

The Effect of the Synodical Conference Fellowship Impasse  
on Our Institutional Missions: A Brief History  
and Evaluation of the Wisconsin Lutheran  
Child and Family Service

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The decision of our Wisconsin Synod to sever fellowship with the Missouri Synod in 1961 had many far-reaching results, some good, some bad. The subject of this paper: the Wisconsin Lutheran Child and Family Service is one of the good effects of this severance. Directly after the storm of the fellowship impasse the Wisconsin Synod in so many ways proved that it could stand alone physically as well as spiritually, even though now separate from its long-time big brother, Missouri. The history of the WLC&FS is one such story.

The story of WLC&FS began July 31, 1965. Previous to this date, the extent of the Wisconsin Synod's care for the convalescing in Milwaukee was the Bethany Nursing Home. This Missouri-Synod-Wisconsin Synod joint effort was located on 33rd Street and Wisconsin Avenue. During its operation its Wisconsin Synod patients were served well by its part-time chaplain-administrator, the Rev. Richard Stiemke. This 19-bed hospital saw the termination of its services when in 1965 new pressure was exerted by the State of Wisconsin to enforce stricter health-care regulations. The vacant

land next to this property was considered too costly for the expansion purposes it would have provided. The state-required remodelling regulations were also considered too expensive for the continuation of this institution.

The spring of 1965 saw the efforts of attorney, Mr. Robert Peregrine (member of St. Matthew's Oconomowoc) and the Rev. Robert Kleist bring about the purchase of the Green Tree Rehabilitation Hospital at 6800 N. 76th St. in Milwaukee. Mr. Peregrine, working through Mutual Federal Savings and Loan of Milwaukee, learned of the bankruptcy of this hospital by its owners, Dr. Ackerman and Mr. Roidberg.

On July 31st, 1965, the Bethany Nursing Home closed its doors and the new "Wisconsin Lutheran Convalescent Center" became a reality.

On January 30, 1966, a group of interested Wisconsin Synod members met at Siloah Lutheran Church to draw up plans to add other social services to the new convalescent center. At this meeting they called the Rev. Ernst Lehninger, then working at the Lutheran Children's Friends Society, as executive director of this planned social-services center. At this meeting, the purpose of the planned Wisconsin Lutheran Child and

Family Service was declared to be:

To care for the spiritual needs of children, unwed and adoptive parents, troubled families, the aged, convalescent, and the handicapped in a Lutheran welfare program, including, but not limited to, custodial care, consultation, case-work service and the operation and maintenance of foster homes, and to provide such other Christian social welfare services as the Board of Directors may decide to institute.

Before the commencement of Pastor Lehninger's services at the new WLC&FS he had to sever his and the Synod's relationship with the Missouri-Wisconsin operated Lutheran Children's Friends Society of Wauwatosa. The story of this severance deserves some words here.

Along with our break from Missouri in 1961 came the declaration of our synod officials that all jointly operated institutions must also sever. In 1963 the board of directors of the Lutheran Children's Friends Society decided that they would continue to exist jointly until our Wisconsin Synod could purchase other facilities. In 1965, as we began to pull out from the Children's Friends Society our interests or assets in that institution were declared to be \$175,000. An amicable break was concluded and we left with check in hand. All went well until a certain Mr. AL Boedecker entered the scene. Mr. Boedecker is a member of the Missouri Synod and also a legal attorney. Mr. Boedecker, moved by anti-

Wisconsin Synod feelings aroused by the issue of prayer fellowship, often referred to the Wisconsin Synod as "conservative swine." Influenced by such feelings, he felt it his business to legally enter the situation and tell us that it was impossible for the Wisconsin Synod to leave with a \$175,000 settlement. His legal claim was that all contributions had been given to the Children's Friends Society as a corporation, and that there was no way of figuring out how much was Missouri's and how much was Wisconsin's. He further declared that since we were making the break from this corporation, we would legally have to forfeit all interests.

Pastor Lehninger was then called to an adverse hearing in which the court made its judgment in favor of the Children's Friends Society. Even though many of the friendly people of the Children's Friends Society told Pastor Lehninger that we would get the money "even if they had to throw it off the building," nevertheless we ended up with not a cent.

WLC&FS opened its residence for the aging in July 1968. Since then it has been operating at 100% of its capacity. The physical makeup of our 76th St. complex allows 111 beds for convalescent care and 48 beds in the resident center. There are approximately 75 rooms.

It is also interesting to note that in 1972 WLC&FS served 186 convalescing patients and sixty seven residents, a total of 253 people. The average age of a convalescent is seventy eight, remaining at the hospital for two and one half years. The average age of a resident is eighty years, remaining at the home for two years.

The residence for the aged can be utilized only by members of the Wisconsin Synod, the Evangelical Lutheran Synod, or the Federation for Authentic Lutheranism. The convalescent hospital, although used by many of our members, is also a service to the community. In this aspect it serves as an excellent mission arm.

As the WLC&FS continues to "share each other's burdens," it also extends social services to unwed parents. Thus a phrase has been coined that WLC&FS offers services before the cradle to the grave under one roof. Statistics available concerning the number of unwed mothers counseled, shows an increase from eighteen in 1966 to eighty six in 1970. All unwed mothers coming to WLC&FS for help must also place themselves under the counselling care of a pastor.

In its attempts to provide care for unwed mothers, the WLC&FS tried to purchase a residence for such purposes. Their first attempt to purchase such a facility

brought condemnation from the community in which the house was located. Our labors to purchase such a home were thwarted since the residents of the area "didn't want a house of prostitution in their neighborhood."

Child adoption is another service rendered by WLC &FS. From its very start our agency proved itself to be of top quality in this area. As of June 9, 1971, the WLC&FS became the youngest member ever to enter the Child Welfare League of America. This Welfare League is a national non-sectarian voluntary agency which certifies its members as being agencies of the highest standards in social services.

The child adoption service of our agency has also proved to be an excellent mission arm. Not only does it place the children<sup>d</sup> of unwed WELS mothers for adoption, but also children from outside our church. In this way many less fortunate children are guaranteed of a future with the Gospel. It has been remarked by a Milwaukee County social worker that no other agency has placed as many hard-to-place children with success as has the WLC&FS.

In placing children for adoption our eyes are first fixed upon our unwed WELS mothers. But in 1972 statistics show that only forty eight of these unwed

mothers applied to our agency for help. In fact, 54% of the WELS women counseled in 1972 have kept their babies. Perhaps in this area there is some cause for concern. Perhaps even in our Wisconsin Synod the <sup>h</sup>same of bearing a child out of wedlock is "lessening."

One danger which was noted concerning the placement of WELS children within our synod, if it may be termed a danger at all, is the possibility of an adopted child returning to the location of its mother.

Even though backgrounds and names must be legally withheld, at present there is one coincidental situation in which a WELS mother who released her illegitimate child for adoption, may very well meet that child again as she moves to the same city of the adoptive parents. Is our synod too small or intimate to place its own children within its own boundaries?

The family counseling service of the WLC&FS is also of great importance. In 1972, 101 family problem cases were dealt with, 64% of these were found to be parent-child problems.

Our Christian Day schools have done excellent referral service for the WLC&FS as regards child and family problems. Today the WLC&FS has a working arrangement with the Board for Parish Education and the bles-



sings of the conference of presidents for in-service training sessions with Christian Day school teachers. Excellent problem-child work is being done.

The most remarkable aspect of our WLC&FS is the fact that in only six short years a group of Wisconsin Synod members of this state could organize such a top-quality, full service social organization. The Rev. Ernst Lehninger; executive director, Rev. James Berger; assistant director, Mr. Robert Eberhardt; administrators of the convalescent-aging department are all licensed nursing home administrators.

Our agency also has a full staff of Wisconsin Synod social workers. These eight people all hold Master's degrees in social work which they gained while studying under a WLC&FS granted scholarship. For every year of granted scholarship, each social worker is expected to return a year of service to the agency.

The heads of staff at WLC&FS are as follows:  
Rev. Ernst Lehninger, Executive Director--Rev. James Berger, assistant director--Rev. Mentor Kujath, public relations--Miss Martha Fleter, projects coordinator--Mr. Robert Eberhardt, convalescent-aging--Mr. Fred Matzke, director of social services; and Mr. Edgar Hahn, accounting.

The WLC&FS board of directors numbers twenty one men, consisting of both pastors and laymen and is divided into the six committees of social services, convalescent-aging, public relations, finance, executive, and planning.

Financially speaking, the WLC&FS has so far suffered no major problems. They operate with a yearly budget of ~~of~~ 1.25 million dollars and to this date owe a debt of one million dollars on their building. The contributions given by the three Wisconsin districts go only for the support of the social-services portion of the agency, since the convalescent-aging portion is financed by purchase of services and other monies such as Title 19 or Medicaid.

At organization of WLC&FS the three Wisconsin districts pledged two dollars annually per communicant for the support of this agency, but to date ~~are~~ <sup>the agency is</sup> only realizing about eighty one cents, which somewhat curtails the services which otherwise might be rendered.

The future plans for WLC&FS include the establishment of two area offices of social services in Tomah and Appleton, Wisconsin.

One situation which also may involve the WLC&FS in the future is the problem of the establishment of a

Wisconsin Synod-operated institution for the retarded, such as Bethesda of Watertown, Wisconsin. At present, of the 660 people housed at Bethesda, ninety six are Wisconsin Synod members, and no more Wisconsin Synod applications are being accepted. To date the statement of the president of our synod remains to this effect: That our congregations are to continue their support of Bethesda, since we have not made any statements of severance from this institution.

But what is to be done in the future? Great strides are being made by our synod at present in the field of mental retardation. A three week seminar is being planned for the summer of 1973 at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. An attempt will be made to educate some district "specialists" in the field of mental retardation both among the clergy and the laity. Something simply had to be done, since even ten years ago there were people on the Synod Board for Parish Education who did not know the difference between retardation and mental illness. Certainly nothing derogatory is meant by this statement. We simply had no one trained in this area of work.

At present we must also say that in regard to the field of mental retardation our synod is carrying out a

holding action until it can obtain an executive secretary of the Board of Special Ministries. This man will be assigned the task of studying the feasibility of an institution for the retarded.

At present it is estimated that there are approximately three thousand retarded in the Wisconsin Synod. This is estimating conservatively, at the rate of one retardation per hundred people. Our synod realizes the need for some institution and it has already expressed favorable wishes for one. However, our synod desires that such an institution be an organization of individuals. Our synod does not wish to get involved in any type of welfare. But is not this also an area of Christian responsibility?

Only the 1973 Synod Convention will tell what the organizational makeup of such an institution will be. One can be sure that regarding this issue, both mission boards will be fighting against <sup>such</sup> an institution, lest they be budgeted out of their necessary funds. Will it be a synod-operated project? Will it use land and services of WLC&FS? How will it be supported? Only time can answer these questions.

Several observations and conclusions have been arrived at through the study of the WLC&FS.

The history of the WLC&FS again is positive proof of the ability of our Wisconsin Synod members to act rapidly and efficiently when the cause arises. The rapid establishment of such an agency is proof also of God's hand working beside those who are zealous to do His will.

The history of the WLC&FS proves that social work can also serve as a great mission outreach into the community and the world. Through WLC&FS we have guaranteed many children a Gospel home, who otherwise may never have heard the words of their Savior.

The history of WLC&FS has proved an eye-opening education in the field of social services to many Wisconsin Synod members of the state of Wisconsin. In 1955 only five per cent of the people of our Milwaukee congregations made use of any of the services offered at the Lutheran Children's Friends Society.

This history of the WLC&FS perhaps serves as a warning for any future organic mergers with other synods. Indeed, a great many problems can arise at the time of severance of church bodies, especially in the field of church properties.

As our synod continues to grow, we hope and pray that the history of the WLC&FS can serve as an inspira-

tion to other states and districts of our synod who may also wish to undertake such ventures of faith.

Historical material gleaned from interviews with  
Pastor E. Lehniger.