

A Brief Survey of the Dealings Between
the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Nigeria
and
the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod
Since the Synodical Split

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In 1961 the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod severed fellowship with the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. Two years later it left the Synodical Conference as well. This action had profound effects upon the Lutheran Churches within the United States, and many questions of separation or affiliation are still being dealt with today. But what ever happened to the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Nigeria? This body was established by the Holy Ghost through the joint efforts of the Wisconsin and Missouri in the Synodical Conference. The Wisconsin Synod played an important part in the Nigerian mission, particularly in the early formative years. How did the synodical split affect the Nigerians, and why is it that they and the Wisconsin Synod have never joined hands again? The following is a brief survey of the ELCN dealings since the synodical split.

The Lutheran Mission in Nigeria had always been one of the Synodical Conference's favorite wards. Already when Dr. Nau founded the mission in 1936, he was greatly encouraged by the promise of the field. Under the supervision of Missionary Schweppe and with the help of many other American workers, both from the Missouri and Wisconsin Synods, the church in Nigeria made tremendous spiritual progress. At the twenty-fifth anniversary, the ELCN statistics showed 33,433 baptized members, 13,645 communicant members, 194 churches plus 33 preaching stations, 94 schools, a completely staffed hospital,

a seminary, 18 national pastors, and 18 American missionaries. Early in 1963, ^{the} ELCN elected its own president, A.J.U. Ekong, and established six standing boards to help them toward self-sufficiency.

It was in the same year that the Nigerian Church celebrated one-quarter century of Lutheranism that the Wisconsin Synod, in its August Convention, voted to terminate fellowship with the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod because of doctrinal aberrations in the area of Christian fellowship practices. At that time, however, the synod declared itself ready to continue its support of the joint projects carried on by the Synodical Conference until it could adjust to the new conditions brought about by the suspension of fellowship with the Missouri Synod. Wisconsin's share of support came to about 12%. There were no WELS workers in Nigeria at the time.

During the next two years, Wisconsin was kept busy with doctrinal issues and with its own missions in Central Africa and Japan. While Nigeria was not forgotten, it was at least temporarily tabled. A letter of January 1963, however, placed the Nigerian predicament vividly before the eyes of synod officials. Superintendent R.C. Stade wrote to the Executive Secretary of the Synodical Conference Mission Board, Dr. Karl Kurth, and sent copies of the letter to the heads of all four involved synods. The letter explained the serious dilemma in which the expatriot missionaries in Nigeria found themselves. Where did they stand? Whom did they represent? Which position of church fellowship were they to practice? How were they to

advise the ELCN? The original copy of the letter was signed by all the American staff in Nigeria.

In August of that same year, the rift between Wisconsin and Missouri grew wider. Wisconsin seceded from the Synodical Conference after a petition for the orderly dissolution of the Conference had been denied. This at least partially solved the problem for the American Missionaries, for they no longer represented WELS, but now the native Nigerians faced a predicament. They still confessed the faith which they had been taught by the early missionaries of the Synodical Conference, but now the Wisconsin Synod had pulled out of the Conference, claiming that the dominant Missouri Synod no longer held to that early position while they, the Wisconsin Synod, did. Yet it was Missouri that was supporting the ELCN with close to \$400,000 a year, refusing any help from WELS. In addition to its own problems, the struggling young church was now faced with a controversy a continent away.

Two months after Wisconsin's withdrawal from the Synodical Conference, Pres. O.J. Naumann addressed a letter to the Board of Directors of the ELCN, briefly explaining the history of the break with Missouri, enclosing some documents of the Synodical Proceedings, and declaring, "Since a letter is hardly the best method to present these matters to you, we assure you that we stand ready to present to you in person an elaboration of the matters referred to and evidence thereof, should you desire this."¹ Naumann asked the Nigerians to weigh carefully

Correspondance of:

1. O.J. Naumann to Board of Directors, ELCN, Reformation Day 1963

the issues, and should they choose to stand with the WELS, the Synod was ready to assume financial responsibility for the work in Nigeria.

It appears that the prospect of a WELS visitation was not too warmly received, neither in Africa nor in St. Louis. Missouri officials feared that the purpose of the visit would be to agitate the ELCN and try and wean them away from the LC-MS. An "if you can't support them, don't disturb them" attitude prevailed. One of the Nigerian pastors even received a letter from a concerned Missourian asking him to dissuade the Nigerian leaders from receiving the delegation from Wisconsin for, she stated:

They do not realize that Wisconsin Synod is very small and that because of the action of the two leaders this Synod may become extinct within the next ten to twenty years unless there are some very radical changes in leadership. Regarding financial support from the Wisconsin Synod, there can be no doubt that the support could not be to any great extent because the Synod is very poor. They have a very small mission in Northern Rhodesia and even this is difficult for them to maintain. They have only a total of about eight schools and no more than four or five missionary families there at one time. Please do what you can to persuade the individual leaders involved who are so willing to go along according to the letter received and desire to join with something of which they have no idea what it is all about. 2

In the field, Stade and the expatriot staff feared that the visitation would not help but become a debate over Missouri and Wisconsin doctrinal positions, "a matter that has no relevance to our work in this nation today".³ Pres. Ekong himself preferred that the visit not be made. He had gone to the Theologian's Conference in Cambridge, England to hear Wisconsin's

2. Rev. Edet U. Eshiett to O.J. Naumann, April 3, 1964

3. R.C. Stade to O.J. Naumann, Mar. 21, 1964

side of the dispute, but the WELS was not present. He had the feeling that the Wisconsin Synod was something of a renegade and needed to make its peace with the Synodical Conference before bringing its problems to Nigeria. Nevertheless, after several meetings, the Board of Directors of the ELCN, in January, 1964, resolved to officially invite the Wisconsin Synod to present in person its grievances with the Missouri Synod.

One of the objections of the Synodical Conference Mission Board to the Wisconsin visitation was that dissatisfied groups would weaken the ELCN by breaking away from the mother church and affiliating with Wisconsin. Perhaps they misunderstood Exec. Sec. Heenicke's comment in May 1964 Report to the Nine Districts that the dissidents "would be taken care of". They feared the groups would leave the main body purely for monetary gain. Some even accused the whole Nigerian Church of inviting the WELS in order to try and work out a better deal than they had with Missouri. The dangers of fracturing the ELCN and the temptation of greed were indeed very real. Letters from individuals in Nigeria soon began reaching the desk of Pres. Naumann. Rev. S.E. Etim of Ogoja and Rev. E.U. Eshiett of Ikot Ekpene expressed encouragement regarding the visit because they said all they had heard in connection with the Missouri-Wisconsin split was one-sided condemnation of Wisconsin's actions. Eshiett even requested a special visit to his Ukpom District. A unique request came from David O. Ezimakor, representing the Lutherans in Ibo land around Umuezhalala Nsu. Those churches were dissatisfied with the care they were

receiving from the ELCN, headquartered at Obot Idim, and were ready to resign and open their arms to Wisconsin Synod Missionaries. Pres. Naumann was well aware that the wrong motivation could have prompted these letters, and that even if these individual groups did sincerely desire only the pure Word of God, it would still be a mistake to jeopardize the unity of the Nigerian church. Therefore he consistently explained that the purpose of the visit was not to "take over", but simply to explain Wisconsin's reasons for terminating fellowship with Missouri and then to leave the ELCN to decide the matter for itself as a whole.

In its earliest stages of planning, the visitation committee was to be made up of Pres. Naumann, Rev. Edgar Hoenecke (Executive Secretary of the Board for World Missions), Dr. William Schweppe (former superintendent in Nigeria), and Rev. Theodore Sauer (superintendent of the Lutheran Church of Central Africa). The trip was to take place in April and incorporate a visit to the Far Eastern fields of Hong Kong and Japan. The Nigerian leg of the journey, however, could not be set up in time. In May the Commission on Doctrinal Matters resolved to send only Naumann, Schweppe, and Prof. Carl Lawrenz of the Doctrinal Commission. At the end of June, Schweppe telegraphed Lawrenz from Northern Rhodesia, "Am requesting release from Nigeria assignment. Men here concurring. Letter in mail."⁴ Dr. Schweppe preferred not to be part of the delegation to Nigeria because of his former intimate connection with the ELCN.

4. W.H. Schweppe to C.J. Lawrenz (telegram) June 30, 1964.

Many of its leaders were his personal friends. Therefore he felt his presence would only encourage the false assumption that the Wisconsin Synod was going to Nigeria to "win them over" and increase the likelihood of a schism within the ELCN. It would be better if the delegation were made up totally of impartial men who could present Wisconsin's position on a completely objective and impersonal basis. Prof. OJ J. Seigler replaced Dr. Schweppe. Now all three members of the committee were members of the Commission on Doctrinal Matters.

On August 21, 1964, the Visitation Committee landed in Port Harcourt, Nigeria, after two weeks of doctrinal discussions in Germany. They followed by about a week a visit from Missouri officials. The next day (Sunday), they attended the services and became acquainted with some of the workers on the field. Monday was taken up entirely with meetings. The Committee read the prepared paper "Concerning^{the} Confessional Position and the Confessional Action of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (Guideline for a Communication to the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Nigeria)" and discussed it with the ELCN Board of Directors. The purpose of the visitation was also clearly explained. That evening the three men met with the missionary staff on the Obot Idim compound and again talked about their visit and Wisconsin's reasons for severing fellowship with Missouri. The major meeting took place on Tuesday. A simplified version of the confessional paper was presented to an assembly of pastors and congregational representatives number-

ing about 500. The people seemed to grasp the principles involved, as was indicated by the discussion and comments which followed the reading of the paper. The rest of the week was spent touring the mission field and its various institutions and meeting formally and informally with Pres. Ekong, Vice Pres. Essien, and members of the expatriate staff. The committee left for the States on Saturday, confident that the purpose of their visit had been realized, and encouraged by the positive reaction of the Nigerian Church's leaders, including the American Missionaries.

David Ezimaker and Pastor Essiet approached the committee early in their visit again asking for personal attention, but the Wisconsin men re-emphasized the importance of the ELCN treating this question with unity. Also, for the sake of good order and to encourage faithfulness to the Holy Scriptures as their primary concern, Pres. Naumann turned down the frequent requests that WELS monies be sent directly to the field.

The visitation committee left some materials, such as the booklet "Your Blessed Fellowship in Christ", for further study in Nigeria. Requests for more materials were received after they returned to America, so a large shipment was sent to Nigeria, including Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterlies, Northwestern Lutheran, J.P. Meyer's Ministers of Christ, Convention Proceedings of the WELS from 1935 to 1963, and several tracts on fellowship and unionism. Although many individuals wrote for

5. One week before the visit Dr. Harms had sent a letter to each of the missionaries and perhaps even to the national pastors assuring them that Missouri had not changed but was still the same staunch confessional synod it has always been.

the materials, the whole shipment was sent in care of Pres. Ekong, to avoid any partisanship.

Thus the Lutheran Church of Nigeria had heard the position of the Wisconsin Synod personally presented to them, and they had in their hands all the study material regarding the synodical break that they could desire. The next step was theirs. The next few months were critical for the young church. But no official step was taken. The January 1965, Synod Convention in Nigeria came and went with no change in its position relative to the Missouri Synod. Fifteen months later, the WELS Commission on Doctrinal Matters had still heard nothing of a final outcome in Nigeria. Only gradually, toward the end of 1966, did it become apparent that the Lutheran Church of Nigeria considered itself a body independent of either Synod in America; a body which had been brought up in the truth of God's Word and considered itself to be still possessed of that truth.

Why did the ELCN hesitate to commit itself for or against the Wisconsin Synod? Perhaps the church did not realize the importance of taking a doctrinal stand. Perhaps the Board of Directors was dissuaded by the Missouri Synod missionaries and mission board. Maybe the ELCN just had too many other more tangible problems to cope with first. No doubt, all these factors were involved, but it was most likely the last one which influenced them most. Dissident groups were growing within the church and political and tribal difficulties were becoming more critical in the country as a whole. The situation

was becoming so bad that in November of 1966, Pres. Ekong wrote to Pres. Naumann, "There is much confusion now in our area that one begins to think of Christ's coming to this earth very soon."⁶ A letter to Dr. Schweppe about the same time expressed Pres. Ekong's concern over the future of the ELCN and asked his former co-worker for advice and counsel.

The internal problems were partly financial. The ELCN was doing its best to become completely indigenous, but it was all but impossible for it to assume the costs of the hospital, the seminary, the teachers' schools, and the many primary and secondary schools which the mission had established, not to mention the salaries of the workers. There was a shortage of native pastors and the seminary had dropped its entrance requirements to an elementary level education. The State helped support some of the church's endeavors, particularly its schools, and that was leading to problems. Many new missions had moved into southern Nigeria and some congregations were being led away from Lutheranism. Others were adopting unionistic practices. Liberal tendencies in some of the Missouri Synod missionaries were even beginning to become apparent, though by early 1967 the work of the expatriot pastors in Nigeria was limited almost exclusively to the new field in Ogoja Province.

But the most serious problem to face the Lutheran Church of Nigeria was only beginning in 1966. Tribal rivalry, the nemesis of African nations, began to erupt in Nigeria at this time. Before long it was an all-out civil war. The oil-rich

6. Pres. Ekong to Pres. Naumann. Nov. 10, 1966

Ibos of the southeast wanted to secede from the rest of Nigeria, particularly the Moslem north. While most of the members of the ELCN were Ibibios, they found themselves near the very midst of the war-torn part of Nigeria called Biafra. The carnage of war was followed by starvation. When the war had ended and communication was again opened up in 1970 between the Lutherans in Nigeria and the Lutherans in the Wisconsin Synod, the possibilities of establishing a permanent bond were more remote than ever. The church itself had lost a great deal of unity and organization, its doctrinal position and practices were not as clear as before, and, worst of all, the government no longer allowed foreign missionaries into the country.

Nevertheless, the door to Nigeria has never been closed completely to the Wisconsin Synod. Requests for support and for missionaries have continued to come before the Board for World Missions. Some of them seem to be selfish requests from groups or individuals seeking material gain, but others appear to be sincerely searching for spiritual help. A second visitation, this time by the Central African missionaries Ernst Wendland and William Schweppe, planned for January 1967, was discouraged at the last minute by the apparent insincerity of one of the petitioning groups in the River District, and by a letter from Pres. Ekong to Dr. Schweppe suggesting that a visit at that time would be too disruptive to the ELCN. Again in 1971 Pres. Naumann and Prof. Siegler hoped to go to Nigeria to evaluate the post-war situation and investigate new calls for help,

but they were unable to obtain visas. One of the original petitioners to the Wisconsin Synod, Pastor Eshiett, came to the United States and spent the 1973-74 school year at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. Contact is being maintained with those who seem sincerely desirous of the pure Word of God.

A new opening to the Nigerian field may also ^{occur} be through its neighbor to the east, the Republic of Cameroon. A faithful group of Lutherans in the western part of that country are sending an impassioned plea for spiritual and monetary aid. Conditions in that country seem conducive to opening up a new Wisconsin Synod mission. If the Lord leads the WELS into that area, it will be within several hundred miles of Obet Idim.

The prospects of officially renewing our fellowship with the ELCN today are most remote. The church has changed under the influence of the Missouri Synod and as a result of the ravages of the Biafran war. But there are still many living in Nigeria who remember the early days under the Synodical Conference; Pastors who studied under Dr. Schweppe, Pastor Norbert Reim, ~~and~~ Pastor Ed. Greve, and others. These faithful Christians still know the difference between confessional Lutheranism and liberal-blend theology. We pray the Lord that one day yet He will join our hands in a firm grasp of mutual encouragement and faithfulness.

Sources

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Interview with Mrs. William Schweppe, New London, Wisconsin.