptures for strength and clarity. The Convention came to close with the first verse of Martin Luther's beautiful hymn, *Lord, Keep us Steadfast in Your Word*, "Lord, keep us steadfast in your Word; curb those who by deceit or sword would wrest the kingdom from your Son and bring to nought all he has done."

²¹ Armin C.E. Keibel. Floor Committee Response to President's Report. In *Proc. of 1958 Arizona-California District Convention*, Grace Ev. Lutheran Church, Tucson, AZ, 14.

²² Armin C.E. Keibel. Floor Report on Doctrinal Matters – Church Union. In *Proc. of 1958 Arizona-California District Convention*, Grace Ev. Lutheran Church, Tucson, AZ, 35.

As the Arizona-California District met in 1960, Walter A. Diehl, the chairman of the Mission Board, summarized the events of the previous two years in four words: “maturity and missed opportunity.”²³ The mission field once again had lacked workers for the harvest. The delegates of the Convention acknowledged that this setback was directly tied to the ever-present Missouri-Wisconsin discussions and distractions. This fact was referenced in President E. Arnold Sitz’s report to the District:

Satan is rapidly side-tracking the attention of the church to extraneous issues from the one thing needful, the Gospel of Jesus Christ, which alone is the power of God to salvation. Moreover, he is deceiving the Church into divorcing Christ from the Gospel, prating about “The Christ is us,” while at the same time decrying the authority of the Word of God, the Holy Scriptures.²⁴

The overriding theme of President Sitz’s message, though, was in keeping with the faithfulness demonstrated over the course of his ministry. He encouraged the delegates to dive deeper into the Word and to work while it is day.

The fraying ties between the LCMS and the WELS had a direct effect upon congregations in the Arizona-California District. The congregation in Coolidge, Arizona had been one of the sites designated by WELS missionaries as a future location for ministry. The group of men and women there had then been enveloped by a neighboring LCMS congregation. As Missouri and Wisconsin grew farther apart, the congregation in Coolidge split into factions supporting the LCMS or the WELS. The 1960 Home Missions Report noted that the remaining

²³ Armin C.E. Keibel. Summary Report on Home Missions. In *Proc. of 1960 Arizona-California District Convention*, East Fork Mission, Whiteriver, AZ, 3.

²⁴ Armin C.E. Keibel. President’s Report. In *Proc. of 1960 Arizona-California District Convention*, East Fork Mission, Whiteriver, AZ, 7.

WELS members in Coolidge as well as in neighboring Casa Grande remained unserved after many in the area had joined Missouri.

The Report by the Floor Committee on Union Matters revealed the sad state of the LCMS at this point and the need for decisive action on the part of the Wisconsin Synod. The Missouri Synod had continued their union discussions with the American Lutheran Church despite clear warnings and misgivings from the WELS. The LCMS also allowed its Executive Secretary for Missions to be a member of the National Council of Churches, an ecumenical mission endeavor. For these and other reasons, the delegates of the 1960 Convention voted to adopt the report of its District's Floor Committee on Union Matters. "It expressed the conviction that Synod's Commission on Doctrinal Matters conscientiously did all it could to resolve the differences in the Synodical Conference – objecting to unionistic fraternization by the Missouri Synod, declaring that an impasse had been reached with respect to the Scriptural principles of church fellowship."²⁵ These serious and sad words demonstrate the conviction of solid Lutheran men that the time had come for a difficult yet necessary action.

The delegates at the 1961 WELS Synod Convention had no easy task in front of them. They were to consider the position of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod on the doctrine of fellowship as well as several other key issues. After reviewing the events of the past years and receiving clarification from the Missouri Synod representative, Martin Franzmann, the WELS Synod in convention voted to break fellowship with her sister Synod on August 17, 1961. This

²⁵ Armin C.E. Keibel. Summary Report on Doctrine. In *Proc. of 1960 Arizona-California District Convention*, East Fork Mission, Whiteriver, AZ, 4.

event warranted a front page article on the *Milwaukee Journal* the next day. The article offered these details:

The action was hailed as the “hour of decision” for the Wisconsin Synod. It was approved, 124 to 49, by delegates in the final session of their 36th convention which dragged on eight hours past expected adjournment at Wisconsin Lutheran High School... The Rev. Werner Franzmann, chairman of the floor committee that introduced the resolution, said the step was essential to avoid confused and troubled consciences in the synod.²⁶

This was certainly a devastating day for all those involved. This was a decision that pitted family members against one another on opposite sides of doctrine. Mark Braun addresses the emotional scene even at the Convention itself: “Martin Franzmann was the Missouri Synod representative as a professor at Concordia Seminary. His brother, Werner, was the chairman of one of the floor committees and a vocal advocate of the split. A third brother, Gerhard, was a professor at Northwestern College at this time. Gerhard Franzmann remembered, Since I loved and admired both [my] brothers, it was a very wrenching experience. I was opposed to severing the ties and said so openly on the floor.”²⁷ Martin Franzmann shed tears upon realizing he would no longer have prayer fellowship with his own son, who was attending a WELS school.

The Wisconsin Synod’s decision to break with the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod sent shockwaves not only across America, but also the world. Churches in fellowship with the two church bodies overseas were forced to address their ties. The ripple effect reached the members of the Arizona-California District quickly. This was clear as the District gathered in 1962 for their Convention.

²⁶ Braun, vi.

²⁷ Braun, 254.

President Sitz wasted no time in addressing how the called workers of the District should move forward. He warned against being high-minded or arrogant about their orthodoxy. He urged that each of them should be careful in their doctrinal statements in this sensitive time. Sitz reminded his hearers that the Wisconsin Synod had certainly made mistakes in its past as well. The only cure to misunderstandings was to return to Scripture. He included this appraisal of the current situation: “We sense the gravity of the occurrences of the past biennium. Our Synod declared suspension of fellowship with the Missouri Synod in the Synodical Conference. The overseas Lutheran Churches, while critical in a point or two of our position on Fellowship, have roundly condemned the stand of the Missouri Synod in their treatise on ‘Fellowship, Part II.’”²⁸

The effects of the split on local congregations in some cases were extremely negative. The congregation in Coolidge, Arizona was finally consolidated into the parish at Casa Grande. The 1962 Home Missions Board Report explains that “The split caused by the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod and declining population finally made it a waste of energy to continue services in Coolidge.”²⁹ At the time of the Convention Emmaus Lutheran Church in Phoenix was about to commence building its church. Since the congregation had been established, a Missouri Synod Church was opened 2 ½ miles away. As recently as a few years before this the two Synods would have communicated and avoided such a situation. Now the two congregations were competing for members.

²⁸ Armin C.E. Keibel. President’s Report. In *Proc. of 1962 Arizona-California District Convention*, Gethsemane Ev. Lutheran Church, Los Angeles, CA, 8.

²⁹ Armin C.E. Keibel. Home Missions Board Report. In *Proc. of 1962 Arizona-California District Convention*, Gethsemane Ev. Lutheran Church, Los Angeles, CA, 16.

There was also an ugly incident in Arizona involving a dual parish setup in the towns of Douglas and Warren, both served by the same pastor. A misunderstanding over the biblical principle of fellowship arose in the Douglas congregation, resulting in disputes between the two churches. The District Praesidium was called in to sort out the matter. When the dust had cleared, both congregations were restored to fellowship with the Wisconsin Synod. This was certainly a situation, however, that the Arizona-California District would have liked to avoid.

Despite these unfortunate events, the District still celebrated some success. The Wisconsin Synod in convention had granted their request to designate the state of California as its own mission district. This status would provide much needed assistance and attention to a mission field that was suffering from the great physical distance between congregations. WELS leaders would now make California a priority for funding as well as ministerial candidates.

The District at large was blessed by God. Nine of their missions had become self-supporting in the last five years, bring the total to fifteen. One of these stable congregations was located in Lodi, California. The story of their entrance into the WELS was an encouraging one. “Its nucleus was a group dismissed from an American Lutheran church. Encouraged by the dismissing body we began to serve them. Now they express gratitude for the spiritual and material support of our Synod.”³⁰

The Convention’s Floor Committee on Doctrinal Matters put the break with Missouri in the proper perspective. They reported that this split was to be considered as a testimony of love

³⁰ Armin C.E. Keibel. Home Missions Board Report. In *Proc. of 1962 Arizona-California District Convention*, Gethsemane Ev. Lutheran Church, Los Angeles, CA, 15.

to the LCMS. The actions of the WELS Synod Convention had been a desperate plea to LCMS to return to their faithful standing of years past. As always the Convention closed with a reminder of what was truly important:

Whereas, hour is late and the opportunities vast; therefore, be it *resolved*, that the Arizona-California District of the WELS encourage the Board for World Missions to proceed with due haste and urgency to bring the Gospel to the heathen in every land, to continue to bring before the members of the Synod ample information in its publications concerning the progress of our World Mission endeavors, and to encourage every congregation to faithfully and diligently pray for and contribute to this work.³¹

The break between the LCMS and the WELS affected the mission work of the Wisconsin Synod in different ways. Pastor David Valleskey explains one of the positive effects:

The original nucleus of many of our WELS congregations in CA founded since the split with LCMS consisted of groups of people who had left liberal LCMS congregations. In one way that was a blessing. The WELS offered a safe harbor in the storm for fine Christian people who had been battling against the inroads of false doctrine in their churches, but to no avail. For them it was good that we were here.³²

Upon graduating from Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary in 1963 Lowell Smith received a call to serve as pastor at Reformation Lutheran Church in San Diego, California. He echoes Pastor Valleskey's sentiments in regard to his mission field: "After I moved to San Diego LC-MS families contacted us, attended worship and looked us over. We gained some fine families from the LC-MS. However, they came from the conservative LC-MS congregations, not the liberal ones."³³

³¹ Armin C.E. Keibel. Floor Committee Report on Doctrinal Matters. In *Proc. of 1962 Arizona-California District Convention*, Gethsemane Ev. Lutheran Church, Los Angeles, CA, 29.

³² David Valleskey, e-mail message to author. November 21, 2010.

³³ Lowell Smith, e-mail message to author. December 3, 2010.

It was not only laymen who arrived at the WELS looking for orthodox teaching. Pastor Robert Neumann left the Missouri Synod in 1964 and joined the WELS, serving a mission in Dallas, Texas. The 1970 Arizona-California District Convention reported two new pastors on its roster. Reverend Albert Young of Anderson, California, and Reverend Harold Dorn of San Jose, California were colloquized and declared to be in fellowship with the Wisconsin Synod on consecutive days in May 1970 following meetings in Milwaukee. The congregations they served, Faith Evangelical Lutheran Church and Mt. Calvary Lutheran Church respectively, both applied for and received membership status in the Arizona-California District and the WELS.

The Wisconsin Synod was now reaping the blessings of holding firmly to the Word of God and the Lutheran Confessions. The WELS was viewed now, more than ever, as a staunch upholder of orthodoxy. The Holy Spirit led both pastors and laymen to recognize this. The 2nd president of the Arizona-California district, Immanuel G. Frey, noted this in his report to the 1970 District Convention:

There was a time not too many years ago when we had a tendency to attribute slowness of growth to our efforts to maintain purity of doctrine and practice. Now the situation is somewhat reversed. Much of our expansion is directly traceable to the fact that we have resisted the liberalization of faith and doctrine so common in our day. Ministers have applied to us for membership and groups of Christians have applied to us for services because they see us as a church body which stands fast in the faith.³⁴

Another positive effect of the break-up of the Synodical Conference was the renewed energy and zeal for missions which the Wisconsin Synod demonstrated. While the Arizona-California District had a heart for evangelism from its very beginning, its pastors rededicated

³⁴ Armin C.E. Keibel. President's Report. In *Proc. of 1970 Arizona-California District Convention*, Grace Ev. Lutheran Church, Glendale, AZ, 15.

themselves to their work following the realization that their mission field had now grown larger without the help of another Lutheran church body. Mark Braun describes this happy result with the help of survey responses from WELS pastors:

The break made the Wisconsin Synod more mission-minded. Previously it had been “fairly common to let Missouri or the Synodical Conference take care of outreach, while we hung back.” No longer able simply to transfer members to Missouri Synod congregations around the United States, “we became more conscious of outreach opportunities.”³⁵

Wisconsin Synod pastors could not rely on the Missouri Synod any longer to preach the unadulterated message of God’s Word.

The called workers of the Arizona-California District rose up to meet this challenge. God blessed their ministry with tremendous growth in the years following the break with the LCMS. Three new missions were opened in 1963 alone in response to the rising population of the Southwest. President Immanuel G. Frey used his report to the 1966 District Convention to take a step back and reflect on their progress:

When we were first organized as a District in 1954 our field was confined to the state of Arizona. Considered today geographically it is the largest district in the Synod, comprising the states of Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, California, and Nevada. Measured from southeast to northwest it stretches no less than 2,500 miles. We began with scarcely 2,000 communicant members four months over twelve years ago, for our District was organized February 22, 1954 at Grace Church in Tucson. Today the District is pushing 5,500 communicants, a gain of 150%. Then we numbered two self-supporting congregations; now there are fourteen. Two others are at the point of going on self-support.³⁶

³⁵ Braun, 327.

³⁶ Armin C.E. Keibel. President’s Report. In *Proc. of 1966 Arizona-California District Convention*, East Fork Mission, Whiteriver, AZ, 10.

Out of the crucible of Arizona a healthy District had grown and flourished. Yet President Frey recognized that plenty of work remained to be done. He informed that they “had just begun to scratch the surface” and that they were cast into the same boat as Jesus Christ, who “came to seek and save what was lost.”³⁷

Setbacks to the WELS mission efforts also occurred, though, as a result of the break. Resurrection Church in Phoenix was established as a WELS mission in 1941. The controversies with the Missouri Synod rocked the congregation to its core. Resurrection’s pastor, William Wiedenmeyer, left the Synod for the LCMS in 1959 as a result, taking a large part of the church’s members with him.

Zion Church in Phoenix, Arizona was divided as a result of the LCMS-WELS troubles. A majority of its members, as well as its pastor, left the Wisconsin Synod and joined Missouri. Before his departure Reverend Robert Schaller had served that congregation for over 20 years. Grace Church in Casa Grande, which was located in an area of constant struggle between the two synods, lost 20 communicants to a newly established Missouri Synod congregation in the area. The Wisconsin Synod remnant at Grace, however, continued to thrive both spiritually and financially.

The relationship between members and pastors of the former sister Synods had been close throughout their history. They endured a rocky start as Missouri doubted Wisconsin’s commitment to the Lutheran Confessions and criticized what they perceived as unionistic

³⁷ Armin C.E. Keibel. President’s Report. In *Proc. of 1966 Arizona-California District Convention*, East Fork Mission, Whiteriver, AZ, 10.

tendencies. After C.F.W. Walther recognized kindred spirits leading and teaching in the Wisconsin Synod, the two church bodies became partners and allies in the spread of the gospel. That solid connection quickly soured after Wisconsin's charges in 1961.

The members and administrators of the Wisconsin Synod felt that they had given the Missouri Synod every reasonable chance to repent of their deviations from Scripture and return a sound confessional stance. The 1966 Floor Committee Report on Doctrinal Matters at the Arizona-California District Convention offered this appraisal:

The Commission on Doctrinal Matters of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod has shown firmness where according to Scripture and the Confessions it had to...this report further shows that our commission on doctrinal matters has manifested conciliatory charity over against other Lutheran bodies where the possibilities of establishing or re-establishing fellowship exists; therefore be it Resolved, that we commend our Commission on Doctrinal Matters for its efforts and urge it to continue in the same spirit.³⁸

Throughout the District Proceedings of the Arizona-California District from 1954-1970, any admonition regarding the doctrinal stance of the LCMS is followed by a prayer that they might return to the unadulterated doctrine of God's Word.

The public reaction of the leaders of the Missouri Synod consisted of some sadness and plenty of unaffected indifference. "Missouri's President John W. Behnken wrote in 1964 that he found it 'difficult to express in words the deep sadness' he felt over the break. Wisconsin's action was, in his view, 'certainly premature.'³⁹ While some in the Wisconsin Synod worried

³⁸ Armin C.E. Keibel. Floor Committee Report on Doctrinal Matters. In *Proc. of 1966 Arizona-California District Convention*, East Fork Mission, Whiteriver, AZ, 44.

³⁹ Braun, vii.

that the WELS might not be strong enough to survive on its own after the split, the thought that the LCMS might collapse was almost laughable to members in the Missouri Synod. Richard Koenig of the Missouri Synod had this to say on the topic of the break, “To be quite candid a good part of Missouri probably couldn’t care less about what the Wisconsin Synod did or did not do.’ Wisconsin’s suspension of fellowship ‘hardly had the power to evoke ‘a profound sense of humility.’”⁴⁰

Pastor Lowell Smith describes the viewpoint of the Missouri Synod pastors in California concerning the WELS’ actions: “Most LC-MS congregations on the West Coast were already liberal, so the split had little result. Already WELS was looked upon as a fringe and extreme little branch of Lutheranism.”⁴¹ Pastor Smith does say that two LCMS reached out to him within a year of his arrival to study the Lutheran positions on fellowship in their respective church bodies. “After a year or two these meetings came to an end with no result, although both pastors continued to have a kinship with WELS and were aware of the divisions in their own body.”⁴²

Those who remained in the Wisconsin Synod were pleased to find that the bond between their fellow members and called workers had been strengthened through this prolonged struggle. Like the rest of the WELS the men and women of the Arizona-California District came out of this ordeal mostly renewed and with a greater sense of clarity. It was time to strike out again as a lone Synod with the help of God.

⁴⁰ Braun, viii.

⁴¹ Lowell Smith, e-mail message to author. December 3, 2010.

⁴² Lowell Smith, e-mail message to author. December 3, 2010.

Mt. Calvary in San Jose, California is a congregation that demonstrates the opposing reactions to the break perfectly. Mt. Calvary had been established as a Missouri Synod church in 1959. As mentioned previously, Reverend Harold Dorn joined the Wisconsin Synod in May 1970. His congregation, Mt. Calvary followed soon after. At this point the Missouri Synod administrators decided they wanted the building back. Someone among the leadership had decided that its location in East San Jose was “not conducive to the gospel.”⁴³ They planned on turning the property into a Chicano social center in order to distribute charitable items. “They told the remnant of the congregation basically, ‘You have no right to it. Get off the property.’”⁴⁴

Reverend Dorn took another call to a church in northern California in 1971, leaving about two dozen members of what had once been a congregation of 180 souls. These 24 members desired to remain an active congregation of the Wisconsin Synod. The Missouri Synod, however, informed the remaining members that they were willing to go to court to retain the church building and property. “That’s where the real adversarial positions were taken.”⁴⁵ The California Mission Board and, specifically, Pastor Robert Hochmuth reached out to assist the men and women of Mt. Calvary. Professor Forrest Bivens describes this relationship further:

They appreciated Pastor Hochmuth and the kindness that had been extended to them through him in seeing that someone was there to conduct services for them. They appreciated the fact that the Wisconsin Synod was willing to take a candidate (that would be me) graduating from the Seminary and have him sent out there to be the pastor.⁴⁶

⁴³ Forrest Bivens, interview with author, November 22, 2010.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

Mt. Calvary was not officially a member of the Wisconsin Synod at this juncture. Professor Bivens was unaware of this fact when he received the call to serve as their pastor. The Arizona-California District was not yet certain that this congregation would survive. For that reason they postponed the process of actually making Mt. Calvary a part of the WELS.

This dispute with the LCMS had both positive and negative effects for Mt. Calvary. There was certainly bad blood between the leaders of Missouri and the members at this congregation.

“They felt as if the Lutheran Church-Synod had abandoned them...some of them really asked themselves, ‘Is it possible for us to continue to exist? Are we a viable congregation? That’s more attitudinal. It had nothing to do with money, really, or property. It was like they were bad material. That was the impression that had come across. So it was almost directed against themselves: ‘We’re no good. We’re a bunch of losers.’”⁴⁷

The members of Mt. Calvary felt rejected. It seemed as though their importance had been weighed by the LCMS and found to be worthless.

This conflict did produce positive results, however, for Mt. Calvary. Professor Bivens explains: “We were on our own. We did not lean on other people then. We didn’t lean on the Wisconsin Synod because they weren’t even a member, and they knew that. They weren’t looking for handouts. They were not looking for continual support.”⁴⁸ The congregation initially received only a small stipend for Professor Bivens’ salary since they could not afford that. Within two years, though, Mt. Calvary was self-supporting. They had learned to survive on their own with God’s blessing. They became a member of the Wisconsin Synod a short time later.

⁴⁷ Forrest Bivens, interview with author, November 22, 2010.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

The property matter was ultimately resolved by the members of the Mt. Calvary standing firm and continuing to use the property for worship services. Eventually the Missouri Synod backed off from their earlier threats.

[The Missouri Synod] informed us they were washing their hands of the whole thing, and it never actually got before a judge. It was all threats and innuendo that they were using. Supposedly, and this may not be accurate, we were told that they did it so that it might discourage other congregations from trying to do the same thing, of leaving the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod and going elsewhere. Again that's a possibility.⁴⁹

The members of Mt. Calvary ended of up with full ownership and rights to the property. This account illustrates both the frustrated, yet apathetic, reaction of the Missouri Synod and the zeal for evangelism on the part of the Arizona-California District of the Wisconsin Synod. God blessed the work at Mt. Calvary. When Professor Bivens took a call to Michigan eight years later, the congregation was composed of over 100 communicants and 175 souls.

The exodus of men and women from the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod following the break did have its downsides. David Valleskey explains one such negative result: "Many congregations whose "mission work" was in effect opening their doors to concerned Lutherans and which had not worked at bringing the gospel to their community through evangelism work in their neighborhoods are now struggling to figure out how to evangelize a post-modern, increasingly secular society."⁵⁰ These congregations welcoming former Missouri Synod members had certainly been blessed by these additions but now needed to learn how to evangelize in their corner of the world.

⁴⁹ Forrest Bivens, interview with author, November 22, 2010.

⁵⁰ David Valleskey, e-mail message to author. November 21, 2010.

Bob Koester, a pastor in Modesto, California during this time notes another downside: “Many WELS congregations started out with people who left Missouri, and I remember some pastors wishing they didn't have the strident attitude some former LCMS members occasionally brought into their churches.”⁵¹ The movement from LCMS churches to WELS congregations in California has slowed considerably and occurs rarely now.

The break between the Wisconsin and Missouri Synod had a lasting effect upon the mentality of the WELS churches in the Arizona-California District. David Valleskey describes an unfortunate result:

Some of the people coming out of that kind of situation have been very leery of change of any kind, identifying change with decay. To give just one example, some congregations had great difficulty changing from the King James Version of the Bible to a more contemporary translation. Such fears of change are understandable when you consider what the people came out of; but they made it difficult for some congregation's to make changes of any kind, even if such changes (not of a doctrinal nature, of course) would benefit the proclamation of the gospel, especially to the unchurched.⁵²

These men and women had endured bitter struggles and battles over teachings and beliefs. They desired now to simply hold on to what they had. When contemplating this in the light of the Missouri-Wisconsin turmoil, it is easy to see why they would feel this way.

From its very beginning the Arizona-California District of the WELS knew disputes and struggles. Thankfully this District was also blessed with solid leaders to guide them through and keep them focused upon God's work to be done. E. Arnold Sitz was elected as the first president. His reports at each Convention were completely honest with the delegates. President Sitz did not mince words in regard to the intersynodical debates or the challenges the young District faced.

⁵¹ Bob Koester, e-mail message to author. November 22, 2010.

⁵² David Valleskey, e-mail message to author. November 21, 2010.

He constantly reminded those in attendance to return to the Word and to rely on the Lord of the Church for strength and encouragement.

President Sitz, was an active member of the synod's Commission on Doctrinal Matters, the forerunner of today's Commission on Inter-Church Relations. He was well known for insisting on taking the train to the meetings in Wisconsin while others were content to ride in airplanes. Attendance at these meetings allowed President Sitz to give the people of his District an accurate picture of the discussions.

E. Arnold Sitz was also well loved by those who knew him. "He possessed a subtle sense of humor, often exercised at the expense of his audience. He was somewhat autocratic but not obtrusively stern, although he always insisted on the best from those who worked with him. He was not in the habit of insisting upon his own way."⁵³

They met in YMCA's, in civic halls, and even in the worship areas of other church bodies. They drove hundreds of miles to serve a group of a dozen people. The pastors of the Arizona-California District served faithfully the flock God had entrusted to them. As Synodical relationships around them dissolved, they grew closer together. They looked to their Lord for strength and returned to his Word often for joy. These were men who obeyed Christ's Great Commission and reveled in the knowledge that the credit belonged to God alone. Thanks be to God for their service.

⁵³ Found, 135.

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