

TWO DECADES OF QUIET LABOR: THE DENNINGER YEARS

by Thomas Schulz

Senior Church History

Professor Edward Fredrich

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Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Library
11831 N. Seminary Drive. 65W
Mequon, Wisconsin

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During the early years of our Synod's history, many pastors passed through the ranks of the Synod. Because of the rather unsettled and then changing nature of Wisconsin's early confessional stand, a good number of these men were only briefly with us. Some had to be ordered out because they were far-removed theologically from the general constituency of the Synod. Others left voluntarily when they realized that they could not agree or would not fit in with the young group's theology. Finally there are those who came and served well for a time, but then left the Synod for no definite reason. This is the case with Pastor A. Denninger. Denninger was born, raised and educated in Germany. He received his theological education at Berlin and so became connected with that mission society. Because of the lack of available pulpits, he never did receive a permanent call while in Germany. To fill his time until a place opened for him, Denninger worked as a colporteur for the inner mission of the Berlin society. In short, he was a Bible-salesman, probably of the traveling variety, doing home mission work. It must have been quite frustrating for Denninger since he was still doing colporteur work well into his 40's.

In 1862, Pastor Muehlaeuser made his jubilee trip to Germany. Besides the obvious purpose of soliciting funds, Muehlaeuser also worked at encouraging men to come over to America to serve churches in Wisconsin. When the appeal was brought to Berlin, it was the chance of a lifetime for Denninger. He, along with his family, loaded up their belongings and headed for the States. His oldest son was eager to enter the new Seminary and join his father in the ministry. The Denninger clan arrived

during September of 1862.

The Synod officials lost no time in finding parishes for Denninger. He was assigned to the parish consisting of four congregations. They were Addison, Ashford, Barton and Wayne in Washington County. These are in the northern part of the county along present state highway 33. He was installed in the middle of October after being examined by Streissguth and Dammann in Milwaukee and ordained.

Almost immediately, the new recruit was faced with a difficult problem in two of his congregations. At St. James church in Wayne, and at Bethel church in Ashford, he was faced with an opposition pastor who was reformed. The problem at St. James was solved quickly. When the congregation realized that Denninger had been assigned to them by the Synod, they discharged the "notorious butcher" (as the proceedings call the reformed pastor) and gladly accepted Denninger.

However, Bethel congregation in Ashford was not quite as quick to give up their reformed pastor. They were ready to stick with the interpretations of their reformed pastor. When their council informed the Synod that they intended to keep their pastor and were determined to hold the same position as him, the 1863 convention recommended that Bethel congregation be ousted from the Synod.

When Bethel congregation found out what was about to happen, they consulted with Denninger. They asked him to inform the Synod that they had changed their minds and had dismissed the reformed pastor and wanted back into the Synod fold. Denninger announced that the congregation wanted the rest of the Synod members to know their intention to amend their serious state of affairs and become acceptable to the Synod membership. They wanted to right things and not be kicked out. The Synod took back its ouster order and gave the

congregation into Denninger's hands. Denninger was advised to first instruct the congregation to stand on the Lutheran confessions.

Denninger's problems at Ashford did not end there. In 1865, complaints were made to the Synod about the communion practice at Ashford. The service still had reformed overtones and was in direct conflict with the rest of Synod practice. Denninger was told to carefully instruct the people in the correct Lutheran communion practice so that they would fall into line and become a truly Lutheran congregation.

For the next nineteen years, Denninger served faithfully both as a pastor and as a member of the Synod. In 1868 he moved from Addison to Town Herman in Washington County to assume the pastorate of four small rural congregations. After six years at Town Hermann, he was called to Farmington in Jefferson County. This parish was between Johnson Creek and Lake Mills. Here he resided until he passes out of the Synod picture in 1884.

During his years as a faithful pastor, he also served on several Synod committees. In keeping with his whole ministry, none of the committees that he was appointed to ever had to deal with a big problem. He was one of those necessary men who took care of the routine business of the Synod. There is every reason to believe that he was recognized as a solid cog in the Synod wheel. For the first 17 Synod conventions, Denninger always served on committees. It was not until 1869 that he had gained enough seniority to chair a committee. When he did, it was the one for vacant congregations.

It is in 1882 at La Crosse, that Denninger shows up absent for the first time. Apparently something had happened so that he and the Farmington congregation were at odds with the Synod. In 1883, he submitted a notice of withdrawal for both himself and his congregation. The Synod was not ready to honor such a hasty withdrawal. They resolved to send a delegation to meet

with Denninger and the Farmington congregation to discuss the matter.

The next year's proceedings give us no further information as to the why of the withdrawal. The delegation accomplished nothing; they could not dissuade either Denninger or the Farmington congregation. Denninger and his congregation simply announced that they wished to dissolve their association with the Synod. The Synod simply accepted that announcement as an accomplished fact, leaving no further explanation.

What happened to Denninger after that is hard to tell. But it is safe to say that for the twenty years that he was a member of our Synod, he served well. He did what he did in a quiet manner. He was able to solve problems that faced him and he was willing to serve with the Synod. He was by no means a spectacular pastor like Bading, Hoenecke or Koehler. But Denninger was a faithful man, quietly working for the edification of God's people and for the glory of the Savior's name.

REFERENCES

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