

# Muehlhaeuser, Founding Father of the Wisconsin Synod

By Armin W. Schuetze

In its early years Grace Church of Milwaukee was commonly referred to as the “Muehlhaeuser Church.” The Wisconsin Synod was called the “Muehlhaeuser Synod.” Pastor John Muehlhaeuser was the founder of both. Yet a founder will not always impress his name in such a way on the congregation or synod to which he gives rise. There must have been a reason that brought this about.

In spite of what is said above, Muehlhaeuser was not the Walther of the Wisconsin Synod. He did not determine its dogmatics. He never served as professor at its seminary. He left behind no classics of Lutheran literature. Today there is no Muehlhaeuser Memorial Church in the Wisconsin Synod. It will have to be a well-informed layman who will have known him as the founding father before his name again came into prominence in connection with the 125th anniversary of the Synod.

What we see in Muehlhaeuser is a man who endeared himself to his congregation, to his brothers in the ministry, and to the synod he helped found, a man who was highly regarded and loved. At the same time he was a man who did not impress his theology on the Wisconsin Synod permanently. The reasons for both will become evident as we review his life and ministry.

Muehlhaeuser’s life can be conveniently divided into three periods. We must give first consideration to his training and early experiences. These to a great extent are determinative for a man’s future life and actions. Then we shall consider Muehlhaeuser as the founder and first president of the Wisconsin Synod. This is a period of ten years lasting until 1860. The final seven years until his death in [1867] are a time of waning influence even though he is held in honor as the *senior ministerii* of the Synod.

## I.

Born in [1803] at Notzingen in Wuerttemberg, Muehlhaeuser was a native of a territory in south Germany that was predominantly Lutheran. It was, however, not a militant, confessional Lutheranism, but one that was tolerant toward the minority of Reformed and the growing number of Roman Catholics. Without stressing the difference in doctrine or forcing Lutheran teaching on the Reformed, the Lutherans would admit the Reformed to the Lord’s Table in their churches.<sup>1</sup>

Muehlhaeuser’s early plans were to become a baker. But deep religious interests were soon in evidence. In 1827 while working for Frau Baeckermeisterin Bueng at Schmaeriken, Canton St. Gallen, Switzerland, he wrote to a baker, John Weitbrecht, whom he seems to have met earlier at Stuttgart, and who two years before had entered the Basel mission house to prepare himself for foreign mission work. Muehlhaeuser expressed a desire to devote himself to the service of the Lord, if the Lord so willed it. The exchange of letters resulted in Muehlhaeuser’s going to Basel. There he joined a Christian young men’s society and made the acquaintance of Christian Friedrich Spittler, who enlisted him as a pilgrim missionary.

Through contacts with the young men in the Christian societies, Spittler, a member of the Baseler Mission Society, had conceived the idea of the *Pilgermission*. As the artisans traveled about, working at their trade, they were to use their opportunities and contacts to win souls for Christ. Soon young men were traveling through France, Belgium, Austria, and Bavaria as pilgrim missionaries, occasionally reporting back to Spittler.

In February 1829 Muehlhaeuser left Basel on such a journey to Austria. The next three years and nine months found him traveling not only in Austria, but also to Hungary and Bohemia. He suffered many hardships. Finding work as an apprentice baker was not always possible. Sometimes he had to be content to work long hours at other simple labor for no more than bed and board. In Vienna he was dismissed from even such employment when it was discovered that he used his free time selling Bibles and religious books and speaking to people about Christ. His second stay in Vienna was cut short when Roman Catholic accusations brought the pilgrim missionaries under suspicion of belonging to a secret society that sought to overthrow the government. Having fled to Bruenn in Bohemia, he was taken into custody by the police. A nine months’ stay in prison ended with his release and return to Wuerttemberg in October 1832. It had been a difficult, eventful journey.

The difficulties did not cause Muehlhaeuser to forget his true mission. His Christian testimony met with much success in the Zillertal of Upper Austria. In Grosspetersdorf, Hungary, a school teacher, who was a rationalist and scoffer, was won for the gospel. This teacher later served the local congregation with services in the absence of a pastor, reading sermons given him by Muehlhaeuser. Like Paul, Muehlhaeuser proclaimed Christ also in his bonds. Two Jewish prisoners, a police commissioner, and one of the guards who escorted him to the border came to faith in Christ through his forthright testimony. The mission journey showed him to be a man who loved God's Word and was adept at personal evangelism.

His continued interest in serving the Lord as a missionary led Muehlhaeuser in 1835 to enter the Barmen mission seminary, a school that trained men particularly for work among the heathen. However, when in 1837 the Langenberg mission society assumed responsibility for sending men to help their emigrant fellow Germans in America, Muehlhaeuser, who, it was thought, might at his age have difficulty learning the languages of the African heathen, was chosen as one of its first two missionaries designated for America. The credentials furnished by the Langenberg society stated that "this dear brother has spent about two years in our mission seminary, and we are fully confident, that, constrained by the love of Christ, he will make conscientious use of the talents entrusted to him for the instruction in the truths of salvation, for the elementary teaching, and for the care of souls."<sup>ii</sup> Muehlhaeuser's education had not advanced far enough for him to be declared a candidate for the ministry as was his companion by the name of Oertel. The plan was that Oertel should do work in America as a pastor, Muehlhaeuser as a teacher and privately as *Seelsorger*. The Langenberg society provided the funds for passage to North America. It was expected that German Americans, especially the wealthy, would support the missionaries, once they had arrived in their field of labor.

The thirty-four year old Muehlhaeuser arrived in New York on October 3, [1837]. His assignment to begin a school for German immigrant children met with little success. Having a free public school available for their children, the Germans could not be enlisted to support Muehlhaeuser's German school, especially since they wanted their children to learn also English. Since Langenberg society members were unable to provide financial assistance, they reluctantly agreed to the advice of Muehlhaeuser's American friends that he leave New York and serve further inland. Upon being colloquized, he was licensed as pastor by the president of the New York Ministerium, Dr. Wakerhagen, and began to serve a congregation of the General Synod in Rochester, New York. The following year at its synod meeting the New York Ministerium ordained him.

Muehlhaeuser found the congregation at Rochester split into a Reformed and a Lutheran faction. One of the factions had begun building a church, but poverty had brought the project to a halt. Muehlhaeuser helped them complete the building and kept the congregation together. His Suabian Lutheranism and his Barmen training as well as the "protestant" approach of the General Synod all made it possible for him to minister to a congregation that included the Reformed among the Lutherans. This was the way in Wuerttemberg; the mission societies sought to serve both confessions; and the General Synod had broad confessional views that represented a mild Lutheranism in contrast to the Old-Lutherans, whose militant, polemical confessionalism seemed harsh and unloving to Muehlhaeuser.

Nevertheless, Muehlhaeuser's lack of emphasis on confessionalism does not mean that he was weak in gospel understanding or knowledge of the Scriptures. When he heard a sermon in New York, the preacher seemed to him to be "unclear and inexperienced in the main matter of the Gospel, namely, the righteousness of God which is granted to men by grace through faith."<sup>iii</sup> His concern for careful gospel preaching and teaching appears from the account in 1840 of the first Christmas tree and children's service in the *Rochester Journal*: "Around the tree were seated little children, perhaps forty in number, with their pastor, Mr. Muehlhaeuser, in their midst Their exercise consisted in prayer, singing appropriate hymns and a thorough catechisation of other children by Mr. Muehlhaeuser on the various points connected with the event commemorated."<sup>iv</sup> The *thorough* questioning of the children on the Christmas event, making it attractive to them through the symbolism of the Christmas tree, shows a deep gospel concern on the part of the Rochester pastor.

The Muehlhaeuser we learn to know from his training and early experience is a man who loved his Bible and the gospel even if he was mild in his confessional Lutheranism, who was "sound in regard to justification" even if he was lacking in formal theological training, who showed a "good-hearted, unselfish concern for

others,”<sup>v</sup> a characteristic nurtured by his contact with Spittler and the pilgrim mission and applied in evangelical witness to needy sinners.

Koehler in *The History of the Wisconsin Synod* has this to say of the Muehlhaeuser who came from Wuerttemberg:

As a Suabian his training naturally had not been along confessional lines, but he was a simple-hearted Lutheran from his youth, and the idea of surrendering anything of his Lutheran faith would have filled him with consternation. On the other hand, in keeping with the 18th century unionism the front against unbelief was the all-absorbing issue which united Lutherans and Reformed in the Baseler Christentumsgesellschaft, his alma mater, and at Barmen later he had been confirmed in this attitude.<sup>vi</sup>

The influence which his early American experiences had on him is described as follows:

During his ten-year membership in the New York Ministerium Muehlhaeuser acquired the notions that are characteristic of the synod constitution drafted by him, and of his practice, so far as they were not already inherent in the Barmen unionism. At Rochester he no doubt heard of the happenings between the Buffaloes and the Sachsen, but he remained a stranger to them, and likewise in Milwaukee, because there was a strong antipathy against the Old-Lutherans out east. The Old-Lutheran demand of adherence to all the Lutheran symbols, which were quite unknown in the Lutheran church here, appeared to Muehlhaeuser, with his ideas of mission work among the unchurched Germans, as unevangelical and legalistic, especially when coupled with the introduction of liturgical forms that were strange to his Suabian upbringing and to which as a South German he was averse to begin with.<sup>vii</sup>

## II.

Muehlhaeuser arrived in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, on June 27, 1848. This was brought about through another trainee from Barmen sent by the Langenberg society, John Weinmann. The Barmen home office had asked its former student Muehlhaeuser to take the three new missionaries, Weinmann, Wrede, and Rauschenbusch, under his wing when they came to America. Muehlhaeuser met them in New York when they arrived in 1846. Two of the men stayed in New York, but Weinmann had been designated to follow the call from the Oakwood congregation of 300 souls on the old Kilbourn Road near Milwaukee. One of its members, Ehrenfried Seebach, had appealed to Germany for a pastor. When Weinmann reported the conditions in Wisconsin to Muehlhaeuser, the latter's missionary spirit compelled him to leave the congregation at Rochester in order to work in Wisconsin. His plan was to work as he once did, as a pilgrim missionary. The New York tract society commissioned him as a colporteur for Wisconsin. This would provide for his livelihood while he preached in the country north and south of Milwaukee.

It was soon evident that the older Muehlhaeuser was no longer able to endure the hardships of a traveling colporteur and pilgrim missionary. Advised by a Presbyterian preacher and the pastor of the English Congregational church, Muehlhaeuser in October 1848 founded an "evangelical" congregation for Germans in a hall rented from the English congregation. His Lutheranism came to the fore the following year, possibly encouraged by Weinmann, when he reorganized the congregation as the German Ev. Lutheran Trinity congregation. However, one of the four Lutheran congregations already in Milwaukee had the name of Trinity, a congregation served by a pastor of the Missouri Synod. Thus at its incorporation Muehlhaeuser's church took the name, German Ev. Lutheran Grace Church (*Gnaden-Gemeinde*).

With no church extension fund from which to receive assistance, the problem of acquiring a house of worship was a formidable one for the new congregation. To solve this, Muehlhaeuser spent six months in the East, chiefly in New York and the New England states, soliciting funds for the purchase of a building that was

available to the congregation. Not only Lutherans, but Protestants in general were solicited for help. The *Boston Puritan Recorder* of August 1, 1850, encouraged support of Muehlhaeuser's project because churches were needed among the immigrant Germans, all too many of whom were infidels and rationalists. The *Recorder* wrote:

We are led to these thoughts by a visit from Reverend John Muehlhaeuser, the minister of a German congregation, recently gathered in Milwaukee, He has come East to secure aid in purchasing a meeting house for his congregation, who now worship in a hall. He has the fullest recommendations from personal friends of ours in that place whose word may be relied on. His desire is to raise money to purchase the house built by the First Congregational Church, which is to be vacated by that Society, as they are building a new house. The house is a substantial brick building, seating some four hundred or five hundred persons, and can be had much cheaper than a new one. This attained, will give the congregation a great influence among the 8000 Germans in that young city.

This is a specimen of those calls from German sources which we think ought to be regarded with special favor. We are not in favor of encouraging applications to build meeting houses to the West of our own people, but if these people are not aided by us, to whom shall they go? And if they are not aided and the Gospel is not promoted among the Germans, what will be the result?<sup>viii</sup>

Muehlhaeuser succeeded in collecting over \$2100 and another \$700 in a later visit. Instead of purchasing the building referred to by the *Boston Recorder*, a lot was purchased east of the river and a new building constructed. Kilbourntown west of the river already had ten German congregations of various denominations.

Here again the mild Lutheranism that Muehlhaeuser had learned in Wuerttemberg and practiced in the East found application. The emphasis of this was to battle against unbelief and rationalism rather than to stress confessional Lutheranism. Thus he could call on and gain the support of Protestants in the East, while his church in the appeal was not directly designated as Lutheran. This also permitted him to be completely at ease in appealing for funds from non-Lutherans.

Similarly some years later, when his congregation was planning the construction of a new school, *The Milwaukee Sentinel* of August 19, 1865, commended them because the ninth ward did not have sufficient schools for all children and published an appeal for financial assistance.

Mr. Muehlhaeuser's parish solicits aid from protestant organizations and individuals outside the ward. Mr. Muehlhaeuser is a conscientious and energetic laborer, having preached in Milwaukee 17 years—longer than any other present clergyman with one exception. We trust he may meet with such encouragement as shall induce him to expand the dimensions and consequent usefulness of his projected building beyond what was originally contemplated.

There seemed to be no embarrassment in soliciting funds among Protestants beyond the parish. With the state church background of Europe, the Germans coming to America had to improvise ways of financing the church's projects. This did not always result in the best stewardship practices.

In these accounts Muehlhaeuser showed himself a man who by his evident sincerity soon gained the confidence of those he met and retained their trust as he became better known.

Muehlhaeuser's concern for people was practical and varied. The poor found in him a friend who knew how to secure help from the more fortunate members of his growing congregation. He was praised for his efforts in behalf of Milwaukee Hospital. A single dollar sent to Muehlhaeuser for this project marked its conception.<sup>ix</sup> A Mr. Otto (he seems to have been one of Muehlhaeuser's members) was commended for erecting

with special cooperation of Rev. Mr. Muehlhaeuser, a depository for the dead on Gruenhagen's burial ground from which place a bell will be led into the house of the sacristan, to render to such persons who have been overtaken with apparent death, upon restoration to life, hope and expectation instead of despair and miserable death.<sup>x</sup>

In 1855 Muehlhaeuser was one of the few pastors of Milwaukee who did not abandon the sick during a cholera epidemic, a fact gratefully remembered by the whole city.<sup>xi</sup> At the time of Muehlhaeuser's death, *The Milwaukee Sentinel* paid tribute to his practical concern for people: "Few men were better known in our community than Pastor John Muehlhaeuser, and few at death have been so sincerely regretted...For many years past Pastor Muehlhaeuser has been active in every good work, looking towards the education of the young and the religious instruction of the people." After outlining his many interests and the projects in which he was involved, the concluding comment states that "he died poor, a sufficient proof that his charity was practical."<sup>xii</sup> All of this made it quite natural to call the congregation he founded and served for nearly two decades the "Muehlhaeuser Church."

The founding of the Wisconsin Synod was almost concurrent with the founding of Grace Church. Muehlhaeuser's aversion to the Old-Lutherans prevented his even considering joining either the Missouri or Buffalo synods, both of which had been recently organized and already had congregations in Milwaukee. The pastors Muehlhaeuser, Weinmann, Wrede, and Meiss, who met in Milwaukee on December 8, 1849, unanimously expressed the desire for the formation of a synod in Wisconsin. They agreed that its name should be "the first German Ev. Lutheran Synod of Wisconsin." Muehlhaeuser, chosen as president, was asked to draft a constitution as quickly as possible. When this constitution was accepted on May 27, 1850, at Salem church in Granville, the Wisconsin Synod had formally come into existence.

This first constitution assigned the name "German Ev. Lutheran Ministerium of Wisconsin" to the new body. The term "ministerium" Muehlhaeuser brought with him from the East, The constitution provided, however, not only for a meeting of the ministerium, but for a synodical meeting which included lay delegates from the congregations. The early proceedings show a lack of concern about the name. The first proceedings have the heading "Synodical Meeting of the Ev. Lutheran Church of Wisconsin." The founders seem not to have been too concerned about what their organization was called. From the very beginning it functioned as a synod. The meeting of the pastors directed itself almost exclusively to the examination of candidates for the ministry, their licensing and ordination. All other business was transacted in the synodical meeting.

Muehlhaeuser served this new synod as president for ten years. In drafting the constitution, he had no ambitions for such an extended tenure in this prominent position. The president's term of office was set at two years, and he was not to serve for more than four consecutive years. Three times this provision was waived in the reelection of Muehlhaeuser. Not until 1858 do the proceedings contain an explanation. The Synod in that year expressly stated that it again, as in the previous election, in nominating Muehlhaeuser for president was setting aside the constitutional provision limiting officers to two terms. The reason for this action was

not that the worthy president has forced his way into this burdensome office, nor that the Synod lacks other able men, but his age, rich in experience, his long residence in Wisconsin, his location in the center of the Synod, in the metropolis of the state, his extensive influential connections with those outside the Synod, his proven great faithfulness and holy zeal, as well as other circumstances show him to be the most suited for the office.<sup>xiii</sup>

This action was not to be considered a precedent but to be excused by the need of the time.

Muehlhaeuser was a missionary at heart, From the very beginning the little synod collected money for heathen mission work and Muehlhaeuser's congregation led the way. While the \$64.82 collected for missions in 1855 seems like a trifling amount, it compares favorably with the \$14.19 raised for the synodical treasury. By far the greatest amount collected in those early years was for mission work, particularly for heathen missions. Soon the statistical reports show that Muehlhaeuser's church was contributing \$50 annually for heathen

missions, considerably more than any other congregation. Although the Synod had no heathen mission of its own, these monies were to a large extent sent to mission societies for their support.<sup>xiv</sup>

Muehlhaeuser's mission interest was to express itself, however, in the years of his presidency particularly by zealous efforts to supply the immigrant Germans in Wisconsin with Word and sacrament. In the first convention after the Synod's founding Muehlhaeuser called on the infant body to give serious thought to the need for a missionary for Wisconsin. A lengthy discussion ensued in which the need was unanimously expressed. Only the lack of financial means forced a postponement. At the same time, each pastor was urged to extend his personal efforts in his own area as much as possible.

Mission work needs continued encouragement. By 1855 it was felt that the congregations had lost their mission zeal and the convention urged its reawakening.<sup>xv</sup> The following year a mission committee of two pastors and a layman under the chairmanship of Pastor Streisguth was chosen.

When in 1857 G. Fachtmann arrived in Milwaukee with good recommendations from Germany, Muehlhaeuser had the man who became the traveling missionary for whom the need was felt already in 1851. Although Muehlhaeuser assigned him first of all to two congregations in Washington County, Fachtmann soon received permission from his congregations to undertake a mission journey as authorized by the president. Fachtmann's report to the next convention was followed by an appointment to serve as traveling missionary.

Fachtmann's detailed reports to the president were replete with opportunities for preaching the gospel. These, added to the numerous groups of Germans who appealed to Muehlhaeuser for Lutheran services, made the Synod's first decade one that was not lacking in opportunity to fulfill the mission on which its first president had come to Wisconsin. What was needed, however, was a goodly supply of competent pastors. To lead the Synod in supplying this need was one of Muehlhaeuser's most difficult problems, one only partially solved, if at all, during his presidency.

Muehlhaeuser's constitution provided for training young men for the ministry in much the same way in which he had become a pastor in the East. A ministerial candidate was to be licensed for two years so that he might prove himself. Before and at the conclusion of this time he was examined by the ministerial meeting. A two-thirds majority vote led to ordination. Each year the ministerial meeting spent its time examining and passing on those to be licensed and those to be ordained. Already in 1855 questions arose about the licensing of candidates and the practice was abandoned two years later in favor of a committee that examined those aspiring to the ministry and decided on their ordination.<sup>xvi</sup>

The constitution also made provisions for receiving pastors from other Lutheran bodies, from Germany, and even from other Christian churches, provided they accepted the Lutheran confession. This provision resulted in a motley assortment of pastors, of greater and often lesser competence, entering and again leaving the ministry of the Synod. In Muehlhaeuser's decade as president the best and most reliable source continued to be the German mission societies. These provided some notable additions to the Wisconsin ministerium, e.g., John Bading in 1853 and Philipp Koehler in 1854, men who would significantly affect the future of the Synod in a way not anticipated by Muehlhaeuser.

The thought of training men in a seminary in America had its inception in the Muehlhaeuser decade. In 1857 congregations were urged to have an annual offering for the support of poor students and the following year the decision was made to send a student to study at the Gettysburg seminary. This arrangement began and ended with the one student, H. Sieker, ordained in 1861. The possibility of providing a German professor for the Springfield University and of using this school for pastoral training faltered in 1860 because of the prevailing confessional problems in the two synods in Illinois that had founded this school. It did lead a committee at the 1859 convention to look into the urgency and need for an institution that would train pastors for Wisconsin, and to give thought to the means that might be available to the Synod for establishing an institution of its own. The year after Bading succeeded to the presidency the question was again taken up and resulted in the seminary's founding in 1863.

Muehlhaeuser had come to America to serve as teacher for German Lutherans in the East. His interest in education continued to show itself at his own Grace Church, which had a "German school" from its beginning, and in the encouragement he gave to the education of the youth of his Synod. We already noted the favorable

comment of *The Milwaukee Sentinel* when Grace Church contemplated building a new and larger school. In the very first meeting of the Synod one of the few resolutions passed was that “every pastor who belongs to this association shall concern himself particularly with the youth and conduct a day school, Bible hours, mission hours, etc..”<sup>xvii</sup> In the statistical report of 1860 the twenty pastors who reported were serving 48 congregations, among which were 23 day school (*Gemeindeschulen*) and 20 Sunday schools.<sup>xviii</sup> According to present standards these day schools may not have been exemplary. Yet Koehler in his summary of the first decade of the Synod’s history refers to the educational efforts of the pastors with praise:

Everywhere they laid stress on the instruction of the youth and thus became the founders of the best elementary school work in our state. For when the public school system in the rural districts was still in its swaddling clothes and the smaller cities had nothing to boast about, the German (Lutheran and Reformed) congregations, both in the country and in town, had many well conducted and attended schools (likewise the German humanists) where they were settled in larger numbers.<sup>xix</sup>

Koehler’s comment regarding the German humanists raises the question whether it was German interest in education or concern for the religious instruction that was more responsible for founding schools. That there may have been a merging of the two interests in many schools conducted by congregations is well possible. Nevertheless, Muehlhaeuser’s example and encouragement, particularly for the religious instruction of the youth, should not be underestimated. It provided the beginnings for a strong synodical Christian day school system that continued to grow throughout the Synod’s history.

The confessional position and the interchurch relations of Muehlhaeuser’s synod during its first decade to a great extent bear the stamp of its founder. Muehlhaeuser was evangelical Lutheran, and in that order. The Milwaukee congregation he founded was first called “evangelical,” in the following year adding “Lutheran” to its name. His love for the gospel was ever evident, That dominated his life and activity. And he was Lutheran. He wanted to be Lutheran, and he would speak of his dear Lutheran church. But he failed to draw all the conclusions that are inherent in subscription to the Lutheran Confession. His mild Lutheranism, brought about by his background and training, found expression in a letter written in 1853: “Just because I am not strictly (Lutheran) or Old-Lutheran, I am in a position to offer every child of God and servant of Christ the hand of fellowship over the ecclesiastical fence.”<sup>xx</sup> It remained for others to raise the confessional fences that were not to be crossed.

During Muehlhaeuser’s presidency cordial relations were maintained with those churches or organizations he knew best These were especially the Pennsylvania Synod and the German mission societies. Special thanks were voted in 1859 and again in 1860 to the Pennsylvania Synod for the support that had been granted “for many years” so that some of the pastors could receive adequate salaries.<sup>xxi</sup> Likewise special thanks were expressed to the Langenberg and Berlin societies for their particular interest in the building of God’s kingdom in Wisconsin. From 1860 on this was to include financial support for a missionary in Wisconsin.<sup>xxii</sup> Muehlhaeuser was concerned to maintain a cordial relationship with these groups. The question of their confessional position did not arise at this time.

On the other hand, Muehlhaeuser’s decade saw no rapprochement with the Old-Lutheran Missouri Synod, at least not on the official level. In fact, the young synod was sensitive to the accusations brought against it by Missouri. In 1857 the request on the part of a synod member to send a delegate to the Missouri convention was turned down “as long as she does not desist from anathemas against us and retract those formerly made.”<sup>xxiii</sup> The Lebanon and Watertown “cases” only increased Missouri’s accusations of unionism and un-Lutheran conduct against Wisconsin. As a result Muehlhaeuser in subsequent conventions reiterated Wisconsin’s claim on being Lutheran by stressing its confession to the Word of God and the Unaltered Augsburg Confession.<sup>xxiv</sup> Muehlhaeuser wanted to be recognized and wanted his synod to be known as Lutheran by confession, but he was not attracted to the strongly polemical confessionalism of Missouri.

The Muehlhaeuser Synod—in its first decade the Wisconsin Synod could well be called that, and it often was. This was so not because Muehlhaeuser sought to rule the small body or to set himself up in a strong hierarchical position as its president. The constitution he drafted would soon be replaced. His mild Lutheranism would soon give way to a strong confessionalism. It was not organizational skill nor a dominating spirit on the part of its founder that caused the new synod to be referred to as the Muehlhaeuser Synod. It was so called because its senior member in age and experience led the young men who joined it with a pastoral heart and with genuine concern. His presidential addresses are pastoral in nature, calling for self-examination, for faithfulness, expressing love for the gospel and for the souls Christ purchased so dearly. Frequently he refers to the short time remaining until Christ returns. By his fatherly, pastoral spirit, by his practical wisdom and experience, by his humble yet determined zeal for the gospel Muehlhaeuser influenced the synod he founded so that it often was called and in fact to a large extent was the Muehlhaeuser Synod during its first ten years.

### III.

In 1860 Muehlhaeuser refused reelection. The burden of work, both in his congregation and in the synod, had increased with each year and forced him to request release from the presidency. The Synod expressed its sincere regret and deep sorrow in granting the request, thanking him heartily for his faithful labors, so richly blessed of the Lord, and besought his continued advice and labors in behalf of the Synod.<sup>xxv</sup> The office of *senior ministerii* was established and conferred on the departing president. It was a position of honor granted on the basis of age and experience to someone who might serve as a worthy example to the Synod. In the sessions he was to be seated in a position of honor next to the president and was at all times to be accorded the honor which was due his age and office.<sup>xxvi</sup> The frequent reference to age and the honor due him is not surprising. He alone was left of those who had organized the Synod. All the others were younger and more recent additions.

In 1862 the Langenberg society invited Muehlhaeuser back to Germany for its 25th anniversary. This was also the 25th anniversary of his ordination. As its first missionary to America, the Langenberg society honored its successful protegee, the founder, first president, and now *senior ministerii* of the Wisconsin Synod. On this jubilee trip, as it was called because of its festive nature, Muehlhaeuser, by request of the Synod, sought to gain interest and support in Germany for the founding of a seminary in Wisconsin and to gain students and pastors for the growing young synod.

On all counts it was a successful trip. He brought back four pastors; others would soon follow. His trip prepared the way for Bading's seminary collection in Germany, begun a year later.

In spite of these honors accorded Muehlhaeuser by his own synod and in Germany, the years from 1860 to his death in 1867 were a time of waning influence for the venerable and venerated Senior.

The founding of the seminary found Bading and Muehlhaeuser on opposite sides in the choice of a site for the seminary and a future college. Muehlhaeuser and a layman from Milwaukee, Nic. Schoof, were appointed to the seven-man committee to bring recommendations to the Synod on the seminary question. Muehlhaeuser and Schoof did not sign the committee report that recommended Watertown as the preferred seminary location, the site strongly favored by Bading. In the discussion Muehlhaeuser brought his full weight to bear in favor of Milwaukee. Nevertheless, Watertown won by a vote of 45 to 19.<sup>xxvii</sup> In the next session Fachtmann and Muehlhaeuser asked the convention to reconsider the location. After some discussion the motion prevailed not to reconsider, except that Watertown was asked to show its interest tangibly by raising at least \$2000 toward the seminary and college. If Watertown failed in this, the motion would be retracted. In the 50's Muehlhaeuser might have been able to determine the location of the seminary without significant opposition. Now the influence of the new president outweighed his. He continued to be held in honor, but his influence was waning.

With the presidency of Bading an increase in emphasis on sound doctrine and practice was immediately evident. Bading's concern for sound Lutheran confessionalism was known in the Synod and was, no doubt, the reason for his election in 1860. Increasingly voices also within the Synod were heard questioning the Synod's



close ties with the German societies, known to be unionistic. Since Bading too at this time was not ready to break with the German societies and was willing to travel to Germany to collect funds for the new seminary, Muehlhaeuser may not have sensed the extent to which Bading represented a practice significantly different from his own. At the 1864 convention, when Bading was in Germany, Ph. Koehler “made the motion to cut loose from the Berlin society, because our Lutheran confession is menaced by continuing association.” The motion was lost and Muehlhaeuser reassured Bading in a letter that “a mild spirit was in evidence.... The great majority were in favor of *this* that the relationship continue, and that we are under great obligations to Berlin.” Regarding the convention he wrote: “There was, I must say—praised be the Lord—there was another spirit abroad; it was different from the recent years. Not as though the Lutheran confession had been compromised, but it wasn’t carried to extremes.”<sup>xxviii</sup>

Yet, Wisconsin was on the way to a firm stand on the Lutheran Confessions that was loosening its bonds with the German societies. In a few years those bonds would be broken and the Wisconsin Synod would join ranks confessionally with the “extreme” Missouri Synod. Muehlhaeuser would not quite live to see this happen, but had he lived, he would not have been able to prevent it. The Synod was moving away from his “mild” position and with it his influence was growing weaker.

The greatness of Muehlhaeuser shows itself in that through all of this he continued to support the Synod, to give it his best efforts wherever they were called for. His name continues to appear on the list of committees at the conventions. He supported the seminary. His work for the Synod he had founded was bound up with his love for the gospel which it was there to proclaim.

The Synod also continued to hold its Senior in high esteem. While there were those who feared that he might be re-elected to the presidency in 1864 when Bading was in Germany and who did not want his milder attitude toward the confessions to be considered that of the entire Synod, they yet recognized the rich fruit his ministry bore under the blessing of a gracious God. Bading paid tribute to Muehlhaeuser in his presidential address in 1868. This was the first convention of the Synod to assemble without its onetime president and Senior. Bading thus appropriately began his address:

Our Synod meeting this year takes place under circumstances quite different from any during its nineteen year history. It is evident that our Synod has moved into a new stage of its existence; its previous history has reached a kind of conclusion.

If we follow the historical course of last year’s synodical events, we shall need to pause first of all at the fact of which our *Gemeindeblatt* informed our pastors and congregations early last fall. I need only mention the name of Muehlhaeuser to call to the immediate remembrance of everyone that our Synod lost in him its father, founder, and intercessor. Even as it is true that next to the grace of God the Synod owes its existence to him, so it is also true that for years the Synod bore his imprint, was often even called the Muehlhaeuser Synod, and in its internal and external development was more or less closely linked to his works and words and battles. The Lord permitted him to see many fruits of his labors in the founding of congregations and in saving individual souls from the snares of unbelief. Today for the first time he is absent from our synodical convention, for the first time his serious, often powerful voice will not be heard. He has now gone in to the joy of his Lord through a blessed death. To the very end he bore our Synod unremittingly on his faithful, fatherly heart.<sup>xxix</sup>

True it was that with his death the Synod entered on a new stage of its history, but a stage toward which it had been moving since 1860. The time of the Muehlhaeuser Synod had come to an end.

“The evil that men do lives after them; the good is oft interred with their bones.” Although proven false many times, these words of the famous bard find a partial application to Muehlhaeuser. Today’s confessionally minded Synod may see its confessionally mild founder as an ancestral skeleton, better kept in the closet. With the hint of an apology it may be said: Yes, Muehlhaeuser was the founder of our Synod; unfortunately, he was rather lax; but we got over that. There is the danger that in trying to forget his failings we forget the man.

“Now to each man the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good” (1 Cor 12:7). The Lord endowed Muehlhaeuser with gifts that have served the common good of the Wisconsin Synod, and through it the church in its early years and to the present. He had a gift for personal evangelism and can serve as an inspiring example to every generation. He was imbued with a zeal for missions. His Synod needed to learn to put such zeal into practice on a national and international scale. He had a concern for education, which is bearing fruit to the present in the Synod’s vital Christian day school system.

Koehler aptly sums up the minus and plus in Muehlhaeuser as follows:

So Muehlhaeuser was not the founder of the Wisconsin Synod’s confessionalism, nor did he organize it as it developed. But what he represented was no less great, a personal living faith, child-like trust in his Savior, and a burning zeal to build His Kingdom and spend himself in the work.<sup>xxx</sup>

The ways of God in history are often strange and inscrutable. Except for Bading with his sound confessionalism the Wisconsin Synod today might be part of a confessionless, ecumenical Lutheranism. Except for Muehlhaeuser, and this includes his mild confessionalism, there might never have been a Wisconsin Synod at all.

<sup>i</sup> Carl Meusel, *Kirchliches Handlexikon* (Leipzig, 1902), VII, 325.

<sup>ii</sup> Quoted in J.P. Koehler, *The History of the Wisconsin Synod* (St. Cloud: Protestant Conference, 1970), p 29.

<sup>iii</sup> Koehler, *History*, p 35.

<sup>iv</sup> *Northwestern Lutheran*, Dec. 18, 1949, p 405.

<sup>v</sup> Koehler, *History*, p 35.

<sup>vi</sup> Koehler, *History*, p 72.

<sup>vii</sup> Koehler, *History*, p 72.

<sup>viii</sup> Koehler, *History*, p 42.

<sup>ix</sup> *The Milwaukee Sentinel*, Feb. 3, 1866.

<sup>x</sup> *The Milwaukee Sentinel*, July 18, 1853.

<sup>xi</sup> Koehler, *History*, p 48f.

<sup>xii</sup> *The Milwaukee Sentinel*, Sept. 17, 1867.

<sup>xiii</sup> *Wisconsin Proceedings, 1858*, p 4.

<sup>xiv</sup> In 1900 in an article in the *Gemeinde-Blatt* (p 68) the question is asked: “*Was ist denn aus den Missionsgeldern geworden, die damals gesammelt worden?*” The answer reads: “*Man had dieselben an auswaertige Missions-gesellschaften verabfolgt und hat jene damit unterstuetzt. Ja, ein Theil ist auch zu Synodalzwecken verwendet worden.*”

<sup>xv</sup> *Wisconsin Proceedings, 1855*, p 2.

<sup>xvi</sup> *Wisconsin Proceedings, 1850*, pp 3f.

<sup>xvii</sup> *Wisconsin Proceedings, 1850*, p 2.

<sup>xviii</sup> *Wisconsin Proceedings, 1860*, p 12.

<sup>xix</sup> Koehler, *History*, pp 64f.

<sup>xx</sup> Koehler, *History*, p 43.

<sup>xxi</sup> *Wisconsin Proceedings, 1859*, p 13.

<sup>xxii</sup> *Wisconsin Proceedings, 1860*, p 10.

<sup>xxiii</sup> *Wisconsin Proceedings, 1857*, p 3.

<sup>xxiv</sup> *Wisconsin Proceedings, 1858*, p 4.

<sup>xxv</sup> *Wisconsin Proceedings, 1860*, p 13.

<sup>xxvi</sup> *Wisconsin Proceedings, 1860*, p 12.

<sup>xxvii</sup> *Wisconsin Proceedings, 1863*, p 24.

<sup>xxviii</sup> Koehler, *History*, p 99.

<sup>xxix</sup> *Wisconsin Proceedings, 1868*, p 3.

<sup>xxx</sup> Koehler, *History*, p 72.