

The WELS and LCMS—Where Are We Today?

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At its convention in 1961 the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS) formally adopted a resolution which suspended fellowship with The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LC-MS). This terminated a confessional fellowship that had existed for 90 years. In 1872 the two synods were among those that organized the Synodical Conference of North America. When in the early decades of the conference doctrinal controversies resulted in some defections, the WELS and LC-MS found themselves jointly contending for a scripturally sound confession.

Problems between the two synods began to arise in 1939. Twenty years of discussion and meetings did not resolve the problems but ended with the 1961 action. Now another 27 years have elapsed. We do well to ask: Where are we now in our relationship with one another? This question also has validity since the resolution in 1961 ending a cherished fellowship explained that the term “suspend” was used because it contained “the hope that conditions might some day warrant the reestablishment of fellowship.”

Two years ago through your essay committee you invited me to prepare a paper for this convention on the topic: “Doctrinal and Practical Differences between the Wisconsin Synod and the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, with Emphasis on Church and Ministry.” I have reworded and shortened the topic as indicated. While the new wording does not directly refer to an emphasis on church and ministry, this will receive the necessary consideration in order to present the total picture as it is today.

It is only natural that in considering this subject we begin by looking at the basic issue that brought about the suspension in 1961. The divisive issue was church fellowship. We shall begin by determining what the differences were at the time the suspension occurred, and then proceed by asking where we are today. We shall briefly take a look at related issues that were also dividing the two synods at the time. We shall then examine issues that were emerging already in 1961 and that could have become the cause for a suspension of fellowship. That will form the second part of this essay. Another question that comes to mind is whether new issues have arisen since 1961. We shall answer that question in the third part. We shall conclude by giving a summary answer to the question of our topic: Where are we today? Such a presentation, I hope, will fulfill the wishes of your district and will also provide the desired consideration of church and ministry. Quite naturally, both doctrinal and practical differences will enter into the presentation.

I. The Basic Issue – Church Fellowship

A. In 1961

The resolution adopted in 1961 said that the basic issue that had become divisive between the two synods was the doctrine of church fellowship. Examples were cited where the differing doctrine of the LC-MS was finding application. Such applications had lent urgency to settling the issue. When all attempts at agreement resulted in an impasse, a break in fellowship was unavoidable.

What were the differences between the two synods in the doctrine of fellowship?

The doctrinal position of the WELS was the one that had been jointly held over the years by the synods of the Synodical Conference. The WELS contended that the LC-MS practice violated scriptural principles and that the LC-MS was defending these violations in its doctrinal presentation on fellowship. We shall briefly set forth the WELS position and then examine the Missouri aberrations.

What is church fellowship? We can also call it religious or confessional or Christian fellowship. The WELS defines it as “every joint expression, manifestation, and demonstration of the common faith in which Christians on the basis of their confession find themselves to be united with one another.” Fellowship involves recognizing unity of faith and giving expression to it. When Christians have the same faith, they will recognize this and express it by joining in worship and church work.

How do Christians recognize that they are united in faith? They cannot look into one another's hearts. So a Christian listens to what someone says he believes and observes how this shows itself in his life. In other words, he examines the person's confession of faith and how he puts that confession into practice. When the confessions of individuals or groups agree, there is evidence of a unity of faith between them. "By their fruits you will recognize them" (Mt 7:16). So when Christians or church bodies on the basis of their confession recognize that unity of faith exists, they acknowledge this and can give expression to this unity by practicing fellowship in their religious life. We see how the first Christian congregation expressed its unity in fellowship: "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer" (Ac 2:42). Thus the Wisconsin Synod statement on fellowship says: "In selecting specific individuals or groups for a joint expression of faith, we can do this only on the basis of their confession."

This raises the question: How much agreement is required to acknowledge and practice religious fellowship? Our Savior answers by saying that we are to teach and obey "everything that God commanded" (Mt 28:20). Scripture says that we are to proclaim the whole counsel of God. Hence we say that "a Christian confession of faith is in principle always a confession to the entire Word of God."

Not everyone will have a complete and perfect understanding of everything in Holy Scripture. We are told to "accept him whose faith is weak" (Ro 14:1). We are to strengthen and encourage one another with the Word of God so that "we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming" (Eph 4:14). "Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace" (Eph 4:3). Nowhere, however, does the Bible bid us keep that unity by giving up any part or teaching of Holy Scripture. To do so in fact disrupts the unity. If anyone persists in rejecting any teaching of Scripture, we are not to "share in his wicked work" (2 Jn 11) but rather "keep away from them" (Ro 16:17). "Weakness of faith is in itself not a reason for terminating church fellowship, but rather an inducement for practicing it vigorously to help one another in overcoming our individual weaknesses." On the other hand, "persistent adherence to false doctrine and practice calls for termination of church fellowship."

A further question must be answered. How do those who are in confessional agreement express this agreement in practice? What practical actions are an expression of religious fellowship? Two factors are involved. One is that the action is in some way related to their faith, that is, has religious significance. The other is that what they are doing is done together, not just simultaneously but jointly. For example, when people attend the Lord's supper at the same altar, they are joining in a religious activity. When a guest is invited to preach at a worship service, he and the congregation are jointly active in a religious function. When Christians join in addressing prayers to God, this is a joint expression of their faith. Even a handshake, as for example in the rite of confirmation, can have religious significance and be a joint expression of a common faith. In whatever manner unity of faith is expressed jointly, this is an act of religious fellowship. "We may classify these joint expressions of faith in various ways according to the particular realm of activity in which they occur, eg., pulpit fellowship, altar fellowship, prayer fellowship, fellowship in worship, fellowship in church work, in missions, in Christian education, in Christian charity. Yet insofar as they are joint expressions of faith they are all essentially one and the same thing, and are all properly covered by a common designation, namely, church fellowship."

What this latter point says is that there are not various fellowships or degrees of church fellowship among Christians, requiring more or less agreement in doctrine. For example, a congregation cannot say: We are in altar fellowship with another congregation, but not in pulpit or prayer fellowship. Or, we may practice pulpit fellowship with another group but not prayer fellowship. Such a false view of fellowship can be represented by a ladder which individuals or groups climb toward complete unity of faith. Each rung of the ladder brings them another step closer to unity and permits expressions of fellowship according to the rung on which they find themselves.

On the contrary, there is "one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all" (Eph 4:5). We are to "make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace" (Eph 4:3). We do so by upholding and confessing the same truth. Error disrupts this unity. To

pretend that it does not by practicing religious fellowship with those in error is in fact disruptive of true unity. The very term unity speaks of oneness in faith. Wherever there is unity of faith there is confessional or religious fellowship, and this may express itself in a variety of ways. But all of them are expressions of the same fellowship based on the same unity of faith. “Church fellowship should therefore be treated as a unit concept, covering every joint expression, manifestation, and demonstration of a common faith.” Nowhere in Scripture do we read of Christians who expressed their confessional unity in one way while recognizing that it was not proper to express it also in every other way. Scripture does not speak of partial unity with degrees of fellowship.

In 1961 at a meeting between representatives of the National Lutheran Council (consisting of the churches now merged into the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America) and representatives of the Missouri Synod, the spokesman for the NLC in an essay entitled “A Lutheran Study of Church Unity” said: “In short we may claim that in the degree to which we can come to a common understanding of the Gospel, in that degree we are able to work together in the ministry of reconciliation... With other Christians who profess faith in the Gospel, Lutherans may recognize a partial unity by a fellowship of certain types of common evangelism and even forms of prayer and thanksgiving, while working toward a more complete unity expressed in pulpit and altar fellowship.” The Missouri spokesman at the meeting in his essay presented the need to teach and observe all that Christ commanded, as stated in Matthew 28. He compared the two positions briefly: “The NLC presentation looks toward a variety of ecumenical relationships and envisages degrees or stages of fellowship proportionate to the degree of consensus which has been attained. The Missouri presentation is oriented toward doctrinal confessional unity...” In 1961 the concept of “degrees of fellowship” was one espoused only by the synods not associated with the Synodical Conference.

We may sum up the WELS doctrine of church fellowship, especially as it relates to the practice of fellowship, with three statements:

1. We are able to recognize those with whom we are in confessional or religious fellowship on the basis of their confession.
2. The confession must reveal unity of faith on the basis of all that Holy Scripture teaches. There will be weaknesses of understanding, but Scripture does not allow for persistent rejection of any doctrine it proclaims.
3. Fellowship is practiced by a variety of joint expressions of faith (joint worship and church work). All, however, are equally manifestations of church, or confessional, fellowship as recognized according to points 1 and 2 (church fellowship—a unit concept).

This was the doctrine of fellowship that was taught and practiced by all member synods of the Synodical Conference. (Cf. “Fellowship Then and Now,” which contains a series of articles published in *The Northwestern Lutheran* to show the doctrine of church fellowship that was taught and practiced jointly also in the Synodical Conference). It was on point three that divergence on the part of Missouri began to become evident. In 1944 a convention resolution allowed for a distinction between prayer fellowship which was part of church fellowship and joint prayers that were not an expression of church fellowship. The latter were permissible between groups not in doctrinal agreement. A year later forty-four prominent LC-MS pastors and professors issued a statement in which they contended for this position regarding joint prayer and insisted that Romans 16:17, 18 could not be applied “to all Christians who differ from us in certain points of doctrine.” This latter statement thus also questioned the validity of point two above (regarding the need for full doctrinal unity). Although the “Statement of the Forty-four” was opposed by many in Missouri and was withdrawn as a basis for discussion, its position ultimately became the fellowship doctrine of the LC-MS.

This was evident in the practice of the LC-MS during those years. With increasing frequency Missouri entered into cooperative endeavours with Lutheran bodies with whom it was not in doctrinal agreement. To conduct joint devotions at meetings where joint work which was of a spiritual nature was discussed or planned became standard practice. Thus Missouri was entering into joint worship and church work with church groups with whom it was not agreed in doctrine and with whom it did not consider itself to be in church fellowship.

In 1960 the principles of fellowship which supported this practice were stated officially in the document, “The Theology of Fellowship,” especially Part Two. It was clear that the “new” position espoused by the Forty-four already in 1945 now was held and defended by the LC-MS through their official spokesmen. In this document Missouri contended that “it would be a dangerous oversimplification to say that any one of the manifestations of fellowship, such as joint prayer, always necessarily presupposes and involves every other manifestation, such as pulpit and altar fellowship.” In other words, prayer fellowship may be practiced where pulpit and altar fellowship is not possible. Different principles apply to joint praying. Instead of asking whether those joining in prayer are one in faith, one must “consider the *situation* in which the prayer is offered, the *character* of the prayer itself, its *purpose*, and its *probable effect* on those who unite in prayer.” What this in effect said is that Romans 16:17, 18 and other passages that call for “avoiding” persistent errorists do not apply to prayer and various other joint religious activities. Basically, it claimed that there are different kinds of fellowships with differing principles guiding their practice. Pulpit and altar fellowship were placed in a category by themselves. These two but not other expressions of fellowship (eg., prayer) required full agreement in doctrine. Thus the LC-MS pronounced its blessing on a practice that was at variance with the Word of God. Missouri firmly held to this “new” position on fellowship. Twenty years of discussion on this subject finally resulted in an impasse and in the suspension of fellowship in 1961. Not to have suspended fellowship would have meant that the WELS itself was acting according to the “new” principle of the LC-MS.

We now ask: What was happened since 1961? What is the situation in regard to the doctrine of fellowship today?

B. The same issue today

Since 1961 at two conventions the fellowship relations of the LC-MS have undergone significant changes. In 1969 the LC-MS convention at Denver declared itself to be in fellowship with the American Lutheran Church, even though thirty years of meetings had not brought about complete doctrinal unity. This lack of unity became evident within a few years so that in 1981 fellowship was again terminated. This action can lead one to ask: Was the break with the ALC evidence that the LC-MS was returning to principles of church fellowship more in harmony with Scripture and closer to those of the WELS?

In the same year (1981) in response to a resolution of an earlier convention, the Missouri Commission on Theology and Church Relations published a study entitled “The Nature and Implications of the Concept of Fellowship.” Although it contains much with which we can agree, the basic difference that led to the impasse and suspension of fellowship in 1961 was not removed. Fellowship between church bodies is spoken of only as altar and pulpit fellowship. Other expressions of fellowship (for example, prayer fellowship) are not directly dealt with. There is, however, this comment in the “Conclusion” of the document that is significant for evaluating the present LC-MS position:

There is the problem of terminology and levels of agreement. Through the use of the word “fellowship” almost exclusively to refer to a formal altar and pulpit fellowship relationship established between two church bodies on the basis of agreement in the confession of the faith, some have been given the impression that no fellowship relationship other than spiritual unity in the body of Christ can or should exist among members of Christian churches not in altar and pulpit fellowship. The fact that the LC-MS is closer doctrinally to a church body which at least formally accepts the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions than to those denominations which do not is often obscured by the “all or nothing” approach that frequently accompanies ecclesiastical declarations of altar and pulpit fellowship.

The “all or nothing” approach no doubt has reference to the WELS position that church fellowship is a “unit concept.” Reference to “levels of agreement” also is significant in the above quotation. What this has reference to is that there can be degrees of fellowship according to the extent to which there is agreement in doctrine. Some expressions of fellowship (pulpit and altar) require more agreement than others (prayer). This view was

expressed in December 1987 by President Bohlmann of the LC-MS to representatives of the Lutheran World Federation at a meeting in Geneva, Switzerland, in a paper on the theme, “Inter-Christian Relationships: Missouri and her Partners.” He said:

Complete agreement on confessional doctrine and practice is neither possible nor necessary for every inter-Christian or inter-denominational action. Expressions of Christian unity should be proportionate to the measure of consensus in confessing the Biblical Gospel we enjoy with the other Christians involved. Although this point has seldom been articulated in official synodical documents, it has in fact been practiced by the Missouri Synod for many years.

The many years referred to cover about the past 30 to 40 years. President Bohlmann does not refer to the many years prior to that, about 75, during which Missouri doctrine and practice was in full agreement with that which the WELS continues to espouse. The idea of degrees of fellowship held by members of the National Lutheran Council in 1961 is the position championed by Missouri’s president. And fellowship practices which in 1961 were defended as exceptional situations now are considered standard practice beyond question.

Another point. Since, according to Missouri, pulpit fellowship is not permitted where other forms of worship are permitted, the need arises to distinguish between worship that is permissible and such worship that is not permissible because it is pulpit fellowship. This problem was addressed in a set of theses prepared by President Bohlmann and endorsed by the Council of Presidents. On the one hand, it is agreed that Missouri “members are free to engage in joint worship only with the pastors, teachers, and congregations of the Synod...with whom the Synod is in altar and pulpit fellowship.” A distinction is then made between “worship services” and “certain public events (such as celebrations, gatherings, rallies, convocations, exhibitions, pageants, concerts, colloquia, or conferences)” which are not considered “worship services” under certain conditions. One of the conditions under which the event is not a joint worship service is “that any clergy participants would not be vested and that program components would not include either sermon or sacrament.” Thus the two elements that produce a joint worship service are the sermon and the sacrament. Reading the Scripture, prayer, singing of hymns, even a religious address would not make it a joint worship service. When scriptural principles of fellowship are not uniformly applied, one finds it necessary to make such artificial distinctions.

Also in the area of altar fellowship the practice within the LC-MS is not uniform. The official position of Missouri is “that pastors and congregations of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, except in situations of emergency and in special cases of pastoral care, commune individuals of only those synods which are now in fellowship with us.” This position of practicing “close communion” has been repeatedly reaffirmed at synod conventions in response to overtures from congregations. This writer, who served as an observer for the WELS at the 1983 Missouri convention, was present when the resolution to “encourage and request the congregations of the LC-MS and their pastors, in particular, to abide by the practice of ‘close’ communion” was passed. Several pastors, among them a district president, publicly asserted that they would not and could not practice “close” communion. No one reproved the speakers for their disavowal of the scriptural communion practice. Several years ago a Missouri Synod pastor who in his effort to practice “close” communion in his congregation received no support from his fellow pastors or district president requested a colloquy and is now a member of the WELS. I have not seen any statistics which state how widespread the practice of “open” communion is, but that it is tolerated is beyond question.

In summary, the difference between Missouri and Wisconsin in the doctrine and practice of church fellowship has become more pronounced and more firmly established over the years. Practices which in 1961 still raised questions also within the LC-MS are now considered normal and acceptable. Divergent fellowship practices do not seem to be a reason for disciplinary action in Missouri. The doctrine of fellowship thus remains a major issue between the two synods.

C. Related issues in 1961 and today

We shall mention only briefly certain related issues that had arisen and created problems in the relationship between the two synods in the years prior to 1961. We call them related because fellowship sometimes was a part of the issue. This, however, does not rule out other doctrinal and practical concerns that were involved.

Especially during World War II when many members were called into the service of our country, the question confronted both synods whether to send its pastors into the military as government chaplains. The two synods gave opposite answers, Missouri entering the governmental chaplaincy program, Wisconsin desisting and instead calling civilian camp pastors or chaplains, funded entirely by the synod and completely under its call and direction. Time does not permit examining the issues that led to the divergent practice (the call, unionism, church-state relations). Suffice it to say that this remains an issue today, although the situation is not as critical as it was during World War II when thousands of members were enlisted into the armed services.

Another issue before the two synods in the decades prior to 1961 was that of the Boy Scouts of America. In the early forties the LC-MS came to the conclusion that a Boy Scout troop under control of the congregation was acceptable. The WELS did not see this as removing what was essentially wrong with the Scouting movement, especially the religious element of self-righteousness, since the Scout Oath and Law were mandatory. The Lutheran Pioneers became a program within the WELS which offered the positive, acceptable features of Scouting but eliminated what was objectionable since it was totally under the control of the church and set up according to scriptural guidelines. The Scouting issue too has never been resolved between the two synods.

II. Emerging issues in 1961

A. The doctrine of Scripture

Although the break between the two synods occurred in 1961 because of an unscriptural doctrine of fellowship on the part of Missouri, by that time there were indications that the doctrine of the inspiration of Holy Scripture also needed serious discussion. In that same year at a meeting of the Synodical Conference the WELS Commission on Doctrinal Matters reported that an article in the *Lutheran Witness*, an LC-MS official periodical, raised doubt whether Missouri and Wisconsin were in agreement on the doctrine of Scripture. A statement in the article spoke of the Scriptures being “inerrant, infallible, and wholly reliable” only in a restricted sense. Representatives of the Concordia Seminary faculty of St. Louis, present at the convention, gave the assurance that the statement was not intended to limit scriptural inerrancy but that they were in full agreement with the WELS in this doctrine.

Subsequent history shows that the fears expressed by the WELS commission members were well founded. During the decade of the '60s professors at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, with increasing persistence and openness espoused what we generally refer to as the historical-critical method of interpreting Scripture. This method views Scripture basically as a human document, written by human beings in human language. One is not simply to assume that Scripture is inerrant in everything. Scripture must be examined with the same critical approach that we use with other human documents. For example, the creation account in Genesis is not to be assumed to be a factual account of what God did, but must be understood in a manner that harmonizes with what man has concluded on the basis of his own study and reason (evolution). According to this method, just because the Bible says that Jesus performed miracles does not prove that they happened. They may just be stories that add the miraculous to what were very normal events, if indeed they happened at all. Even the virgin birth of Christ and his bodily resurrection must come under critical scrutiny. Carried out to its ultimate conclusion, this method raises questions about the truthfulness of any part of Scripture. It places man's reason above Scripture as judge rather than submitting reason to the absolute truth of Scripture. For us to admit the possibility of error in any part of Scripture makes all of Scripture uncertain. The very basis for Christian faith is undermined by this method of Scripture interpretation since it no longer recognizes Scripture as the inerrant Word of God.

The story of Missouri's battle over the doctrine of Scripture at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, was told in 1977 in a monograph entitled *Anatomy of an Explosion*. It was written by Prof. Kurt Marquart of Concordia Theological Seminary, Ft. Wayne. The author points out that already in the '50s there were "public symptoms" of the "historical-critical contagion," a fact, as we noted above, which the WELS commission had recognized from the *Lutheran Witness* article. He shows how during the '60s it gained considerable momentum. It ran concurrent with and in some respects was related to the LC-MS efforts toward closer ties with the American Lutheran Church and the growing desire on the part of many in Missouri to enter the ecumenical stream. The broader view of fellowship we discussed earlier was part of the picture. Then, too, laxer views of Scripture became a factor since they were held quite widely among the Lutheran bodies who were not in confessional agreement with the Synodical Conference. Increasingly LC-MS theological professors carried on graduate study at universities, especially in Europe, where the inerrancy of Scripture was denied and the historical-critical method of interpretation was developed and taught as the only correct one.

Finally, the year 1969 saw Dr. John Tietjen, a leader among those who were moving toward this "new" doctrine of Scripture, become president of Concordia Seminary. Conservatives in Missouri were concerned. Thus in the same year the synod convention elected Dr. J. A. O. Preus as a conservative president of the synod. On the other hand, the same convention voted to enter into fellowship with the American Lutheran Church, a body in which liberal views of Scripture were permitted and gaining prominence. The division within Missouri thus showed itself in two synodical actions that were inconsistent.

With a liberal heading the seminary and a conservative as president of the synod, the "explosion" described by Prof. Marquart occurred. The year was 1974. As a result of an investigation into the doctrinal views of the St. Louis faculty, Dr. Tietjen was suspended as seminary president and professor and then led an "exodus" of ninety percent of the professors and eighty-five percent of the students from Concordia Seminary to form what became known as Seminex (seminary-in-exile). Subsequently some of the pastors and congregations that supported the position of the "exiles" formed the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches, which has now merged into the newly formed Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

In a sense this "exodus" purged the seminary of those who held liberal views of Holy Scripture and ended the reign of the historical-critical method of Bible interpretation at St. Louis. The five remaining professors, among them Dr. Bohlmann, who soon was called as the new seminary president and later was elected synod president, became the nucleus for rebuilding the faculty and seminary on the basis of the LC-MS traditional doctrine of Scripture with its emphasis on verbal inspiration and inerrancy. The general view within Missouri and of most observers on the outside is that the battle against the historical-critical method of Scripture interpretation has been won. It was this issue also that contributed to Missouri's termination of fellowship with the American Lutheran Church in 1981.

The question, however, remains: Has the LC-MS been purged of the historical-critical method and all liberal views regarding the doctrine of Scripture? What about the pastors who were trained during the '60s and early '70s, who hold to the views they learned in those years but are satisfied to remain in Missouri? That there are such is beyond question. That historical-critical Bible interpretation is practiced at Valparaiso University is evident. That this is being tolerated one cannot but conclude. Conservatives in the LC-MS seem to be disenchanted with the lack of discipline on the part of the man who was among the five who stood firm in 1974. While the WELS appreciates the "return" of the LC-MS to a sound position on Scripture, questions remain that need to be answered. Not only must it be clear what the official position of the synod is on this doctrine, but also that the synod considers it necessary to discipline pastors and professors who do not share the synod's official position. Unless the latter happens, the synod's position in effect becomes a pluralistic one, one that permits varying doctrines to be held and continue even though the official position may be stated in an acceptable manner.

B. Church and ministry

We now take up the subject which you asked might receive special emphasis. It may be somewhat misleading to consider the doctrine of church and ministry as an emerging issue in 1961. It had been an issue

for forty and more years prior to that. For some time there was a so-called Missouri and a so-called Wisconsin position. Nevertheless, the division was not so clearly along synodical lines as those terms would indicate. There were people in the Missouri Synod who held the Wisconsin position, and there were Wisconsin people who agreed with Missouri's view. In fact, there was a professor at Missouri's Springfield seminary who taught the Wisconsin position.

Efforts were made to come to agreement, and it was not always clear to what extent there were actual doctrinal differences. In some respects, during the '50s and '60s the positions taken in the doctrine of church and ministry followed synodical lines more clearly, especially as far as the Wisconsin Synod is concerned. We can therefore say that this issue has emerged as one which perhaps in both synods is seen as an issue that would need considerable discussion in any efforts toward reaching doctrinal agreement.

We shall first of all briefly sketch the history and take note of the growth in understanding of the doctrine of church and ministry within the two synods. An examination of this development will help toward understanding the issues.

The German Saxon immigrants who became the founders of the Missouri Synod settled in Perry County, Missouri, in 1839. Very soon it was evident that Pastor Martin Stephan, whom they had trustingly followed out of their homeland, was guilty of gross immorality and had to be dismissed. This was a traumatic experience for this young congregation. Consciences were deeply troubled. Should they have left home? Could the other pastors among them carry on a valid ministry since they had left their congregations in Germany? Were they still the church of God? Were they still a Christian congregation? Should they return to Germany to secure a new, properly ordained pastor? There was growing despair as the result of deep feelings of guilt. The questions they asked pertained to the doctrine of church and ministry.

C. F. W. Walther, one of the young pastors who had left his congregation in Germany and emigrated with the Saxons, through his careful study of Scripture and of Luther's writings and the Confessions came to a correct understanding of the church. The church in essence is the gathering or congregation of all believers. As such it is invisible, but wherever a group of Christians is gathered about the Word and the sacraments the church is present. Such a visible group of Christians, all of whom are priests of God (universal priesthood), can properly call a pastor to serve them. A direct organizational link with the church in Germany with ordination by pastors in Germany was not required. The people were won to this understanding and were comforted. Through bitter experience they had been led to a correct understanding of the church and its ministry. Yes, also Christians wherever they are gathered together in a local congregation are the church, and the man they call to serve them is truly in the preaching office which Christ instituted. This was not dependent on some larger church organization. Jesus had said, "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them" (Mt 18:20).

Already in the 1840s Walther's scriptural understanding of the ministry was put to a test. A Pastor Grabau had also led a group of Germans to America and was the founder of the Buffalo Synod. Grabau's position on the ministry was hierarchical and papistic. He downgraded the universal priesthood and gave the pastor a position of authority and rule over the congregation by virtue of his being an ordained pastor. Walther had to reject the Grabau position. The pastor is called by the universal priests to serve them. He is not ordained by a higher church authority to rule over them. Eventually many of the pastors and congregations agreed with Walther, left Buffalo and joined Missouri.

Beginning in the late 1870s and extending into the 1900s there were intermittent discussions at conferences about the parochial school teacher's call. Is his call divine like the pastor's? Some considered only the pastor's call to be divine. They held that God entrusts to him all teaching and preaching in the congregation. Others viewed the teacher's position as one for which he was "hired" like a "Christian cobbler or tailor," helping parents in what is their God-given duty. Since the teacher, however, also was expected to teach the Word of God, there were also those who considered his position as an auxiliary office, derived from the pastor's position. The teacher served under the pastor, "helping" the pastor in this area of responsibility. Only in that sense did the teacher have a "divine call."

Then there were also those who pointed out that the teacher, too, was called by the congregation to teach the Word of God “publicly,” that is, in behalf of or in the name of the church. Thus he too was in the public ministry and had a divine call. While these matters were discussed off and on for several decades, the discussions did not lead to a final unanimous conclusion.

In the early 1900s a disciplinary case in a Missouri Synod congregation in Cincinnati, Ohio, became the occasion for further discussion and clarification, especially of the doctrine of the church. Time does not permit going into details in the Cincinnati Case, as it was called, nor is that necessary. The questions it raised pertained to the role of the synod in matters of discipline. Is the synod able to carry out discipline according to Matthew 18? Or is that the prerogative only of the local congregation? The ultimate question was: Is the synod church in the same sense as the local congregation is church? Or is the synod only a human institution while the local congregation is a divine institution?

The Wauwatosa seminary faculty presented its views during 1912 and 1913 by means of articles in the *Quartalschrift (Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly)*. These called forth a response from members of the St. Louis Concordia Seminary faculty. Although several meetings were held between professors of the two seminaries, there was no agreement. The Wauwatosa faculty held to what thus became known as the Wisconsin Synod position, the St. Louis men to what is called the Missouri position. Even then, not all pastors or professors in either synod were in agreement with the position of their seminary. Both groups, however, contended that they were in agreement with Walther and Luther, as they had presented these doctrines from Scripture. St. Louis held that Walther considered only the local congregation and the pastoral office in the congregation to be divinely instituted. Wisconsin pointed out that Walther’s concern was to assure the Christians in Perry County that they as a Christian congregation were indeed church and could establish a valid public ministry in calling a pastor. Walther did not really address himself to the particular questions as they were now being asked about the synod since it was not an issue at his time. For that reason also terms like pastor and preacher and church and congregation were not always used as carefully and precisely as later.

In the early ’30s attempts to arrive at agreement culminated in the adoption of the 1932 Thiensville Theses. They were the product of the two faculties and the synod presidents. The theses are more of an agreement on how the local congregation and the synod will function in cases of discipline than a settlement of the basic issues.

By 1946 a number of issues had arisen between the two synods that had to do with the doctrine of church and ministry. The Synodical Conference at its convention noted that “the Army and Navy Chaplaincy and other matters relating to the doctrine of the call, the ministry, and the Church have been a source of disagreement between the constituent synods of the Synodical Conference for a number of years, threatening true unity among us.” An Interim Committee was chosen to study the matter and report at the next convention. In 1948 the majority report of the committee basically agreed on the Missouri position. A minority report by a Wisconsin Synod pastor referred to “two marked differences in the matter of Church and Ministry.” One was whether “the concept of a divinely instituted church local” was restricted to the local congregation or also applied to larger groupings like synods. The other difference had to do with the “idea of a divinely instituted ministry,” whether it was limited to the “pastorate of a local congregation” or covered also “the various special offices with which the ascended Lord has endowed His Church.” The minority report did not see these as differences in doctrine as such, but in application. This called for further study. But calling the differences a matter of application—did this make them less serious and less threatening to the unity? Not necessarily. A difference in application generally arises because of a difference in doctrine and is evidence of it.

Four further years of study by the Interim Committee resulted in improved understanding. The recommendation that the Synodical Conference adopt the Thiensville Theses of 1932 as “correctly expressing the Scriptural principles of this doctrine” was accepted. At the same time it was recognized that there still was no complete agreement in applying these basic concepts of the doctrine of church and ministry to the practical life of the church. These were to be studied jointly by the faculties of the seminaries.

The final doctrinal discussions within the Synodical Conference were carried on by the Joint Doctrinal Committees of the four constituent synods. For these discussions the WELS Commission on Doctrinal Matters

prepared “Theses on the Church and the Ministry,” setting forth the WELS position. The doctrine of church fellowship, however, received urgent primary attention and led to the impasse and suspension of fellowship before attempts at agreement on the doctrine of church and ministry could be made.

By including antitheses, which were lacking in the Thiensville Theses of 1932, the statement of the WELS defines the differences clearly. In regard to the church, the antithesis reads: “We hold it to be untenable to say that the local congregation is specifically instituted by God in contrast to other groupings of believers in Jesus’ name; that the public ministry of the keys has been given exclusively to the local congregations.” A similar antithesis says regarding the ministry: “We hold it to be untenable to say that the pastorate of the local congregation (*Pfarramt*) as a specific form of the public ministry is specifically instituted by the Lord in contrast to other forms of the public ministry.”

If in the early years the difference between the Wisconsin and Missouri positions was not strictly according to synodical lines, the ready use which the Wisconsin theses enjoyed on the part of the WELS shows that in the late ’50s they expressed the united confession of the synod on church and ministry. The consistent teaching of its seminary faculty had achieved unity within the WELS even while disunity still was present in the Synodical Conference.

The same cannot be said for Missouri. In a general way the official position of the LC-MS followed the so-called Missouri view of church and ministry. Yet in 1964 the LC-MS Board of Parish Education authorized Concordia Publishing House to publish a book entitled, *The Ministry of the Lutheran Teacher*, by Arnold C. Mueller, for many years the LC-MS editor of its Sunday school materials. He held that there is one divinely instituted ministry which is not simply equivalent to the pastorate but that the pastorate is but one of the forms or branches of the general or public ministry. Whoever is called by the congregation to teach children thus also has a divine call, not simply as an assistant to the pastor, but into the public ministry. This includes not only male teachers, but all who are called to teach: “Sunday school teachers, Bible class teachers, and women teachers in our schools, all have a divine call.” This volume clearly sets forth the doctrine of the ministry in agreement with the position of the WELS.

In his *Anatomy of an Explosion* referred to earlier, Prof. Marquart shows how the “Missouri” position on the church was used by the liberals in the LC-MS to move the synod into the ecumenical religious world. While we may not agree with him in calling it a “truism” “that *congregations* (regular assemblies of Christians around the means of grace administered by a divinely called public ministry) exist by divine command, whereas *synods* and other larger organizations of congregations exist by human right and arrangement,” he correctly rejects the conclusion that “only congregations are really churches, but synods are not—as if congregations lose their churchly character when they act together as churches in synods!” He contends for the position that Walther and Pieper considered the synod “as church in the theological sense.” He shows that the original LC-MS constitution assigned responsibilities to the synod “that *only a church* can do.” He points out that “the whole argumentation of Walther [in 1848] and Pieper [in 1896] for Missouri’s particular style of church government presupposes that it is *the church* which is here being governed, and that this must *therefore* be done with God’s Word alone, and not with human rules and regulations!”

The point that Marquart makes is that the view that larger organizations of churches and congregations are not really church led the liberals to conclude that “we can belong to a greater assembly of churches without becoming co-responsible for what the other member-churches do.” Marquart shows that failure to recognize the synod as church can lead to unionistic practices on the synodical level. Lest there be misunderstanding, Marquart makes the careful distinction between the synod in its essential nature and its outward organization: “That the purely external, organizational trappings of synods are only of human origin and authority is perfectly true and needs to be stressed.” We add that the same, of course, is true of the purely external, organizational trappings of congregations, a point not specifically mentioned by Marquart.

By and large we can agree with the views expressed by Marquart. But one wonders whether he represents the thinking of the LC-MS or only a view that is being tolerated within it. An article in the *Concordia Theological Quarterly* (April-July 1985), issued by the faculty of the Ft. Wayne Concordia seminary, is entitled, “An Assessment of LC-MS Polity and Practice on the Basis of the Treatise.” The author writes:

It seems significant that the original name chosen by the founders of the Synod did not contain the word “church”: “Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Missouri, Ohio and other States.” The Synod was not the church. The Synod was a walking together of churches who found themselves united by a common confession. The churchly functions by which the church is identified (i.e., the administration of the means of grace) are not a proper function of a Synod. The Synod is not identified as a church because it does not, as Synod, possess the keys immediately as do the local churches. The Synod does not call men to administer the means of grace. The local churches or congregations do this.

The author objects to the term “pastor of pastors” being applied to the district presidents. He writes: “The pastoral office is identified with the preaching of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments. The duties prescribed for the district president in the constitution are a ministry of the law, not of the Gospel. Perception of the office of the district president as a pastoral office confuses law and gospel in the church and destroys both the purpose of the office of district president and the pastoral office in the congregations.”

One wonders how district presidents are to carry out their prescribed function “to exercise supervision over the doctrine, life, and administration of the office of the pastors and teachers of their district” without using also the gospel. Is this a purely legal responsibility? The author goes on to explain: “This does not imply that the district president ought not to fulfil his duties in a kind and gentle manner, or that he should see himself as only an ecclesiastical law-enforcer. However, it must be remembered that there is no such thing as an ‘evangelical law’ or ‘by-law’ and that the administration of laws and by-laws is never an evangelical (strictly speaking) ministry.” What confusion of law and gospel! This demonstrates the kind of conclusions that are drawn when the district president is not recognized as being in the public ministry instituted by the Lord.

What is the official position of Missouri on church and ministry at the present time? There does not seem to be a clear answer. In 1981 the Commission on Theology and Church Relations of the LC-MS issued a report on “The Ministry—Offices, Procedures, and Nomenclature.” This document distinguishes between the Office of the Public Ministry, which is divinely established and identified with the pastoral office, and Auxiliary Offices which are established and an example of which is the teaching ministry. At the same time the report states that the office of the public ministry, which is divinely mandated, “may exist in various forms, that is, the ‘flocks’ to which a man ministers may have various forms, and the office may be designated by a number of names, but it remains an office mandated by God for the good of the church.” This seems to be an effort to include under the pastorate positions beyond those of the parish pastor. One wonders why the teaching ministry should not be considered one such form of the office of the public ministry since the teacher has a designated flock to whom he has been called to minister.

While the report shows the thinking that is going on in the LC-MS at the present time, it does not represent its final word on the matter. The report was considered tentative and subject to revision. From it one may conclude that the official position of the LC-MS basically seems to be the so-called Missouri position but that it wants to make some room for points that are part of the WELS position, or should we say, the position of some within the LC-MS which is similar to that of the WELS.

The question may be asked: Is the difference between Wisconsin and Missouri one of application or doctrine? We noted earlier that the minority report of the Synodical Conference Interim Committee by a Wisconsin Synod pastor said that the difference was one of application. This, of course, is true. The concept of church is applied only to the congregation by the one group and to other forms of gatherings like the synod by the other. One applies the term *public ministry* only to the pastoral office and designates others as auxiliary offices; the other calls them all various forms of the public ministry.

Upon closer examination, however, more is involved than a difference in application or in the use of words. The significant factor is that the LC-MS position claims that the specific *congregational* grouping has a special divine mandate and that the *pastoral office* has a special divine institution in contrast to all other forms of the church or ministry. But there is no word of institution in the New Testament for such specific forms. That Christians are to assemble for worship, to administer the Word and sacraments, that in the interest of good order

individuals should be designated for the public ministry is indeed the Lord's will and command. But there is no mandate for specific forms, binding the New Testament church to forms such as the local congregation or the parish pastorate.

In an article on "The Scriptural Truths of the Church and Its Ministry" Prof. Carl Lawrenz highlights the point at issue as follows: "Unlike the Old Testament with its Mosaic law code, its special discipline of ceremonial laws for God's Old Testament people, the New Testament has no binding legal regulations and prescriptions from God for his New Testament church beyond that which is embedded in the moral law, God's immutable holy will for all people for this earthly life (Ro 13:9, 10; Mt 22:37-39)." In the Old Testament God did determine forms through his ceremonial law. This law was to be observed very strictly by the Israelites. But the ceremonial law has been abolished. God has given his New Testament church liberty to establish forms according to need, following only the law of love and the principle of good order so that everything may be done in the interest of the gospel for the welfare of the church. The exact forms that the church will use are not imposed on God's New Testament people as ceremonial law, but in Christian liberty the church functions under God's broad gospel directives. This points to the doctrinal issue involved. The Missouri position fails to recognize the full liberty that the church has under God. It makes formal distinctions which Scripture does not make. It sets up "musts" where God gives freedom. It recognizes what in effect must be considered ceremonial laws for the New Testament church.

A specific fear expressed by those who hold to the Missouri position is that to call the synod church is to set up the synod as a superchurch which will rule over and dictate to the local congregation. Strange as it may seem, historically in the LC-MS the synod sometimes functioned more like a superchurch than was true in the WELS. There were those who said: In the Missouri Synod they live the Wisconsin doctrine and in the Wisconsin Synod the Missouri position. What was noticed is that in the Wisconsin Synod the congregations and its pastors showed greater independence over against the synod than was true in Missouri. This, however, was not necessarily a matter of applying a particular doctrinal position. In Missouri a strong sense of synodical loyalty led congregations to look to the larger body for direction in a way that was not true in Wisconsin, where synodical loyalty was less pronounced. As a result, congregations did not always appreciate the help and guidance of their fellow Christians in the synod and functioned independently when brotherly cooperation was called for.

There are, it should be noted, dangers in failing to recognize that also larger groupings like the synod are indeed church. Prof. Marquart referred to one. Liberals in the LC-MS, who considered such larger groupings as purely human arrangements, did not see them bound by the same biblical principles (eg., of fellowship) that applied to local congregations, which are of divine institution.

The article from the *Concordia Theological Quarterly* shows another. If the synod is not church, the district president's position according to the author becomes a purely legal one, functioning under the rules and regulations set up in a constitution with its laws and bylaws. This can easily develop into synodical leaders functioning on the basis of power and authority given them by the constitution. In fact, in the cited article the author is concerned that the changes that were being made in the LC-MS constitution were granting the synod president far too many powers. The point is that recognizing the synod to be church does not lead to a superchurch and not considering the synod church does not prevent setting up a superpower over congregations. And it is not such practical considerations that must determine our doctrine.

According to Scripture, we believe that the gathering of Christians into congregations or synods or whatever groupings may serve the proclamation of the gospel all are equally the creation of the Holy Spirit. The external trappings or form of any group are, of course, of human design. That congregations will be the primary group in which Christians assemble for Word and sacrament and to do the work of the church is only natural. On the other hand, when for certain church work larger groups are formed, this does not set up superchurches. The various groups will all function in a relationship that is controlled, not by divinely mandated ceremonial laws, but by the law of love and the principle of good order called for in the New Testament (1 Cor 16:14; 14:40). The same Christians who assemble in local congregations for worship and the Lord's work will also recognize themselves gathered with many more Christians in the fellowship of the synod to do the work of the

church which cannot well be done by the smaller congregational groups. As long as we recognize both as the church gathered under God in the interest of the gospel, practical matters of organization and form will be adjusted in Christian liberty and love so that the church may do its work in an orderly manner. When this is kept in mind, the synod will not become a superchurch and the congregations will not see their connection to the synod and its work as a merely human arrangement. The proper scriptural doctrine of the church and its ministry has much to do with the practical life of the church. Walther recognized that in the 1840s. It is still true today. We in the WELS must not only seek to preserve what Scripture teaches about this doctrine but also apply it carefully in our congregational and synodical life.

III. New issues since 1961

A. The role of women in the church

Throughout its history the synods of the Synodical Conference were united in the recognition that specific roles were assigned by God to man and woman at the time of creation. A leadership or headship role was assigned to man and a helping and submitting role to woman. There was agreement that passages like 1 Corinthians 14:34 (“Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says”) and 1 Timothy 2:11, 12 (“A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent”) required that only men should serve as pastors and that voting rights in the congregations should be restricted to the male members.

Already in the LC-MS 1938 convention the restriction of voting rights to male members began to be questioned in Missouri. The convention resolved that the “hitherto accepted position and practice of Synod be restudied in the light of Scripture.” Subsequent conventions in 1953, 1956 and 1959 again concerned themselves with the same question. While reaffirming the traditional position of the synod, restudy of the question continued to be called for in memorials submitted to the conventions. Since some congregations had begun to grant voting rights to women, the 1959 convention resolved to urge such congregations “to recognize the validity of Synod’s historic position and to reconsider their practice with the view to bring it into harmony with this position.”

In the 1960s as the liberals were gaining greater control of the LC-MS, the drive for woman suffrage gained momentum. By 1969 the synod’s Commission on Theology and Church Relations brought a report before the convention stating: “We find nothing in Scripture which prohibits women from exercising the franchise in voters’ assemblies.” The pertinent passages were applied only to prohibiting women from holding the pastoral office. They might, however, hold offices on boards and committees of the synod. This report of the CTCR was adopted, and the synod offered to help congregations that might “have difficulty translating the provisions of the resolution into constitutional language.”

Not everyone in Missouri was convinced that this action was scriptural. Subsequent conventions have received repeated memorials calling for reconsideration and return to the former scriptural position. In 1977 the *Concordia Theological Quarterly*, published by the Ft. Wayne seminary faculty, published theses showing the practice of woman suffrage to be unscriptural. By then, however, the vast majority of congregations had adopted woman suffrage, and efforts to reconsider the matter have been unsuccessful. For the LC-MS the question is settled. Those who still consider the practice unscriptural are tolerated as long as they themselves are satisfied to remain within Missouri, which overwhelmingly disagrees with them.

In 1985 the WELS published “Man and Woman in God’s World,” a pamphlet which sets forth the position of our synod. Applications are based on “the headship principle which God established at the time of creation and which therefore applies to all times.” Regarding woman suffrage, the presentation states:

In a desire to affirm the headship of men, our congregations withhold voting privileges from women in their governing assemblies. The question of such suffrage does not center on the relative importance of the matter being voted on, whether it’s theological or non-

theological...The Christian woman knows that if she were to demand the right to vote and to govern the congregation, she would be exercising authority over the man who is to be her head.

As is evident, the WELS position upholds the one that was once shared by all synods of the Synodical Conference. The action of the LC-MS in 1969 has made woman suffrage an issue between the two synods, a new issue since 1961.

Although affirming woman suffrage in 1969, the same convention of the LC-MS, however, rejected the ordination of women for the pastoral office. This became an issue between Missouri and the ALC (with whom Missouri had declared fellowship at the 1969 convention) when the ALC in 1970 voted to allow women pastors. This contributed to the break in fellowship again a decade later. Thus, the LC-MS has held the line on this issue. How long that will be possible remains to be seen. It rests on a somewhat artificial distinction between permitting women to speak and participate in every way in the congregation assembled for a voters' meeting but not permitting women to speak as pastors when assembled for worship. The applicable passages are looked upon as constituting a special rule or law against speaking in a worship service (a ceremonial law) rather than as being concerned with maintaining in all situations the male-female roles established at the time of creation. A recent survey indicates that about 1000 LC-MS pastors and about 28 percent of the members do not consider the ordination of women as pastors contrary to Scripture.

B. Justification

For a time it appeared as though the doctrine of justification might become an issue. Different views on justification seemed to be held, especially by some members of the Ft. Wayne seminary faculty. The specific issue had to do with what has commonly been referred to as "objective justification." This term affirms the truth St. Paul teaches in 2 Corinthians 5 that God in Christ reconciled the whole world to himself, so that the whole world is declared righteous in Christ. This righteousness, complete in Christ as an objective reality, is received by faith (subjective justification).

Upon request of the 1981 LC-MS convention, the Commission on Theology and Church Relations in 1983 published "Theses on Justification." The WELS Commission on Inter-Church Relations made a study of these theses and was happy to report full agreement with them. The theses carefully define the scriptural doctrine and in antitheses also reject whatever false opinions had in the past and present been set forth.

This subject is mentioned here not as an issue that has in fact become one between the two synods since 1961. We are grateful that on this basic, central doctrine Missouri held unambiguously to the truth of Scripture. In this presentation, which to a great extent is critical and points to differences, we are pleased to be able to note that what could have become an issue, and a serious one, did not in fact result as such.

IV. Summary—Where are we now?

The WELS and LC-MS—where are we today? The basic issue that caused the suspension of fellowship in 1961 remains. If anything, it has become more pronounced. Likewise, related issues such as the government chaplaincy and the Boy Scout issue remain. While the LC-MS did deal with aberration in the doctrine of Scripture which arose at St. Louis, decisive doctrinal discipline does not seem to have followed to purge the destructive leaven of the historical-critical approach to Scripture from all areas of the synod. As to the doctrine of church and ministry, this has become more of an issue than it was in 1961.

Since 1961 the new position of the LC-MS on woman suffrage stands as a new issue between the synods. Because it arose after the suspension of 1961, it has never become a subject of discussion.

Of further concern is the question: Does the LC-MS practice doctrinal discipline when there are those who disagree with a correct official position? Does the synod allow for differing positions in some matters of doctrine and practice in its midst? If a synod officially holds the correct position but tolerates false views by pastors and professors, such a body cannot be considered orthodox. This appears to be the situation in Missouri. A degree of doctrinal pluralism is evident.

A paper such as this could easily make us of the WELS feel self-satisfied about our own synod. Truly, we are thankful that the Lord has preserved his truth among us. It is purely God's grace that has accomplished this. That there can be no room for complacency if only the official position is orthodox must be remembered. That we must expect every pastor, professor and teacher to proclaim the same truth must be the concern of all. That only God can accomplish this through his Word of truth dare never be forgotten. "Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain" (1 Corinthians 15:58).