THE MANKATO CONTROVERSY

Marcus L. Birkholz
Church History
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"The Wisconsin Synod will crawl into a hole and die." Quotes of such nature were being uttered and heard prior to the Wisconsin-Missouri Synod break in 1961. What prompted such statements was the idea that the Wisconsin Synod had been so dependant on the Missouri Synod and so self-centered it would not be able to carry on the mission work needed to keep a synod growing. It was a fact that we were dependant in many areas. Now it is eleven years since we broke. Are we dying? If one was to look at the number of new missions, the area of work of the spcial ministries, the growth of our schools, he would have to conclude the negative. But what if that person had looked at the facts prior to the break, would he have come to the conclussion of the opening quote? In this paper I would like to go back about eleven years before the break. At that time a controversy was in the makings in Mankato, Minnesota between the Minnesota District of the Wisconsin Synod and the Missouri Synod. Looking back at the Mankato controversy and its effects on our Lutheran Collegian work, I would like to show that one would not have made such opening remark.

Before we start with the controversy itself, a certain amount of background material is needed. Just prior to World War II the LC-MS and Minnesota District (WELS) had become polarized on certain issues. The issue at stake was the matter of chaplaincy. With our German heritage, both of our synods had suffered during World War I. Many feared that World War II would be no exception. Within our circles the question arose whether we could in good conscience send our pastors into the military chaplaincy. The LC-MS said yes. Some feel their response was to show themselves as not being unAmerican.[1.]

Meetings were then set at Bethany Lutheran Junior College in Mankato. Representatives of Evangelical Lutheran Synod, Wisconsin Synod and Missouri Synod were there. Three papers were delivered by the Wisconsin Synod. Professor Schweppe of DMLC was one of the speakers. Our present day position was presented at that time. After the papers, a LC-MS pastor objected, repeatedly saying, "you have charged us with sin." Thus the sides were drawn, yet no definate action resulted from this meeting.[2.]

The historical situation in Mankato is also of some importance. At this time in the Mankato-North Mankato area, there was no church of the Missouri Synod. St. Paul's served North Mankato. St. Marks served the west Mankato area. Immanuel, the largest of the three, served the heart of Mankato. Since Missouri was not represented, most Missouri Synod people found themselves attending Immanuel Lutheran Church. However the esprit de corps continued among a certain segment of the people.[3.]

The man around whom the controversy orginally started was Rev. Adolf Ackermann. When the controversy began he had just step down as Minnesota District president. Before we proceed, a little of his background is of interest.

Adolf Ackermann was born January 11, 1871 in Mittel-Schlechtbach, Germany. At the early age of fourteen, he decided to become a missionary. On September 24, 1885 he arrived in America. October 6 of the same year he entered DMLC. In 1890 he received the first diploma of Bachelor of Arts granted by this college.[4.] He gloried in the fact that he was the <u>first</u> graduate, not only of the first class, but also alphabetically first.[5.] His theological training was completed at Concordia, St. Louis.

He served DMLC as college president from 1908-1918. After serving congregations at Essig and Brighton, he was called to Immanuel Lutheran Church of Mankato. He was installed June 25, 1922 and served it until his death. His presidency of the Minnesota District was from 1936-48. His resignation came in that year for health reason.[6.]

The other man in the controversy was G.W. Fischer. After the associate pastor, Emil Peterson, took a call to St. James, Minn., the congregation called Pastor Fischer. He was installed June 26, 1949. I'm lacking in information about his early life. Prior to being called to Minnesota, he had been serving a congregation in Milwaukee. During his stay in Milwaukee, he found himself in a controversy. At that time there was an organization of Lutheran Men of America. This group was made up of ALC, LC-MS, and WELS men. As time past, this organization was putting us in a touchy fellowship situation. Thus Pastor Fischer wrote papers and spearheaded the warning of such fellowship practises. Thus he was very sensitive to the fellowship problem when he arrived in Minnesota.[7.]

Upon arrival in Mankato, he found another fellowship problem. In Mankato there was The Mankato Ministerial Association. Membership included any protestant body. This Association sponsored a daily Radio program. During the devotion, a pastor could hold to his own doctrinal positon. However, it was always acknowledged as being brought to the public by this Associaton. To be on this program, one had to pay dues to the Association. When Fischer arrived, he found Pastor Ackerman involved in this program.[8.]

When exactly the first charges were made cannot be established. The controversy continued between the two pastors until Ackerman's

death on May 7, 1950. The controversy was continued through the Sunday bulletin and letters to the members of the congregation. At this time many charges were made but not all were substantiated. The chaplaincy issue and the Ministerial Association were the major issues. The chaplaincy problem arose because Ackermamm never took a firm position on the matter. This was even true when he was District President. He was considered by many to be quite a politician since he could not be pinned down. Fischer on the otherhand seemed to come across as a very hard nose, non evangelical person.[9.]

During the controversy sad to say a certain amount of mud was slung. Charges and counter charges were made. At one time a handwriting expert was called in to identify a slanderous letter received by one of the pastors.[10.] When Ackermann was moved out of the parsonage, the bath tub also was moved out. This brought the charge that Fischer wouldn't even bathe in the same tub Ackermann had.[11.] Yet it was the issues that divided the congregation.

When the congregation was polarized the larger group followed Fischer, whereas Ackermann had the Missouri Synod followers backing him. It was then at this time that the Missouri synod came into the controversy. A certain number of Missouri background people sent a request to the Missouri Mission Board to establish a congregation in Mankato. This was the opening the LC-MS needed to begin in the community.[12.]

There was a meeting between LC-MS and Wisconsin Synod at Bethany which granted a congregation to be started. Our Savior's Lutheran Church became its organized name. Officially it was not a daughter congregation of Immanuel, but a sister congregation. When it was organized Fischer questioned will we (WELS) recognize it? Ackermann replied to the effect,

"The question is out of order, we have already settled it by the previous motion." (The previous motion had established the congregation.)

This newly organized congregation was to bring to head the controversy. Immanuel congregation terminated Ackermann's call just prior to moving him out. The question in the community was, to which congregation will he go? He died that night, May 7, 1950. So there was no answer. At his funeral both Missouri and Wisconsin Synod pastor officiated. Pastor W.A. Poehler of Concordia College, St. Paul touched on this controversy in his opening words when he spoke, "I come to bury our friend not to praise him. The evil that men do lives after them. The good is oft interred with their bones."[13] With his death the problems however did not cease.

The Our Savior's congregation began doing mission work. Normally this would be commended. They, however, did not work among lost sheep. Rather they gathered their flock from the midst of Immanuel's flock. Immanuel congregation raised one objection after another. Finally Oscar J. Naumann, President of the Minnesota District, sent a formal complaint on August 10, 1951 to the President of Minnesota District, LC-MS. This letter and the following sent between the two synods are included in the appendix of this paper. Two points were raised by Naumann: First that Our Savior's had become an opposition altar in Mankato with its membership policies. Second was that as a synod they should defer actions on the application of Our Savior's into membership.

A year later after the Missouri convention which accept Our Savior's, Naumann sent a letter of protest on the eve of their 1952 convention. We received the following response from their Secretary of the Board of Directors of the Minnesota District, "Therefore be it Resolved that we declare the accusations to be uncharitable, unjust, and therefore

unchristian, and that our secretary be instructed to convey this declaration to the author of the protest."[14] Following this response and a praesidium meeting, Pastor Naumann announced the decision to the Minnesota District congregations that we were no longer in fellowship with Our Savior's Lutheran Church and Pastor Alvin G. Fehner of the same congregation.[15] This took place October 2, 1952.

After no real settlement of the situation and our synod still working with the Missouri Synod, Immanuel congregation voted to withdraw membership on October 30, 1956.[16] Thus this controversy ended with the Wisconsin Synod.

So far I have not treated any effects of this controversy on our Lutheran Collegian work. First, however, background to the collegian work is necessary.

Dr. J.A.O. Preus, a professor at Bethany, first organized the collegian work in Mankato in 1951. At that time the work was carried out through the Synodical Conference organization of Gamma Delta of the LC-MS. Rev. Martin Birkholz of St. Mark's participated in the work in that first year. The Wisconsin Synod at this time did not have any offical collegian organiztion. This does not mean that we were not involved in this work. Pastor Wackerfuss had been serving Evanston since 1942. We also had a pastor serving the students at the U. of Madison. These and others also served under the Gamma Delta arrangement.[17]

After Preus left in 1953, Rev. Birkholz was elected pastoral advisor in 1954. The faculty advisor at this time was a Dr. Walz who was a member of Our Savior's. Under his guidance the following year, Our Savior's Church was chosen as the meeting place with Pastor Fehner serving the group. Thus Pastor Birkholz was ousted from all collegian work. Under the advice

of Dr. Preus, Rev. Birkholz held a meeting with Dr. Walz and asked for a joint leadership. When he was refused, the decission was made to establish collegian work among our own. Thus a loose nit group was organized during the school year of 55 and 56.[18] Rev. Birkholz lacked at this time all offical authorization to establish such a group. On October 10, 1956 M.J. Lenz, then president of the Minnesota District, gave authorization to Pastor Birkholz and R.A. Haase of North Mankato.[19] Then on October 17, 1956 at St. Mark's church the first meeting was held of an offical collegian society of the Wisconsin Synod.[20] This group grew then to an active membership of forty plus students. It also led the way in our Synod as the first group to have its own student center with a house mother. In summary of the collegian work I'd like to cite the Minnesota District's Golden Jubilee History:

> These beginnings in Mankato were but evidence of work being done by other pastors througout the Synod in the interst of our own students. Recognizing this, the Home Mission Board held the first Campus Pastor's Workshop at the Synod's offices on October 16, 1962. Eventually the student work was placed under the supervision of the Spiritual Welfare Commission, which together with the Lutheran Collegian group at Whitewater, Wisconsin, under David A. Tetzlaff sponsored the first conference of Lutheran Collegians from April 23 to 25, 1965. This proved to be the organizing convention, and LUTHERAN COLLEGIANS WELS came into being.[21]

One looking back to this controversy may feel or come to the conclussion that it was a Pyrrhic victory. We suffered a loss of a congregation. The gain was only a collegian group. This, however, is not the point of comparison which I'd like to stress. The point is that though we had losses at this time, we did not give up. Rather we step into an area that we as a synod were just babes. As babes we did not die but rather grew and grew until our collegian work is no longer a babe.

END NOTES

1. From a conversation with President O.J. Naumann.
2. From the same conversation.
3. From a conversation with Rev. M. Birkholz
4. From a private publication which included a biography of Pastor Ackermann, his installation service at Immanuel and his funeral sermon.
5. A subsequent conversation with Rev. Birkholz
6. op. Cit. Private Publication.
7. From a conversation with President Naumann.
8. From a conversation with Rev. Birkholz
9. Conclussion of both Rev. Birkholz and Pres. Naumann.
10. From conversation with Pres. Naumann.
11. From conversation with Rev. Birkholz
12. Ibid.
13. Op. Cit. Private Publication
14. From the letter received by Pres. Naumann. cf. Appendix iv.
15. Cf. Appendix v. Letter sent by President Naumann.
16. "Proceedings 21st Biennial Convention Minnesota District" p.31.
17. From conversation with Rev. Birkholz
18. Ibid.
19. Taken from the letter received by Rev. Birkholz from Rev. Lenz.
20. Minnesota District Golden Jubilee History 1969, p. 43.
21. Ibid. p. 44.

C O P Y

August 10, 1951

To the Honorable Minnesota District
The Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod
Pastor H. A. Gamber, President
924 Margaret Street
St. Paul 6, Minnesota

Dear Brethren in Christ:

In the name of your brethren in the Minnesota District of the Ev. Lutheran Joint Synod of Wisconsin and Other States I beg leave to bring to your attention a matter concerning which we are greatly disturbed.

We must consider it a violation of trust that the assurance given to our officials and to the officials of the Norwegian Synod that the Missouri Synod Mission planned for Mankato was to be a sister congregation and not an opposition altar has proven false. This is evident from the fact that members of Immanuel Lutheran Church of Mankato have been given the assurance that they would be accepted into membership in Our Savior's Church even without a peaceful release from their own church.

We must consider it a violation of the fraternal relations which have bound us together in the Synodical Conference these many years that many members of Immanuel Church have been accepted into membership in Our Savior's Church without a peaceful release.

We call to your attention that this practise is in direct violation of the accepted principles of the Lutheran Church - Mo. Synod as expressed in "The Abiding Word", Volume I, Concordia Publication 1946, in an essay on "The Holy Christian Church", page 281: "It follows that a Christian cannot resign from a Christian congregation, as he may from a purely secular club or society, but that he may ask to be transferred from one congregation to another."

We therefore protest against this practise and request that your officials be asked to take the necessary disciplinary action to correct the situation in order that we may continue to work as brethren in the Lord's Kingdom. We also request of you as brethren that you defer action on the application of Our Savior's Church for membership in your Synod until these matters have been righted.

Sincerely yours in Christ,

Oscar J. Naumann, President
Minnesota District, Wisconsin Synod

C O P Y

Aug. 16, 1952

To The Honorable Minnesota District of
The Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod
In Convention Assembled Aug. 18 - 22, 1952
Concordia College, St. Paul, Minnesota

Dear Brethren in Christ:

In the interest of preserving God-pleasing Christian order and fraternal relations between our Synods, districts, and congregations, I feel it my God-given, though painful, duty to bring a solemn protest before your convention.

We protest the status of Our Savior's Lutheran Church of Mankato, Minnesota, as a member of the Minnesota District of the Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod. We submit that such membership is invalid, because of the un-scriptural position and practice in regard to the reception of members with which we charged Our Savior's Church when, a year ago, we pleaded with your convention to defer action on the membership application of Our Savior's Church. We now advise you that our charges have been fully substantiated in the presence of your district officials, that the offense has in no way been removed or abated, and that our further efforts to that end have been rendered ineffective by the attitude of said congregation and its pastor.

We submit further, that your district at its convention in 1951 violated fraternal relations and offended against divine order, when, despite our plea and without making prior Scriptural disposal of the charges preferred against Our Savior's Church, the convention reversed God-pleasing order, granting the congregation the right of membership and filing the charges for future consideration. Resort to such a process is an offense, not only to our church, but against the souls of those who are guilty of the violations involved. Lev. 19,17; Luke 17,3.

We regret that this protest comes to you again on the eve of your convention, but we decline to accept the responsibility for this. We waited in vain for a reply to our efforts to solve the Mankato difficulties. Not until last Thursday did we receive even an oral reply to our letter.

We, therefore, plead with you again out of concern for the fellowship which we have enjoyed these many years, that you take definite measures to correct this situation. May God bless your thoughts and efforts to this end.

With sincere fraternal greetings,

Oscar J. Naumann, President, Minn. Dist, Wis. Synod

C O P Y

Minnesota District
of
The Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod
Board of Directors

2209 Girard Avenue North
Minneapolis 11, Minnesota
September 23, 1952

The Rev. O. J. Nauman
727 Margaret St.
St. Paul 6, Minnesota

Dear Brother Nauman,

This letter shall concern itself with the Wisconsin Synod protest mailed from your office August 16, 1952. Concerning this matter the official minutes read as follows:

"A Wisconsin Synod protest. This protest is dated August 16, 1952, and is a protest over against membership of Our Savior's Lutheran Church, Mankato in the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. This protest was given to the Committee on Constitutions and Memberships, the Rev. E. Schwandt, chairman. This committee presented its report. The entire report of the committee was adopted, and this report as well as the protest letter will be included in the official minutes and the official printed proceedings. It was furthermore resolved that last year's protest against Our Savior's membership in the Missouri Synod, in view of succeeding events, be rejected."

The following is an exact copy of the committee report as presented to the Convention. This report is on file with the secretary of the Minnesota District.

"To the Honorable Minnesota District of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, assembled at Concordia College, St. Paul, Minnesota, August 18-22.

"For the benefit of those who were not delegates to our Convention of last year, we quote from the action taken by our District on the protest lodged against our receiving Our Savior's Lutheran Church of Mankato into membership:"

"1. In view of the fact that the District President and the Pastor of Our Savior's congregation at Mankato have done all that is necessary by way of Christian love, therefore be it Resolved that we file the protest of Immanuel Congregation of Mankato against membership of Our Savior's congregation of Mankato into membership of our District.

2. Resolved to instruct the District officials and Our Savior's congregation together with its pastor to do everything possible as soon as possible to bring this entire matter to a successful conclusion."

The following protest has been directed to this Convention:

(Protest)

"Whereas your committee in consultation with officials of our District, the pastor and delegate of Our Savior's congregation at Mankato and with the President of the Minnesota District of the Joint Wisconsin Synod, was assured that the instruction given our officials by the District has been complied with but not as yet brought to a successful conclusion,

THEREFORE be it Resolved that we encourage the District officials and Our Savior's congregation together with its pastor to continue their efforts to bring this entire matter to a successful conclusion."

In the matter of the protest of August 16, 1952, by the President of the Minnesota District of the joint Wisconsin Synod, your committee begs to report:

"WHEREAS our Convention in 1951 acted in good faith, 'in view of the fact that the District President and the pastor of Our Savior's congregation at Mankato have done all that is necessary by way of Christian love', in filing the protest of Immanuel Congregation and receiving Our Savior's Congregation into membership of our District,

THEREFORE be it Resolved that this Convention reject the protest of the President of the Minnesota District of the Joint Wisconsin Synod.

WHEREAS in this protest the author voices the following accusation: '--that your District at its Convention in 1951 violated fraternal relations and offended against Divine Order--' and '--the Convention reversed God-pleasing Orders--' and 'Resort to such a process is an offense not only to our Church, but against the souls of those who are guilty of the violations involved.',

THEREFORE be it Resolved that we declare the accusations to be uncharitable, unjust, and therefore unchristian, and that our secretary be instructed to convey this declaration to the author of the protest."

The Rev. E. Schwandt, chairman

Teacher G. H. Prigge

Layman Urban Stark

May this entire matter find its solution at the foot of the Cross of Jesus.

Fraternally,

Arnold E. Wenger
Secretary of the Board of Directors of the Minnesota District

The Ev. Lutheran Joint Synod of Wisconsin
and Other States
The Minnesota District

Saint Paul, Minnesota
October 2, 1952

Dear Brethren of the Minnesota District:

It becomes my painful duty to report to you that your praesidium has found it necessary to declare that Our Savior's Lutheran Church of Mankato, Minnesota, and Pastor Alvin G. Fehner are not in fellowship with us.

Our protests against their unscriptural practice in the reception of members without a peaceful release were filed last year by the Missouri Synod - Minnesota District. Their officials were charged with doing everything possible as soon as possible to bring the matter to a successful conclusion. But any action toward investigation, discussion and settlement of the Mankato Case originated with us. Meanwhile our sister district accepted Our Savior's into full voting membership over our protest and plea and without first investigating the charges brought. It is our firm belief that this procedure is contrary to Matthew 5,23.24. In our congregations we do not receive into voting membership a communicant who has offended a brother and has not removed the offense. So the Lord is not pleased with our worship and church work if we have not removed the offense we have given and have honestly sought to be reconciled.

We, therefore, protested the acceptance of Our Savior's into full membership in the Missouri Synod. Our protest was handed to Pres. Gamber rather late, because we were awaiting the reply to a statement submitted to Our Savior's and Pastor Fehner by President Gamber and your district president. President Gamber assured me I would receive a reply. To this day none has been received aside from an oral statement of Pastor Fehner's: "We won't accept that in a million years." That was the fruit of our efforts to bring about repentance and reconciliation in Mankato. Remember, President Gamber had helped to set up and to sign the statement.

Not only was our protest of this year rejected, but last year's protest was taken from the files and also rejected. I cannot but feel that it is our God-given duty to voice our disapproval of such action and to bring the weight of our admonition closer to those who have erred, by declaring them now out of our fellowship. Their district, I fear, strengthened them in their impenitence by its action. May God still grant repentance to these misguided souls.

We therefore must approve the action of Immanuel Congregation in stating that Our Savior's is not in fellowship with them. We held off publication of this notice in the hope that further dealings on the District level would result in the settlement of this troublesome case. We have not succeeded in any way.

You will find appended to this a copy of our 1951 Protest, a copy of our 1952 Protest, the Missouri Synod action on this latter protest, and our notice for the church papers.

Sincerely yours in Christ,

Oscar J. Naumann

Oscar J. Naumann, President

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