

Why WELS?

By Thomas Pfothenhauer

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Sometime last winter, having just thrown a few pieces of birch and maple into my airtight wood stove, feeling real cozy, the telephone rang. Who could this be? The pleasant voice of Pastor Donald Tollefson greeted my ears. (Some years back, when I was still in the active ministry at St. Paul's, Ottawa, the congregation had issued a Divine Call to Pastor Tollefson to become an associate pastor of the congregation. I have often thought what a pleasant experience that would have been – had he accepted.) So why was Pastor Don calling me on this chilly evening, four years into my retirement from the active ministry?

“Tom, as you know, the synod is celebrating its 150th anniversary and at this summer's District Convention several men will be presenting brief papers sharing their reasons for joining, or rejoining our Church body. Could you give us a 30 minute presentation as to what it was that attracted you to the WELS?”

This request triggered a flashback: June, 1970, the Michigan District Convention in Saginaw. Several Missouri “retreads” had been officially accepted into the Wisconsin Synod at the morning sessions. At the noon lunch President Waldemar Zarling asked a Pastor Zimmermann to speak some words of welcome to the new inductees. Above the clamor of the cutlery the pastor's booming voice welcomed us into our newfound fellowship. Following what I thought was a rather exaggerated build-up, the good pastor said, “And now, we want to assure these brethren, having newly entered into our synod, that we are most happy to have their congregations join our ranks.” Of course you had to know Zimmermann. On a more serious note, I must tell you that many pastors, each in their own way, often going out of their way, made certain that this former Missourian felt welcome. Those acts of kindness and concern were very much appreciated. I feel a special debt of gratitude to Pastor Waldemar Zarling – who even now as we meet is enjoying the beatific vision – for making me feel very much at home in my newly found home.

I suggested to Pastor Don that fulfilling the assignment he had in mind might call for an autobiographical approach. I believe he agreed; and so I agreed.

To have been born into the WELS is one thing. But to enter from the outside, to actually request admission, and then to obtain it by having to prove your qualifications, flying to Milwaukee on a frigid January day to have your theology reviewed by a (colloquy) committee – perhaps even to fail – that simply stretches credulity! Frankly gentleman, there were times when I thought, “I must be out of my mind.” Was I still living in the real world? Why would a 39-year old man with a wife and four children, serving a congregation of a 1000 souls – a congregation with 90 years of active service in the Ontario District of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod – why would such a man risk upsetting his family, perhaps losing his congregation (not to mention his pension)? He had better have good, Christian, godly, biblical, sound reasons.

Why WELS? The answer is provided with the formula, LCMS=WELS. I know, this will call for some clarification.

My roots go deep into the soil of Perry County, Missouri, the birthplace of the LCMS. The renowned theologian and church leader, C.F.W. Walther, who began his work along the Mississippi, is reputed to have once visited St. Paul Lutheran Church in Ottawa. He brought with him from St. Louis a young recruit for the ministry. My paternal grandfather, Dr. Frederich Pfothenhauer, after working as a missionary in the Dakotas, served his synod as its president for seven three-year terms. He only began preaching in English in his latter years, writing out his sermons to the last word. (Some of these homiletic jewels are in my files.) He conducted the synod conventions (I'm told) with considerable wit and an unchallenged knowledge of Robert's. I was privileged to meet this tall and stately man only two or three times. He passed into the next world when I was just six years old. My maternal grandfather, Dr. J.F. Boerger, served a large congregation in Racine Wisconsin. When doctrinal controversy broke out in the Missouri Synod, Dr. John W. Behnken, the president of the synod

asked my grandfather to chair a committee with the assignment of examining the document that came to be known as the “Statement of the Forty-Four.” After careful study this committee urged that the recommendations of the Forty-Four be considered divisive of church fellowship, and that appropriate action should be taken. This recommendation was never acted upon, the reason being given (so it was said) that a disciplinary scuffle would do irreparable damage to the synod’s expanding worldwide mission activities.

Some of my fondest memories from that time come from visiting in the home of my Boerger grandparents. After church, our family would jump into the car and drive the ninety miles from Chicago to Racine in time for a family visit and early supper at Grandmas. (Those were war years – you could drive only 45 miles an hour.) By that time Grandpa was quite shaky; he could barely get the soup to his mouth without spilling. But he was still getting up around five every morning to study the Latin and Greek Church Fathers in their original languages. The seminary in Springfield honored him with a DD, and once called him to teach the seminarians New Testament Greek.

Sometime after the death of my two grandfathers, my uncle Ted explained the relationship that existed between the grandparents and their hundred or more grandchildren. “The grandfathers,” he said, “were the mighty oaks reaching to the sky; the grandchildren are the acorns (nuts?) lying around on the ground beneath the spreading boughs.” Your knowledge of at least one of these grandchildren confirms the wisdom of dear uncle Ted.

The greatest influence of the human kind that I experienced came from my father. (Mother’s influence may actually have been greater, but was largely unrecognized in my early years.) Father, I’m convinced had a deep love for his children, although what we often saw (and felt) was a stern and strict exterior. At the age of 16, the heavy hand was lifted and we were told in effect, “Go out and seek your fortune, always remembering your baptism.”

Father was deeply concerned with the way things were developing in his “beloved synod.” The impetus to unite the various Lutheran bodies was growing – and Missouri was feeling the pressure. The form this union would take would establish pulpit and altar fellowship between the various synods (organizational union was not in the offing): pastors from the different synods could exchange pulpits; members could commune in each others churches. A noble goal indeed, provided that the necessary agreement about the truth of God’s Word was in place. Unfortunately, the doctrinal agreement required by scripture had not been reached. This “agreeing to disagree,” or *religious unionism* as it is called, deeply disturbed my father.

It was the day before my confirmation and I was standing on the back veranda, trying on the new suit with that neat reversible vest, so fashionable in that day, when my Father shared with me his deep concern that the synod was heading for a split. That very next week, he told me, the synod would be meeting in convention in the Chicago loop (we lived on the north side). The issue of *unionism* was bound to dominate the agenda, perhaps fracturing the synod. Of course that didn’t happen. I wasn’t in attendance, but if that convention played out like some of the ones I did attend, then the conservatives were handed a few choice crumbs while the unionistic agenda just kept rolling along.

My father’s two sons (I have a brother in the LCMS clergy) had completed their prep school training and were now poised to enter the seminary – Concordia, St. Louis, of course! It wasn’t to be. Against precedent, surmounting many obstacles, my father was instrumental in having us enrolled at Concordia Seminary, Springfield, IL.

Bear in mind, that in those days, all the evidence pointing to the teaching of unacceptable doctrine and practice at the St. Louis seminary had not yet surfaced. We boys did not really understand what all the fuss was about. We simply had to trust our father that he knew what he was doing. Instead of enrolling in St. Louis at the school of the *Major* prophets, we attended Springfield, the school of the *Minor* prophets.

Some of the men enrolled at Springfield were from the Wisconsin Synod and would be taking calls into their own synodical body upon graduation. One of these men was a classmate, an outstanding student, Harold

Essmann, who has distinguished himself in our synod in the service of his Lord. The assignment committee sent me up north to Winnipeg, Manitoba, to start a mission from scratch. We had no car for the first nine months, and walking a mile to this one home to conduct an adult instruction class at minus 40 degrees was a frostbiting experience. The Sunday school was conducted in one rented public school, while the church services were conducted in another school. But, in spite of the many difficulties, those were halcyon times (the mid-fifties) for starting new missions in Missouri. Three new churches were started at about the same time in Winnipeg. We all had new worship facilities within a few years. A classmate who was called to Long Island, N.Y. was serving 300 communicants in a new worship edifice within a few years. He once told me that starting missions was “like shooting fish in a barrel.” Well, not quite. The steady and sometimes rapid growth in our various fields always seemed to be mixed with copious amounts of “blood, sweat and tears.” And of course, there was always the latest troublesome news about the situation in St. Louis....

After four and half years in Winnipeg, I accepted a Divine Call to serve two congregations located in the Province of Ontario near Stradford, home of the celebrated Stradford Festival. The congregations were five miles apart, had little or no contact with each other, and expected the pastor to provide each congregation with a full program. The only time there were less than 500 people attending the two Sunday morning church services was when snow squalls blowing off of Lake Huron closed all the roads. The one congregation had a long-standing and deeply entrenched Masonic lodge problem. I had been informed of this situation and came prepared to deal with the matter. By the time it was all over, two men had left the Freemasons and three men left the church. This “lodge fight” was the Lord’s training ground for the larger fight that lay in the not too distant future. The one congregation was independent (not belonging to any synod) and down through their history had alternated between Missouri and the LCA for obtaining their pastors. I encouraged them to consider joining the Missouri Synod. (sic) And of course, there was always the latest troublesome news about the situation in St. Louis....

Things had settled down very nicely in this dual parish when a Divine Call arrived in the mail requesting my pastoral services at The Evangelical Lutheran Church of St. Paul, in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada’s capital.

This well-established congregation of 837 communicants (on the books, at least), in the nation’s capitol, located eight blocks from the Parliament buildings proved to be an all-around challenge. My pastorate there extended over a period of 30 years, the highlight of which I have no doubt was the privilege of working with and for 28 men in pastoral training – the vicarship program. However, sometimes working with vicars was a little more than I had bargained for. I refer to several Seminex types whose concept of ministry differed somewhat from the bishop’s.

It became increasingly evident that what we were hearing about our major seminary had a solid basis in fact. I was informed by one St. Louis vicar that it was *passé* to invoke the name of Martin Luther (that German guy) in a Reformation sermon. The Martin Luther I **should** be concerned about had the last name *King*. After only a short time on the job the vicar requested a week off so that he might fly south and join some Civil Rights demonstrations. My reading list, he duly informed me, should really include a work by Malcolm X. However, the vicar’s major preoccupation was protesting the U.S. involvement in the war in Vietnam. While I admired this man’s idealism (to a point) and supported his basic civil rights concerns, pursuing these interests as the main thrust of ministry could not be tolerated. Conducting a social-concerns ministry at St. Paul was not the purpose of the vicarship. Somehow, this vicar and his bishop finished out the year together. But, you may ask, was this experience simply anecdotal, an exaggerated example? No, there were just too many pieces from too many places pointing to serious doctrinal problems in the synod and in the seminary, and sadly, they all fit together.

While attending a meeting at the seminary in Springfield, I was privileged to spend the better part of an afternoon and evening discussing synodical affairs with J.A.O. Preus. The powers that be, I was informed, were not amused with my request that “no more vicars from St. Louis be sent to St. Paul.” You guessed it. My next

vicar, from St. Louis, should not even have, by his own admission, been sent out to vicar. Failure to hand in several term papers precluded a vicarship assignment. I am convinced this man was sent to St. Paul's to punish us. And punishment it was – a miserable year for all concerned. As far as I know, after leaving Ottawa, the man went off to sell encyclopedias.

Attending pastoral conferences had become an ordeal. The divisions were clear: If you had taken up the “new” theology being promoted by the St. Louis faculty, you sat with that group at lunch; if you were unwilling to jettison the synodical-conference approach to theology, you sat over on the other side with your people. Positions hardened and shouting matches were not unheard of. Conference time became a dreaded time.

There was a lot of politicking going on – on both sides. I wrote a lot of letters; meetings were held on our church premises. A repeated theme was the need to elect conservative officials. If only this or that individual could be elected to this or that position – then, we would be on the way to resolving our problems. Convention workbooks were glutted with memorials, “Therefore, be it resolved that....” When newly elected synod president, J.A.O. Preus, was in the chair for his first convention, the liberals, playing parliamentary games, threw up challenge after challenge.

Then there were the dialogue meetings with the other Lutherans. I attended my first in Winnipeg, a couple of years into the ministry. There for the first time I heard a Lutheran professor (or pastor) deny the historicity of the biblical characters mentioned in Genesis 1-11. I volunteered that Jesus disagreed with his position and in support of my contention quoted Jesus' words from Luke 11:51: “from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah, who was killed between the altar and the sanctuary.” I wondered how imaginary people could bleed real blood. I still wonder that.

There was the dialogue session held at the Upper Canada Village restaurant on the St. Lawrence River, attended by Missouri and Canada Synod Lutheran pastors. At this meeting the Virgin birth and bodily resurrection of Christ were openly challenged. The Missourians challenged the LCA Lutherans to provide evidence for their claims. We received bland replies: “Well, there were virgin births reported in South America.” “No,” said the pastor from Montreal, “denial of Christ's physical resurrection from the dead need not keep a person from joining our church.” After lunch this pastor and I took a walk. He put his arm around my shoulder and with honey dripping from his lips said, “Tom, the Presbyterians have gotten together, why shouldn't we get together?” “Not today,” I muttered, and threw his arm off of my shoulder in utter disgust. At the close of this meeting the chairman invited us all to join in the singing of *Blest Be the Tie that Binds*.

Carrying on a day-to-day ministry was becoming increasingly difficult. I seriously began to wonder how much longer I could in good conscience continue in the Missouri ministerium. In terms of time, how long was a person expected to continue fighting this battle – a battle which the conservatives appeared to be losing? The liberal\conservative agenda was gradually taking over life itself. My immediate family was being immersed in the discussion. When guest speakers for our semi-annual Mission Fest would come to our home, the first question my young children would ask the guest was, “Are you a lib or a con”?

My wife and I discussed our options. They were limited: stay with Missouri and hope and pray that matters would improve; resign from the congregation and try to join an authentic Lutheran synod; seek employment in some other field. Gradually, a game plan emerged: Never, never, would I resign my ministry from St. Paul and desert the congregation to the wolves. I would leave the synod and take the congregation with me. This, I believe, was the answer I received after much prayerful and anxious wrestling with God.

But how to implement what certainly was a radical solution? St. Paul, after all was a thoroughly Missourian congregation. Their pastors had a history of involvement in district and synodical affairs. Almost one third of the annual church budget went for “outside” purposes. It was reasonable to conclude that this congregation would never leave the Missouri Synod. Yet they did just that. I believe in miracles!

An educative process was put into place. Articles describing the liberal trends in Missouri were reprinted in the congregation's monthly magazine, *The Ottawa Lutheran*. Much of this material was lifted from

Christian News, but only if the source could be documented.

I ordered several books from the Augsburg Publishing House, e.g. *When God Speaks*, by Philip A. Quanbeck. Quotations from these popular works were quoted and discussed in dozens of church agency meetings over a three-year period. At one point the entire congregation was divided into manageable groups and invited to attend special evening information sessions. “This is what has been taught in this congregation; this is what will be taught or at least allowed to be taught if the current trend in Missouri continues,” was an oft-repeated theme.

Considerable time was spent gaining the confidence and consent of the leaders in the congregation. The chairman of the congregation, Wally Bruer, and Herman Bacher, a member of the Board of Deacons were consulted on a regular basis. I preached only one sermon which dealt directly with fellowship aspects. The Sunday morning Bible class became the forum for dissecting the “New Hermeneutic,” the so-called scientific way of interpreting the Bible. Always in attendance, always supportive from the beginning and down through the years were Carl and Norma Noffke. At the time I credited much of the doctrinal concern and understanding in the congregation to the fact that many of the members had attended the Christian Day School (“Nelson Street school”).

The issue that brought the matter to a head was the impending declaration of fellowship between the LCMS and the ALC. This would be decided at the synod’s Denver convention in July of 1969. In anticipation of this action the St. Paul voters passed several resolutions. They placed the onus on the synod: should the synod enter into this unscriptural fellowship, St. Paul would automatically become an independent congregation. Another resolution stated that all concerns (other than in-family discussions) were to be discussed only in regularly called meetings, with the full knowledge of the pastor and the Board of Deacons.

It was a solemn Sunday the day I announced the results out of Denver. I remember pacing through the entire previous night trying to come to terms with the fact that the newly elected president of the LCMS had accepted the new fellowship agreement. How could he have? But he had. So that was it, we as a congregation would now be on our own.

Of course no one in the Ontario District took our actions very seriously – at least not at first. A vice-president of the district invited me out for a beer and some talk at a bar in Hull. I declined. The same gentleman circularized the congregation in a letter which played the emotional card. But since it didn’t deal with the issues it worked in our favor. In retrospect, about ten years elapsed, before the truth finally sunk in amongst the other Lutherans: St. Paul is no longer in the Missouri Synod.

But let me tell you: being a separate congregation with no synodical affiliation is a non-starter. How do you carry out the Great Commission? How do you keep a pastor in the pulpit? What about inter-congregational fellowship? How does the pastor stay fresh and challenged without meeting with other pastors? St. Paul felt very isolated.

This resulted in a search program – find a suitable synod, and join it. We wanted a synod just like the one we had left, only like it had been before the “troubles” began. This couldn’t be too difficult; after all, how many such synods existed? ELS and WELS.

In the month of October in 1969 the congregation observed WELS Day, a Sunday. President Waldemar Zarling preached the sermon. In the afternoon four meetings were conducted with two groups: the ladies of the congregation and the St. Paul Voter’s Assembly. Zarling and President Lawrenz from the seminary each addressed one of the groups and then switched places. I had provided Lawrenz with my copy of the Canadian Scout Handbook. The good professor held us in awe as he expounded on that and many other subjects.

I share an incident that occurred around this time. I received a letter from Pastor Paul Neipp warning me against joining the Wisconsin Synod. In his letter he included the copy of a letter that Francis Pieper, the theologian, had sent to my grandfather, suggesting that grandfather begin steps to suspend relations with the Wisconsin Synod. The reason, Pieper offered, was Wisconsin’s erroneous doctrine of church and ministry.

Since scripture teaches that public ministry is not limited to only one form, i.e. the parish pastorate, I paid little attention to this communication.

It was not long after that meeting that the voters agreed to join the WELS. There were one or two dissenting votes and the congregation lost less than two dozen communicant members as a result of its action. The seminary provided us with excellent vicars: Zahn, Cherney, Schuetze, Berg come to mind. Zahn organized a “super safari” which took a busload of members to visit the pastor and teacher training schools belonging to our church body. He conducted a mission fair which got a lot of the members involved. I can still see that life-size African grass hut that he had built in one of the upstairs rooms of the parish house!

What attracted me to the WELS? Because she is so much like good old Missouri, good old orthodox Missouri. May God preserve our beloved synod in the ways of truth.