

THE LUTHERANS EAST OF THE MARSH:
AN HISTORICAL AND MINISTERIAL EVALUATION OF THE WISCONSIN SYNOD
LUTHERANS IN NORTHEASTERN DODGE COUNTY, WISCONSIN

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper two-fold: The first purpose is to understand the historical circumstances that led to a high concentration of Lutheran congregations being established in northeastern Dodge County, Wisconsin, and to see how that collection (particularly the set currently affiliated with the Wisconsin Synod) is faring today. The second purpose is to cast a vision, set a course, and/or offer some advice concerning these Wisconsin Synod congregations about how they can move forward boldly into the future.

Congregational aimlessness is not a rare occurrence in Christianity in general. Neither is it rare, for that matter, for a Christian congregation to feel small, non-influential and perhaps even insignificant in the context of a larger community. But it is uniquely difficult when one congregation of Christians that share a common Christ, creed, heritage and culture with other congregations in their shadow allow those thoughts to continue among their own people or their neighbors. This paper hopes to create an understanding of a specific multi-congregational dynamic that has been long in the works, and can be much improved, with the hope that these congregations may be blessed long into the future.

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INTRODUCTION

I remember sitting on my mom's lap in that echo-chamber of a church. I must've been about 5 years old, because I recall practicing some of what I had learned only the week earlier in that two-room school down the sidewalk. The little organ alongside of us seemed huge to me then. The sound that it made was enormous and powerful (and that hasn't changed to this day). I don't remember it in detail, but I imagine that some chubby little finger was pointing along as synapses fired in the brain. It was a “*Eureka!*” moment. What amazed me was my own ability, using what dear Mrs. Noldan had shown her little disciples earlier that week, to follow along with what was being pronounced all around me. The connection between those lines and shapes (called *letters*) and the sounds that I heard echoing off those three-foot thick walls by familiar voices was incredible!

That was a memory which had been lost to me for many years, until I recently picked up and studied that old book – familiar to many, but a stranger to me after many years – *The Lutheran Hymnal*. The color, smell, and weight of that book brought something back to me. The strange Gothic font of the titles caused that specific memory, all but lost, to come right back to the forefront. It came with surprising force for something that had been so long retired. I was about six when the then “new hymnal,” *Christian Worship*¹, was published and sold; yet another reason that I believe I must've been about five in my memory. I share this story only to demonstrate something that I believe to be true about so many of the people in the congregations that this paper will touch: *The congregations we belong(ed) to are part of us*. They are part of us in ways that affect us every day and in unique ways. They are home to us. They are family to us. And even when we are removed from them, they still remain folded deep within the crevices of our memory and experience, defining who we are today. Every day of my life I read something, and that would not have been possible but for Edna Noldan and Zum Kripplein Christi Lutheran Elementary School. And if holding one old hymnal for a few seconds can bring me such a singly strong memory that makes me feel comfortable, connected and reminiscent, then the same type of experience is a hundred times as true for others.

If it is true for me, who have been consistently and regularly removed from “home” since

1 *Christian Worship* is well past being “new,” and I can only barely remember the old one. But I follow the tradition of my elders in calling it “new”. Is there something demonstrative about me – and about my people – that can be applied to the conclusions of my thesis? You be the judge.

I started boarding at high school, I can only imagine how true the same must be for someone who passed more phases of life in their own congregation: parochial elementary school there among friends, followed by high school in the area, followed by college in the area, starting a family in the area, buying a house in the area, working a career, and/or retiring there. For them it would be more than just my one example of learning how to read. It would be years upon years, phases of life, compiled and compounded:

A one-time young teenage boy will remember seemingly forever how a certain elder commented to him one glorious Sunday on what a man he had become. A once-little girl may never forget how special she felt when her parents let her invite three church friends over for her first “*real*” sleepover party (and how years later she realized that her friends only came from 3-5 miles away). A groom will remember his shaking knees and pulsing heart at that spot beside the altar. A mother will remember each baptism of her children at the front of their church – and a few of the times over the next several years when she had to walk them out as they screamed at the top of their lungs. A widow will remember being brought to tears at the general absolution, given by her pastor at the funeral of her beloved husband, because she never did say something she now wishes she had.

Why is that thought important? It's important because it reminds us that head-knowledge assessments of ministry are so much easier to make than are changes on ground. Theoretical proposals for the future may be easy for some (and ever-easier the more removed you are), but the reactions to their implementation are likely to be much more difficult when we try to make our imagined future a reality. Since we're dealing with people's lives and memories, we must recognize the need to tread ever more carefully the more dramatic the changes. It is easy for a pastor to say, “This or that needs to change,” because the pastor usually does not have the same fond memories tied up in that location or in that way of doing things. It's easy for a teacher to say, “This or that assumption must be dropped, and a new thing put in its place,” because a teacher comes from elsewhere, with different perspectives on the matter.

I am personally afraid that some will think about me, the author of this thesis: “It's easy for him to suggest this route. He doesn't know the history of this congregation... the pride I have in what my family accomplished... the things I learned in this pew... the difficulties that lie ahead...” To that I would simply say, “You're absolutely right. I have not lived your experience,

and I do not claim to. But please don't say that I'm not invested here. I love this place and I love these people.” For that very reason, at the opportunity presented by this thesis, I did my best to become an expert in the history of the Lutherans in northeastern Dodge County, Wisconsin and in their current situation. I had the goal of understanding two principle questions: “Why are there so many Lutheran congregations, so close together in this area?” and “What can we possibly do about that?”

I am not so bold as to claim that I am now the expert I set out to be. Indeed, as will always be the case, the current pastors serving the congregations mentioned in this thesis are much more aware than I am of all the intricacies and dynamics of each congregation. Surely the active members are more aware than I of recent history among themselves. But I am happy to report that I did learn a great deal about the history and dynamics of the area in my preparation of this thesis. The most surprising revelations to me personally were: (1) the discovery of the high degree of formal and informal interaction that has *always* existed among these many congregations and (2) that there already exists a much greater understanding of the issues at hand (among both pastors *and* membership) than I had suspected there ever would be. I believe that both of these discoveries could prove useful for moving the Wisconsin Synod Lutherans east of the Marsh forward in purposeful and mission-minded cooperation for a bright future.

THE SCOPE OF THIS STUDY

In view of the two simple questions that came to be the essence of the paper, it will be necessary to keep a few things in mind. The first pertains to the historical section: “Why are there so many congregations, so close together?” In dealing with this question, I compiled as many individual records of history as I could find (e.g. early Wisconsin Synod convention proceedings, congregational history booklets commemorating anniversaries, family histories, and newspaper clippings). I then sought to coordinate those individual histories for a better perspective on the area as a whole. Special attention was paid to the origins of congregations, dual-parish situations, early creeds and synodical affiliations, etc. It very quickly became apparent to me that, at least for the historical portion, I could not deal only with extant Wisconsin Synod congregations and still do justice to the real cause-and-effect of history. There were several congregations which have been long-defunct, but played an important role in realities

which are still current in the area.² Also, because of the doctrinal history and close proximity of the Midwestern Lutheran synods (Wisconsin, Iowa, Missouri) there are many congregations that have changed synodical affiliations throughout their own story.³ To cut their portion out of the history of the Lutherans in the area would have been impractical, difficult and untrue. Keep in mind that when Lutherans start congregations today, they do so with affiliation already intent in the formation of the congregation. But in the 1800s, as self-professed Lutherans and other Christians came to the United States *en masse*, settled into their neighborhoods, and formed congregations, affiliation with a synod would not have been their first priority. As the author of the paper, I simply request that a nod be granted to basic historical realities: The matters of fellowship and differences in doctrine that exist today between the synods are often more modern than the history of the congregational interactions that I present here. Granted that there were differences. But even back then – to the average layman – those differences were often unclear, usually unknown, and eventually (relative to the Wisconsin-Missouri Synods) non-existent in the mid-to-late 1800s⁴.

When it comes to the practical portion of this thesis, “What can we possibly do about the situation?” I will neither recommend, nor plead, nor plan for the inclusion of non-WELS congregations in any proposed plan for the future. Though we would certainly pray for fellowship with them *on the basis of Scripture*, we have just as certainly maintained separation

2 Most notable among these defunct congregations would likely be:

(1) The Evangelical Lutheran Church of the Unaltered Augsburg Confession in the Town of Hubbard, first served by a pastor named Fredrich Beckel (or Boekel) and located on the present site of Saint Michael's Cemetery of the Town of Hubbard, about two miles south-southwest of Iron Ridge on Cedar Road. When conflict struck this congregation, it split three ways. Members formed Saint Paul's Lutheran Church in the Town of Hubbard (1857-1890), Bethany Lutheran Church in Hustisford (1858-present) and Saint Michael's Lutheran Church outside of Hustisford (1859-present).

(2) Saint Jacobi Evangelical Lutheran Church (Town of Theresa), which was first served by a Pastor Johannes Bading, who would go on to become the second president of the Wisconsin Synod. This congregation also served as a base-of-operations for decades to Pastor Jacob Conrad, whose name shows up in many of the congregational history books of the area. The congregation shut its doors in 1949 and its remaining members were received into membership at Saint Peter's Ev. Lutheran Church (Kekoskee).

3 A few examples:

Zum Kripplein Christi (Town of Herman) left the Missouri Synod for the Wisconsin Synod in 1863.

Saint John's (Mayville) left the Wisconsin Synod for the Missouri Synod in 1912.

Saint Peter's (Theresa), having not officially joined a synod for much of its history, was served by pastors of the Iowa Synod from 1880-1947.

4 Although the Wisconsin Synod was dominated in its early days by leaders who were *less-than-rigidly* devoted to the Lutheran Confessions, it eventually warmed to a more Confessional stance. In 1872, the Wisconsin and Missouri Synods expressed their unity in faith and doctrine through the formation of the Evangelical Lutheran Synodical Conference of North America.

for a reason.

In the same practical portion, I would hope that readers can give me the benefit of the doubt when it comes to a few unrefined generalizations that are made there. In researching for this thesis, writing it, and talking about it, I have found it a constant tension to be descriptive and demonstrative without “airing dirty laundry,” “naming names,” or starting rumors. Originally this paper was intent only to talk about this group of congregations in the abstract, and never to name any of them. I soon realized that this would be *very* difficult to accomplish from an author's perspective, and that perhaps even the concrete nature of the whole situation would be lost. There is something more compelling about seeing a map, for example, than simply reading a description. In all cases that an individual *interviewee* is cited, however, I have kept their identity anonymous to the best of my ability. With regard to my description of certain circumstances within the area (e.g. congregations that are “struggling,” “small,” “large,” “remote,” etc), I have left it to the individual reader to identify whether his own congregation matches each such description.

Having explained all that, it would be good to define and describe the geographical area that this paper intends to deal with. When I began to study the Lutherans in northeastern Dodge County, I already had a rough idea concerning the borders of my study, based largely on my own experience of the area as a child: I went to grade school at Zum Kripplein Christi Lutheran Elementary School (Town of Herman). In order to have the numbers to maintain certain athletic teams, that school formed teams together with Saint Peter's Lutheran School (Kekoskee). Since we didn't have our own facility, we regularly practiced and played in the gymnasiums of Saint Matthew's Lutheran School (Iron Ridge) or Saint Paul's Lutheran School (Brownsville). Different tournaments and events would also occasionally bring us to Saint John's Lutheran School (Lomira) or Saint Paul's Lutheran School (Town of Lomira). Add the fact that Zum Kripplein Christi's school was nearly a type of association by itself, and that families from congregations like Zion (Town of Theresa), Emmanuel (Town of Herman) and Trinity (Town of Herman) all contributed students to its school. These congregations also formed a joint youth group which I once was part of, later formally including youth from Saint John's (Woodland) and Saint Matthew's (Iron Ridge). If you are familiar with the area and know these congregations or places by name, then you already have a good understanding of the rough borders of this thesis.

But as it turns out, there was far greater precedent for setting the borders where they would come to be set. As I researched the history of these congregations, I came to realize that many of them had *very* long-standing relationships with one another. Somewhere in the recesses of my mind I had formed the idea that at some point, long in the past, each of these congregations had its own pastor, its own organist, etc. It turns out that I could not have been more wrong. As a matter of fact, in the opinion of this amateur historian, the very area that I had known so well as a child is one that has been a single large ministry area for nearly its entire history. Many of the congregations within the area had founded one or two of the others (either by contributing members, supplying the labor of a pastor, or both). Each of them would be involved with a neighboring congregation at some point in their history to share pastors in dual-parish or triple-parish situations. Even to this day, there is a somewhat regular exchange when it comes to membership and families, etc.

The area is roughly this: The western border would be the Horicon Marsh, Rock River, and Lake Sinissippi, which formed a natural barrier in pioneer days and still does today. The eastern border would be U.S. Highway 41, the southern border would be State Highway 60, and the northern border would be State Highway 49. [See Appendix #1] My efforts, therefore, have centered principally on these thirteen current Wisconsin Synod congregations, moving roughly from north to south and east to west:

Saint Paul's Ev. Lutheran Church in Brownsville, WI

Saint John's Ev. Lutheran Church in Lomira, WI

Saint Luke's Ev. Lutheran Church in the Town of Lomira (Knowles), WI

Saint Paul's Ev. Lutheran Church in the Town of Lomira, WI (called "Halfway Church")

Saint Peter's Ev. Lutheran Church in Kekoskee, WI

Saint Peter's Ev. Lutheran Church in Theresa, WI

Zion Ev. Lutheran Church in the Town of Theresa, WI

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church in the Town of Herman, WI (on State Highway 33)

Zum Kripplein Christi Ev. Lutheran Church in the Town of Herman, WI (called "ZKC")

Saint Matthew's Ev. Lutheran Church in Iron Ridge, WI

Trinity Ev. Lutheran Church in the Town of Herman (Huilsburg), WI

Saint John's Ev. Lutheran Church in the Town of Hubbard (Woodland), WI

Bethany Ev. Lutheran Church in Hustisford, WI⁵

In order to prepare the historical portion of this thesis, as a matter of consequence, I also spent some time getting to know the early history of the following congregations. These congregations (due to their lack of existence or doctrinal unity with us) will not play a part in the practical portion of my thesis, but may have played a large part in the history of many still-extant congregations:

Saint Paul's Ev. Lutheran Church in the Town of LeRoy, WI (defunct)

Saint Petri Ev. Lutheran Church in the Town of Theresa, WI (defunct)

Saint Jacobi Ev. Lutheran Church in the Town of Theresa, WI (defunct)

Immanuel Ev. Lutheran Church (called "Hochheim")

in the Towns of Theresa and Herman, WI (merged back into its mother-church)

Immanuel Ev. Lutheran Church (called "River Church")

in the Town of Theresa, WI (now LCMS)

Saint John's Ev. Lutheran Church in Mayville, WI (now LCMS)

Saint Paul's Ev. Lutheran Church in Mayville, WI (now ELCA)

Saint Stephen's Ev. Lutheran Church in Horicon, WI (now LCMS)

Saint John's Ev. Lutheran Church, Town of Hubbard (Browns Corners), WI (now LCMS)

Ev. Lutheran Church of the Unalt. Augsburg Confession, Town of Hubbard, WI (defunct)

Saint Paul's Ev. Lutheran Church in the Town of Hubbard, WI (defunct)

First, since this thesis is intended to be inherently practical, allow me to present a quick portrait or description of the area. I have already referred to the congregations in these townships as "one large ministry area." Let me clarify what I intended by that. I will begin somewhat anecdotally, describing the culture of the area and then zooming in particularly to the "church culture" among our congregations. Then upon transitioning into the historical portion of the thesis, I will share some compelling documented evidence for the fact that this has always been one united area from a pastoral or ministerial perspective.

⁵ Bethany was a late addition to this thesis, based solely on its large historical influence on, and interaction with, the congregations to its northeast. To date, nobody at Bethany has been contacted by the author regarding this thesis. Based on what will be my proposed vision for practical portion of my thesis, I would consider Bethany to be outside of the main geographical area of highly concentrated churches. That conclusion is simply practical and logistical: it is slightly farther away and much larger than any of the other congregations.

THE PEOPLE EAST OF THE MARSH

First of all, each of these congregations are decidedly rural. The largest population center among this “east of the Marsh”⁶ region is the city of Mayville, WI, which in the 2010 census weighed in at a population of 5,154.⁷ While that is certainly large enough to have whatever accommodations a person might need to be content, it is not large enough that people know where I'm from when I say, “I'm from Mayville.”

Shortly following after it in size is the city of Horicon (with a population of 3,655), the village of Lomira (with a population of 2,430), the village of Theresa (with a population of 1,262), the village of Hustisford (with a population of 1,123), the village of Iron Ridge (with a population of 929), the village of Brownsville (with a population of 581), and last but not least comes the village of Kekoskee (with a population of 161).⁸ Each of these cities and villages are defined by their civic pride and participate in activities and organizations that are also (at least stereotypically) rural-leaning: Firemen's picnic fund-raisers, frequented local businesses and well-known watering holes, the high school FFA, deer-hunting in fall with the neighbors, mutual insurance agencies, graduations and confirmation celebrations where it seems the whole neighborhood is invited. The local folks participate in all these things and take pride in them; and their communities are the better for it.

As you might have guessed, the economy of the area is predominantly blue-collar. Perhaps the most prominent occupation is also the most historic – farming. Dairy farming, in particular, has been prominent in the area for more than a century, as has also been the case in the state of Wisconsin as a whole. Other important employers in the region include a John Deere factory in Horicon, a Quad Graphics (commercial printing) plant outside of Lomira, some dairy processing or cheese plants in Mayville, Lomira, and Theresa, and other factories of various kinds. All of these businesses make use of and propagate a population of hard-working and industrious people, many of whom form the backbone of our congregations there.

As far as the Wisconsin Synod Lutheran congregations go, it is easy to see a similar

6 I will be using this term, “east of the Marsh,” as a catch-all term for the region (*synecdoche*) throughout the course of this paper. I certainly understand that not all the congregations dealt with here fall strictly east of the Horicon Marsh. But I do feel that the Marsh itself is more generally known outside the region and therefore presents a better reference point for less-local readers than say, Lake Sinissippi.

7 2010 United States Census. (<http://factfinder2.census.gov>, accessed on 2/10/2013).

8 2010 United States Census. (<http://factfinder2.census.gov>, accessed on 2/10/2013).

“church culture” among the membership east of the Marsh. Historically, these congregations have all valued the education of the young and placed it as a high priority. Of the thirteen extant Wisconsin Synod congregations mentioned above, a full ten have had their own school at some point in their history. At present, four of those parochial schools still exist. Most (if not all) of the congregations that do not operate their own school have dedicated funds to assist their young disciples in attending a sister congregation's school.

Another anecdotal piece of evidence that supports a common “church culture” is the fact that the very *ethos* of worship is virtually identical among the Wisconsin Synod congregations there. The Wisconsin Synod hymnal *Christian Worship* serves as the common liturgical basis at the worship services of all these congregations. Taken as a whole, they are overwhelmingly conservative in their approach to the divine service and overwhelmingly similar to one another. There are not typically guitars, percussion instruments or bagpipes leading the service: the pipe organ leads the congregation in song. There is a confession and absolution at every service, three readings, and so forth. The worship experience at each individual location on each Sunday is essentially the same, the only major variable being the sermon, which is dependent on the pastor alone.

Come to think of it, even the sermon and pastor would be the same if you were to attend services at many of these congregations on a given Sunday. That's because among them there is a long history of dual-parish and triple-parish arrangements, particularly among the historically smaller ones. Several of these congregations have spent the majority of their century-and-a-half long histories in multi-parish arrangements: Zum Kripplein Christi (Town of Herman), Emmanuel (Town of Herman), Trinity (Town of Herman), Saint Paul's (Town of Lomira), Saint Luke's (Town of Lomira) are all notables. One congregation in particular, Zion Ev. Lutheran Church (Town of Theresa) seems to have had its own pastor for exactly seven years of its 150-year history.⁹ As of January 2013, of the ten pastors serving the the thirteen congregations (including one retired pastor and one vacancy pastor), three of them are currently serving dual-parishes.

9 The first of their independently held pastors was L. Christ (1875-1879) and the second F. Bredlow (1886-1889).
Zion Ev. Lutheran Church, *Centennial Jubilee, 1863-1963*, Zion Ev. Lutheran Church, Town Theresa, Dodge County, Wisconsin, July 1963 (Zion Lutheran Church, 1963), 2.

It's easy to understand why that is. Many of the congregations are small and have been small since their conception (See Appendix #6). But the pressing question then becomes “Why?” or more specifically,

“WHY ARE THERE SO MANY CONGREGATIONS, SO CLOSE TOGETHER?”

Since most of the congregations east of the Marsh were founded well over a century ago, the foundational effort to understand the way things *are* must of necessity lie mostly in the way things *were*. To capture that answer, we need to understand the circumstances surrounding the foundation of each of those congregations. This “big picture” kind of understanding was hard for the author to come by, because in our circles, history booklets are almost uniquely published for anniversary celebrations. Each booklet therefore purposefully focuses on the one individual congregation. Unfortunately this focus comes at the expense of its sister congregations nearby, so that every 25 or 50 years members are given the impression that “we built this by ourselves.” This author found one occurrence after another of dual-parish situations of the past that were ignored or overlooked by published history – e.g. a single pastor, represented in two or three different history booklets, leading two or three different congregations at the same time, and that arrangement never being mentioned in the individual history booklets themselves. This is perfectly understandable, since the story presented by the booklets must be focused on the purpose of its authors. But it might also be a fitting analogy for the dilemma we face when confronting the kind of rugged independence that defines many of the congregations today. We will look into that more later.

When we examine the histories more closely therefore, with an eye toward the area as a whole, we will discover that each congregation owes its founding (over and against the other congregations in the area) to one or more of four principle reasons. These are the reasons which I will demonstrate shortly. Any given congregation was formally organized:

- For the sake of convenience...
- For the sake of confession...
- For the sake of conflict...
- For the sake of Christ...

First,

FOR THE SAKE OF CONVENIENCE ...

If you were to ask the average member of these Wisconsin Synod congregations, “Why do you think there are so many congregations so close together here?” The most likely answer you would get is: “Well, they were all founded before cars were invented.” That seems to be the popularly-known answer to the question – and with good reason. Convenience is likely one of the most compelling reasons that many of these congregations were founded.

But perhaps we should take it back even a step further than cars and highways. The first organized Lutheran congregation east of the Marsh (Immanuel Ev. Lutheran Church in the Town of Theresa, called “River Church”) was organized in 1847. At that time, the nearby saw mill which would eventually become the city of Mayville was only two years old. Two years later in 1849, another congregation (Zum Kripplein Christi in the Town of Herman) was founded – the same year that Solomon Juneau would cut a path through the woods to build his log cabin on the banks of the Rock River, founding what would someday become the village of Theresa. Other Lutheran congregations in the area also began popping up in the late 1840's and early 1850's. At that time the whole area was covered in trees that would need to be cleared before the land could be used to produce the grains and goods to maintain a family. The roads that existed back then would not be recognized as roads today. Now consider that at least in the Town of Herman, horses did not arrive until 1862.¹⁰ What did people do before then? As you can imagine, they walked. And walking takes time. It would be incredibly convenient to have a church within three miles of your house!

Saint John's Ev. Lutheran Church in Lomira is a perfect example of a congregation that was founded for the sake of convenience. By separating from their mother-church, Saint John's solved two problems for the group – overcrowding and long distances. In 1863, Saint Paul's (Town of Lomira) found that their accommodations were getting too small for their ministry:

¹⁰ Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church, *1851-2001* (Emmanuel Lutheran Church, 2001), 2.

This bit of information was encountered (without citation) in the well-written congregational history cited above, but has proven difficult to trace by this author. It certainly falls in place with the rural nature of the area. Robert C. Nesbit presents the statistic that in 1850 oxen outnumbered horses and mules in Wisconsin by three to two, with oxen being far preferred in rural areas (*Wisconsin: A History*, The University of Wisconsin Press, 284). Jerold Apps also says that in early rural Wisconsin, farmers preferred to have an ox as their first animal because American horse breeds were smaller back then, and an ox could also be eaten when it was no longer useful as a draft animal (*Horse-Drawn Days: A Century of Farming With Horses*, Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 15).

The original log church soon proved to be inadequate, for the membership of Saint Paul's congregation by this time had increased considerably. A new house of worship became a necessity, as the members well realized. However, the members residing farther North at the time considered it advisable to build their own church in Lomira Center (now the Village of Lomira) and for that reason, on January 29th, 1863, organized the Saint John's Evangelical Lutheran Congregation.¹¹

With its organization, Saint John's became one third of a triple-parish arrangement served by a man of incredible importance to the area as a whole, Pastor Jacob Conrad. The other two congregations being served by him were Saint John's mother-church (Saint Paul's, Town of Lomira) and their grandmother church (Saint Jacobi, Town of Theresa). With the formation of Zion Ev. Lutheran Church (Town of Theresa) later that same year, Pastor Conrad would find himself serving four churches – visiting each one roughly every two weeks – a task which he seemed to perform admirably for four long years.¹²

Did it make sense to have so many, so close together? Back then it certainly did, since it was convenient. In fact, it was likely as much necessity as convenience. A person who needs to walk to church would probably need it to be within three miles or less. And once the land was cleared, the roads were flat, and the horses were common, the horses would have appreciated the same. It also meant that only the pastor had to do the majority of the traveling, rather than whole families with land and animals to care for. It made sense in its time, and that was the point.

Perhaps the single most important event which would change the way these rural churches do ministry happened roughly a half-century after many of their foundings, 300 miles as-the-crow-flies in eastern Michigan. On September 27, 1908, the first Model T Ford automobile rolled off the line at the Piquette Plant in Detroit, MI. The Model T has long been considered the first affordable automobile. Obviously, it would take years for the automobile as such to permeate the United States, but permeate it did – and it changed the way people get around forever.

Think about it. Picture yourself hopping into the car to go to church these days. In the

11 Saint Paul's Ev. Lutheran Church, *125th Anniversary Jubilee of Saint Paul's Ev. Lutheran Church, Town Lomira, Dodge County, Wisconsin, on the 5th of October, 1980*, (Saint Paul's Lutheran Church, 1980)

12 Situations like this, and a few others, were stumbled upon by the author through a grueling compilation of recorded histories of each individual congregation. While I did record which information came from what source, etc, the mode of organization and manuscripts are a bit messy to be included with this paper at the moment (since they result from a mass coordination of resources). If you seek such information for your own research, please do not hesitate to contact the author.

upper Midwest, if it's a particularly cold January, you'll grab your keys and go start the car a few minutes before departure so that the windows won't get foggy. But once the engine is running, you've got a machine that is easily controlled, warms you up, and protects you from the wind, sleet, rain and snow in a bubble of tempered glass, plastic and metal. You can easily move at 55 miles per hour. You could drive 15 miles to church in 19 minutes. Perfect! Now forget the car and make it a horse and buggy. 55 mph turns to 5 or 8 mph. The controlled environment doesn't exist. If the weather is particularly bad, you'll have to not go. If it's tolerable but unpleasant – then it will be an unpleasant ride to church. And it's not just turn-the-key-and-go. Someone has to go outside and prepare the horse. “Better take the younger one because old Berta has that hitch in her step lately, and it would be better to let her rest.”

All this is simply to say that people were much more limited before the modern automobile. It was not only a wonderful blessing to have a congregation within 3-5 miles, it was more necessity than convenience. It could also be noted that many of the city and village congregations showed up later than their rural counterparts, because the cities and villages did not exist when the first congregations were started. After there was a gathered population, however, it became more convenient to hold services where the people were, rather than out where the church building was. Other congregations that seem to have been established (over-and-against their counterparts) primarily for the sake of convenience are:

- Saint Stephen's Lutheran Church in Horicon (LCMS)¹³
 - Founded in 1858, by a Pastor Fachtmann from Granville, then served by J.J. Elias Sauer from Emmanuel (Town of Herman) and later Wilhelm Kolb from Saint Paul's (Town of Hubbard).
- Saint Peter's Lutheran Church in Theresa¹⁴
 - Founded in 1870 by Lutherans in the village of Theresa who wished to have a church “in their midst,” presumably something closer than Zion, Saint Petri, Saint Jacobi (Town of Theresa) or Saint Paul's (Town of Lomira).
- Saint Peter's Lutheran Church in Kekoskee¹⁵
 - First services preached at Kekoskee in 1872, by Pastor Jacob Conrad from Saint Jacobi (Town of Theresa).

13 Saint Stephen's Ev. Lutheran Church, *A Brief History of Saint Stephen's ev. Lutheran Church of Horicon, Wis., from A.D. 1858 to 1928 submitted for her 70th Anniversary* (Saint Stephen's Lutheran Church, 1928), 24.

14 Saint Peter's Ev. Lutheran Church, *Centennial Jubilee – 1870-1970 – Saint Peter's Evangelical Lutheran Church, Theresa, Wisconsin* (Saint Peter's Lutheran Church, 1970), 4.

15 Saint Peter's Ev. Lutheran Church, *125th Anniversary – 1872-1997 – Saint Peter's Ev. Lutheran Church, Kekoskee WI* (Saint Peter's Lutheran Church, 1997), 1

- Saint Matthew's Lutheran Church in Iron Ridge¹⁶
 - Founded in 1885 when the opportunity to buy a failed Methodist-Episcopal church's building presented itself to area Lutherans.
- Saint Paul's Lutheran Church in Brownsville¹⁷
 - Founded in 1885 when a group of members from Saint John's Lomira who lived in the village of Brownsville decided to organize closer to home.

FOR THE SAKE OF CONFESSION ...

Albeit that it may have been convenient at one point to have a congregation every three miles or so, a cursory glance at the locations of some of the Lutheran congregations in the area reveals that convenience was often not the real issue in deciding who would worship where. Indeed, some of the congregations were placed within a mile-and-a-half of another Lutheran church or two. For twenty years, between 1870 and 1890, a person traveling west from Woodland on State Highway 67 and County Road R would pass three Lutheran churches in two and a half miles, all with a common early history.¹⁸ These two sections, “For the sake of confession,” and “For the sake of conflict” will explore a few well-documented examples of doctrinal differences and personality clashes that added to the high concentration of churches.

It is good for us to remember the theological battle that was being waged in many areas in the early days of our Wisconsin Synod – these thirteen congregations being no exception. The war of which I speak was over this question: Will the Wisconsin Synod be an “Old Lutheran” synod or a “New Lutheran” synod?

Though a book could be dedicated to all the history involved in those terms, allow me to quickly give a reasonable explanation. “Old Lutherans” were exactly what you would think; Lutherans who subscribed with no meek subscription to all the hard-won confessions of the Lutheran Church, contained in the Book of Concord of 1580. Particularly, they were not interested in down-playing doctrinal differences for the inclusion of (or cooperation with) other Protestant denominations in worship, education, etc. They stuck by the teaching of the Real Presence in the Lord's Supper in, with and under the bread and wine. They did not compromise

16 Saint Matthew's Ev. Lutheran Church, *St. Matthew's Evangelical Lutheran Church & School – Church Celebrating 125 Years* (Saint Matthew's Lutheran Church, 2010)

17 Saint Paul's Ev. Lutheran Church, *A Brief History of Saint Paul's Evangelical Lutheran Church at Brownsville, Dodge County, Wisconsin, Compiled for the Fiftieth Jubilee, October 6th, 1935* (Saint Paul's Lutheran Church, 1935), 1.

18 From east to west: Saint John's (Woodland), Saint Paul's (Town of Hubbard) from which Saint John's had split in 1870 and which largely merged into Saint John's in 1890, and Saint Michael's (Hustisford).

on their understanding of original sin, faith, or election.

“New Lutherans” on the other hand, tended to be more prone to compromise. They would have seen themselves as making reasonable concessions to Reform-minded Christians for the sake of unity in the body of Christ. They were not rigidly insistent (as many of the Old Lutherans were) on the use of certain liturgical elements like private confession with the pastor before receiving Holy Communion. They were generally willing to teach people from “united catechisms,” which were books written so as not to offend any stripe of Protestant. They would likely have been more willing to make use of Melancthon's revised and compromised Augsburg Confession of 1540 (a.k.a. *the Variata*).

It seems that both “Old” and “New Lutherans” settled in northeastern Dodge County, and sometimes had a bit of trouble telling each other apart. Like all attempts to categorize people, dividing the pioneer pastors between these two camps often turns out to be tricky business. To be sure, there were many who have come to be well-known among church historians for their “Old Lutheran” stance from the beginning of their ministry to its end. Pastors Martin Stephan II, Heinrich Dicke, Erdman Pankow, Gustav Adolph Kindermann, Philipp Koehler, Johannes Bading, and Johannes Jakob Elias Sauer are all examples of early pastors that carried on ministry in northeastern Dodge County and solidly fall into the “Old Lutheran” camp. The last three are particularly notable, since they were early and influential “Old Lutheran” pastors of the largely “New Lutheran” Wisconsin Synod.

But there were more than a few in the cast of characters who seemed to be on neither side at all, or both, or maybe changed their own opinions with time. Perhaps as good an example as any would be that of Friedrich Beckel. In his history of the Wisconsin Synod (presented at a convention in 1860), first president Johannes Muehlhaeuser writes about Beckel:

F. Beckel was preparing himself for the preaching ministry under the guidance of Pastor Keil.¹⁹ Beckel separated himself from Pastor Keil under the pretext that Keil was too strict and narrow Lutheran. After mature deliberation and examination we arrived at the resolution to accept Beckel into our small circle, because we were in dire need of workers. Beckel received a license and was sent to Schlesingerville as preacher.²⁰

19 Earlier in his history, Muehlhaeuser mentions that Keil was a Missouri Synod pastor serving in Milwaukee.

20 “Schlesingerville” is now named “Slinger.”

Johannes Muehlhaeuser (translated by Arnold O. Lehmann), “The Founding and History of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Wisconsin and Neighboring States [Presented to the Eleventh Convention of the Synod at First Ev. Lutheran (later St. Peter’s) Church, Fond du Lac, Wisconsin, May 31-June 7, 1860],” *WELS Historical*

But it seems that Beckel was not as interested in working for the “New Lutherans” as it would have appeared:

In the course of the first half year Beckel married a young girl who came from an old-Lutheran family, with the result that Beckel, as he personally felt, returned to the old-Lutheran church, but was not able to become a member of the Missouri or Buffalo Synods, and as a result he is up to this day an independent, preaching and administering the sacraments according to his own conscience. Beckel is still carrying on this ill-practice in Town Hermann on the basis of our license which was invalid on the day when he left us.²¹

The year to which President Muehlhaeuser refers seems to have been 1849, since that was the year in which Saint Paul's Ev. Lutheran church in Slinger was organized under Beckel's name.²² It was probably upon his leaving Muehlhaeuser's association later that same year that Beckel crossed into Dodge County. There he would become the organizer of three Lutheran congregations: The Ev. Lutheran Church of the Unaltered Augsburg Confession in the Town of Hubbard (defunct), Zum Kripplein Christi Ev. Lutheran Church (Town of Herman) and Trinity Ev. Lutheran Church (Town of Herman). Included in the very names of at least two of these congregations at their organization was a phrase that meant to serve as a distinguishing mark over-and-against the “New Lutherans” of the area: He named them congregations “of the Unaltered Augsburg Confession”.

Right alongside the staunch confessional stance of a man like Fredrich Beckel stood as many “New Lutheran” pastors like Jacob Conrad. While it is always unfair to play historical speculation, I do not hesitate to call Conrad a “New Lutheran” early in his ministry, even though I never encountered him calling himself so. Synodical convention notes from those early years clearly show a man who was probably more inclined to accommodation than clear confession. At the 1854 convention of the Synod, while pastoring at Emmanuel (Town of Herman), he seems to publicly reprimand pastoral candidate J.J. Elias Sauer for causing problems at the congregation in Slinger. What was Candidate Sauer doing? He had begun some church services by chanting

Journal, Vol. 3, No. 2, Fall 1985, 12

21 Johannes Muehlhaeuser, translated by Arnold O. Lehmann, “The Founding and History of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Wisconsin and Neighboring States [Presented to the Eleventh Convention of the Synod at First Ev. Lutheran (later St. Peter's) Church, Fond du Lac, Wisconsin, May 31-June 7, 1860],” *WELS Historical Journal*, Vol. 3, No. 2, Fall 1985, 12

22 Saint Paul's Ev. Lutheran Church (http://www.stpaulslinger.org/site/cpage.asp?cpage_id=180039773&sec_id=180011427, accessed on 2/2/2013)

the opening prayers – a custom which was seen as “Old Lutheran” in the minds of the Reformed parishioners.²³ In another moment from the 1855 Synod convention, Pastor Conrad is recorded as having asked “whether those young persons who come from the Methodist Church would still have to be confirmed,”²⁴ presumably believing it unnecessary himself.

On the other hand, we cannot make too great a case of the Wisconsin Synod's early doctrinal laxity, because in other years it is just as easy to encounter cases in which there was very real concern for having correct teaching and practice. Take in this case the incident of Pastor Friedrich von Schmidt, who briefly served the dual-parish of Saint Jacobi (Town of Theresa) and Saint Paul's (Town of Lomira) in 1860-1861. At the Synod convention of 1860, only after having been certified by the Wisconsin Synod as a pastor, he raised some eyebrows with public comments about the doctrines of church and ministry. His comments revealed that he followed the teaching of J.A.A. Grabau, founder of the Buffalo Synod, who believed that parishioners owe obedience to their pastor in everything “that is not directly contradictory to Scripture”.^{25, 26}

Much discussion and study ensued among the small Wisconsin Synod pastorate. Pastor von Schmidt was asked to reconsider his position, to study it, and report back the next year. One year later, he was suspended from the Synod. Apparently he made some attempt to take his congregations with him into the Episcopal Church, and had a bit of success. He managed to split the congregation of Saint Jacobi roughly in half. But his success was short-lived. Six years after the split, von Schmidt's followers returned to their roots and organized themselves once again as a Lutheran parish, called Saint Petri Ev. Lutheran Church (Town of Theresa).²⁷ The new congregation established themselves just one-and-a-half miles from Saint Jacobi, existing as such for eighty-two years (1866-1948).

It is easy to see why men of such various opinions and different natures as Fredrich

23 Arnold O. Lehmann, “Synodical Convention, June 11th to 14th at the Granville Congregation, Milwaukee Co. [1854],” *WELS Historical Journal*, Vol. 10, No. 2, October 1992, 4.

24 Arnold O. Lehmann, “Synodical Convention in the Evangelical Lutheran Grace Church in Milwaukee in the Year of Our Lord 1855,” Vol. 10, No. 2, October 1992, 8.

25 Arnold O. Lehmann, “Proceedings of the Eleventh Convention of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Wisconsin held in the Church of Watertown and Vicinity, Wisconsin from May 25 to 31, 1861 A.D.,” Vol. 13, No. 2, October 1995, 14.

26 Arnold O. Lehmann, “1862 Proceedings, Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod,” Vol. 16, No. 1, April 1998, 8-9.

27 From a short, handwritten history of Saint Jacobi congregation in English and with corresponding German. Origin unknown. Obtained from a Wisconsin Synod member and amateur historian in Lomira, WI.

Beckel, Jacob Conrad, and Friedrich von Schmidt would end up attracting and establishing different congregations of Lutherans as well. For the purposes of this paper, however, the important thing to note is that through the course of time, changes took place on a broader scale that affected that area as a whole. Particularly, the Wisconsin Synod grew into a more firm and faithful confession of Biblical truth and a stronger commitment to the Lutheran Confessions. Our spiritual ancestors eventually recognized that same reality – which is why Beckel's congregations and Conrad's congregations stand side-by-side in common confession today.

FOR THE SAKE OF CONFLICT ...

Speaking of different personalities:

In the upper Immanuel Congregation near Mayville a serious controversy arose while I was still there. In that congregation there were a number of people who would not submit themselves at all to the authority of God's Word. They began gradually to undermine Christian discipline, so that it became necessary to oppose them earnestly. As soon as that happened the battle was joined, which ended with the separation of fourteen families from the congregation. The gracious God was with me, so that in the subsequent investigations by the Missouri Synod and the Wisconsin Synod my actions were upheld. I must, however confess before God that in this controversy I was at times too hotheaded and impetuous.²⁸

The above words are from Pastor Peter Heinrich Dicke, a German immigrant from Westphalia and early Lutheran missionary, describing from his perspective a controversy that involved three congregations, two synods, and gave birth to yet another congregation east of the Marsh. At the time of the controversy, Pastor Dicke was serving a triple parish arrangement between Immanuel-River Church, Immanuel-Hochheim (itself likely born of controversy), and Zum Kripplein Christi. The conflict seems to have arisen principally at Immanuel-Hochheim, which formerly stood at the highest point on the town line road between the towns of Herman and Theresa, and where Pastor Dicke himself lived.

Our ancestors were wise enough not to pass on too many details about the conflict, and it would hardly make sense to speculate 150 years later about which party was “right” or “wrong”. While Pastor Dicke in his autobiography seems to interpret the aggravation as mostly doctrinal (and therefore perhaps more suited to our heading, “For the sake of confession,”) it seems that

²⁸ *Autobiography of Peter Heinrich Dicke, Pastor and Pioneer Missionary in Northern Wisconsin*. Translated from a typescript copy of the original by his granddaughter, Eleanor Katherine Daib (1960), retyped by Paul Wollangk, archivist at St. James Lutheran Church, Shawano WI (2003). (http://wigenweb.org/shawano/St_James_Lutheran_Rev_Dicke.htm, accessed 12/20/2012)

there were more than a few personal issues that put up barriers as well. For one, he confesses that in his efforts to deal with the controversy, “I was at times too hotheaded and impetuous.” The history book of Immanuel-Hochheim bears this out:

An idea of how intense the controversy became may be seen from the fact that from June 15, 1862 until May 19, 1863, a period of about eleven months, thirteen voters meetings were held, in most of which some discussion of the controversy took place. [...] It is apparent that in the course of the discussions personal issues became involved, since a group of members declared at one meeting that they wished to separate themselves from the pastor, but not from the congregation. They were told that this could not be done. Eventually thirteen families separated themselves from the congregation and formed the neighboring Zion congregation.²⁹

It seems that this new congregation went right to work to organize themselves. They contacted a nearby Wisconsin Synod pastor to come to their assistance – Pastor Jacob Conrad, who was already at that time serving three Wisconsin Synod congregations in the Towns of Theresa and Lomira. The congregation was quickly organized and accepted into the Wisconsin Synod. They built a new log church between the two Immanuel congregations.

I dwell on this particular example not because I have an axe to grind against the Zion or Immanuel congregations. Rather I share it here because along with being particularly well-documented, this history is also a perfect example of how an event from long in the past, relatively obscure and unknown today, can continue to influence the way we do things well into the future. Don't misunderstand: it was heated, it was difficult, and it was personal for all the people involved. But the time-tested importance of this controversy for us today is not who said what to whom, but rather that one congregation split and became two. Zion has existed from 1863 to the present (150 years) about two miles from Immanuel-River Church, and from 1863 until 1957 (94 years) about a mile away from Immanuel-Hochheim. Both Immanuels (while they existed separately) were Confessional and conservative Lutheran congregations like Zion, which is perhaps another witness to the fact the issue was more personal than doctrinal, as has been suggested.

In 1872, after researching, observing, and much theological dialogue between the two synods, the Missouri Synod (which included the two Immanuel congregations) and the Wisconsin Synod (which included Zion) declared formally what had become evident to them

²⁹ Immanuel Ev. Lutheran Church, *1854-1954 – Hochheim Centennial*, (Immanuel Ev. Lutheran Church, 1954)

both: The differences in confession that had once existed between the synods had been corrected by sound Biblical teaching, Spirit-guided leaders, and time. The synods were now in full fellowship with one another. This declaration also put the two Immanuel congregations in fellowship with Zion congregation once again, less than ten years after all that fierce in-fighting. What was to be done? Pastor Dicke had moved on years ago, but hard feelings between the members would certainly have remained.

For that reason, in 1881 an effort at reconciliation was made. Both the Wisconsin Synod (in the person of Synod President Johannes Bading) and the Missouri Synod (in the person of Wisconsin District President C.J.A. Strasen) were present, along with the pastors of the Immanuel and Zion congregations, when resolutions were made and passed for full reconciliation between the congregations.³⁰ Both synods recommended that in view of their common history and close proximity, the congregations reunite formally. The advice of the officials of both synods, however, went unheeded.³¹

In every possible sense I rejoice that Zion exists today. Allow me to play some historical speculation: If that small group had never broken away from their mother church, they would likely never have joined the Wisconsin Synod. I might never have known some of the close friends that I grew up with. Perhaps the grade school that I went to would not have been possible, since Zion was an integral part of supporting that school. If that group had heeded the advice for unity and reunited with their mother congregation, they might simply have returned to the Missouri Synod and may have suffered somehow the doctrinal compromise of that synod throughout her more recent decades.³²

These conclusions are all easy to reach, and would have impacted me, my family, or my neighbors directly. So I *absolutely* rejoice that God is the God of history, and that things turned out the way they did. I believe it all to be for a reason, through faith in the promises of God. But

30 Zion Ev. Lutheran Church, *Centennial Jubilee – 1863-1963 – Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church – Town Theresa, Dodge County, Wisconsin – July 1963*, (Zion Ev. Lutheran Church, 1963)

31 Immanuel Ev. Lutheran Church, *1854-1954 – Hochheim Centennial*, (Immanuel Ev. Lutheran Church, 1954)

32 For reasons that are too complex to innumerate here, the Wisconsin Synod was forced to recognize in 1962 that the unity in faith and teaching which it had held in common for so long with Missouri Synod was broken. The fellowship of the synods was declared terminated, and remains so to this day. Faithful Lutherans continue to pray for restoration some day, but only on the complete truth and common basis of Scripture. (Though I personally have great hope in recent developments within the LCMS, I beg even Missouri Synod readers to grant me the concession that you live in a divided house.)

I also pose this question: Does the past govern the future? How long should any conflict govern the way we do ministry into the future?

Zion was not the only Lutheran congregation east of the Marsh to be born out of conflict. All of the following congregations were born out of some conflict or another, most of which seemed to be mixed elements of personality and doctrine:

- Immanuel-Hochheim in Herman/Theresa³³
 - Group split from Immanuel-River Church in 1853
 - Merged back into Immanuel-River Church in 1957
- Saint Paul's Lutheran Church in the Town of Hubbard³⁴
 - Split off from the Ev. Luth. Church of the Unalt. Augsburg Confession in 1857
 - Remaining members moved to Saint John's in Woodland in 1890
- Bethany Lutheran Church in Hustisford³⁵
 - Split off from the Ev. Luth. Church of the Unalt. Augsburg Confession in 1858
- Saint Michael's Lutheran Church (ELCA) outside of Hustisford³⁶
 - Split off from the Ev. Luth. Church of the Unalt. Augsburg Confession in 1859
- Saint John's Lutheran Church in Woodland³⁷
 - Split off from Saint Paul's Lutheran Church (Town of Hubbard) in 1870

FOR THE SAKE OF CHRIST ...

Church-planting “for the sake of Christ” was perhaps one of the more surprising reasons that I saw when researching the question, “Why so many congregations, so close together?”

It's easy for us 150+ years later to say, “My ancestors came from Germany.” But from there we tend to project our own realities, concluding that all of our families spoke the same language, were the same kind of Lutheran, had the same values and perspectives, were equally devoted to retaining or abandoning their home culture, etc. All of these turn out to be pretty brassy assumptions when we research the history.

German was still an extremely divided language in the mid-1800s. Most notably it was divided between *Plattdeutsch* (Low German) and *Hochdeutsch* (High German), but there were

33 Immanuel Ev. Lutheran Church (River Church), Town of Theresa, “The History of Our Congregation,” (<http://www.immanuelmayville.com/history.php>, Accessed 12/14/12)

34 This is well attested to in the histories of Bethany Ev. Lutheran Church (Hustisford) and Saint Michael's Ev. Lutheran Church (Hustisford). Saint John's (Woodland) is another congregation that resulted because of a controversy that split this Saint Paul's congregation.

35 Bethany Ev. Lutheran Church, *God's Grace Through a Century, 1858-1958*, (Bethany Ev. Lutheran Church, 1958)

36 Saint Michael's Ev. Lutheran Church, *Our Story: The History of Saint Michael's Lutheran Church*, (<https://sites.google.com/site/saintmichaelselca/about-us/what-we-believe>, Accessed 2/12/13)

37 Saint John's Ev. Lutheran Church, *Diamond Jubilee, 1870-1945*, (Saint John's Ev. Lutheran Church, 1945)

also dialects of both. Although certainly weighted toward Plattdeutsch, among the early settlers of northeastern Dodge County, both languages could be found.

When it came to religion, Germans that arrived in the United States were free-thinkers (atheists), Jews, Old Lutherans, New Lutherans, Evangelicals, Reformed, Roman Catholic, and Anabaptists. Depending on how much time they spent out east before they arrived in the upper Midwest, they may have been influenced by Methodists, Presbyterians, Anglicans, or American Lutherans.

Leaving Germany, they would have come from the fields, from small towns and from large cities. They would have come from the mountains and the plains, from the north, south, east and west. When they moved to the rural townships of northeastern Dodge County, they most likely all settled down according to their land allotment, one next to another, without initially paying much attention to what religion their neighbors were. Their priorities would likely have been something like this: First, find my land (usually 40 acres, as set by the federal government). Second, understand its borders. Third, scope out where I want to build my house. Fourth, construct a home (usually a log cabin first) for me, my wife, and kids. Finally, begin clearing the half-acre that the government requires me to clear in order to keep my land.

Somewhere in those priorities, depending on the person, would have been the desire to know the neighbors and to form a religious community. But without horses for travel, without flat and easily-traveled roads, without an educated preacher for miles – what do you do when you want to worship the Triune God with others? Simply put, you just do it. You gather your closest neighbors, the Lutherans, Methodists and Reformed, and you humbly decide to make a congregation that will work until the circumstances change. The question for many of the earliest settlers in rural Dodge County was not, “Lutheran Church or Reformed Church?” but rather “Church or no church?” Within that context, then, we can be proud of every immigrant that answered, “Let's form a church!”

A quick glance at any of the early plat-maps of the area will reveal this history. Even today, cemeteries labeled “union cemetery,” or “evangelical³⁸ cemetery” abound, and are often

38 In this case, the term “Evangelical” must be understood from the mindset of an 1800s European like those who named the congregations and cemeteries, not from that of a modern American perspective. “Evangelical” was the name that King Frederick William III gave to the union of the Lutheran and Reformed churches that he forced by royal decree. It therefore became a practical “catch-all” term that would have largely meant “German Protestant” to the German settlers in the 1800s.

found on plots of land where these hodge-podge churches once stood. But it is always necessary to remember that while the settlers were certainly happy to have these churches, their roots in union were often forged by necessity, not necessarily by a common confession of the members. As a person becomes acquainted with the history books of many of these congregations, it's easy to see that these little groups were often not particularly aware of the differences between denominations and were simply happy to have *any* qualified preacher in their midst, whether he was a Lutheran, Methodist, or Reformed. Indeed, this was a threat and a blessing for early Lutheran pastors.

Firstly; it was a threat, because scam preachers and preachers of other denominations were everywhere. The Methodists in particular had a presence in northern Dodge County. That denomination in that century was doing a *remarkable* job of producing missionaries and lay-leaders for the Western frontier of the United States, and their circuit-riders (traveling preachers) were well known for their dedication and the sheer number of miles they traveled every week.

Secondly; it was a great opportunity, because if a good Lutheran pastor got his foot in the door, was patient, kind, and a good educator, he could often win over such little groups and bring them into the fold of Lutheranism. The goal of such a Lutheran pastor could not be seen as selfish. Rather, by doing so he would ensure the preaching of law and gospel for years into the future. And in many cases, we can thank God that dedicated men did step into such congregations!

The best documented example of such a man that I have encountered was our old friend and prominent area pastor, Jacob Conrad. At different times throughout his long ministry, he would serve: Emmanuel (Highway 33), Saint Jacobi (Town of Theresa), Saint Paul's (Town of Lomira), Saint John's (Lomira), Saint John's (Mayville), Zion (Town of Theresa), and Saint Peter's (Kekoskee), often at the same time, and he was possibly also involved in the formation of Saint Paul's (Brownsville). The man was everywhere – and it's a good thing he was!

Once again, to read the history booklets of these congregations *en masse* reveals something of the character of Pastor Conrad which would otherwise be missing from any individual account. Early on he was certainly a “New Lutheran” sympathizer, yet undeniably and devotedly Lutheran. As time progresses one can see him, like the Wisconsin Synod itself, growing in confessional stance. He was a pastor of pastors, not principally concerned with his

own welfare or reputation, but more than anything he wanted the sheep that he loved to be connected to their Savior. Consider this particular example of events that transpired at Saint John's (now LCMS) in Mayville:

Most of the German immigrant settlers [in Mayville] came from northern Germany, from Pomerania, Brandenburg, Oldenberg, etc. Many of their people were unchurched. But among these German pioneers were also those who would not go on living without God's Word, and so toward the end of the fifties they teamed up to start a congregation. So on 1 July 1860 came the founding and constitution of a Protestant Reformed Church. [...] In the constitution which was accepted by this congregation was, among other things, the provision "that other fine preachers can serve this community, as such, other than regular members of the Protestant Reformed Synod." However, it is good to note that this small handful lacked unity in faith and doctrine. Some wanted to be Reformed, and the others were Presbyterian, and yet another was devoted to the Lutheran doctrine. [...] Pastor Bergenz³⁹ soon left the flock entrusted to him and went to a different area.

In 1866 the congregation changed its name and now called itself "the German Presbyterian Church". They made use of a certain "Pastor" Roser, who made their parsonage his residence. A dispute arose between him and his members, especially the Lutheran-minded portion of the congregation, who were not satisfied with his ministry. Eventually he was revealed as being of an unfit character. The little flock was driven almost completely apart. Finally, no one knew who was still regarded as a member of the church and who was not. But some of the members were still remaining firmly at the property (north of Allen Street).

Among them was also an upstanding Pomeranian, Carl Weiske, who had already not accepted the Reformed character long ago. This man, in conjunction with some other like-minded Lutherans, turned to Pastor J. Conrad, who was then at the small congregation of Wisconsin Synod Lutherans on the road to Theresa⁴⁰. They asked him to come and preach there in Mayville. That is just what he agreed to do, and in the fall of 1871 he began to serve the small group that wanted to be Lutheran with God's Word in the old school house. At the request of these people then, on the 30th of November of that year (1871) convened a congregational meeting to discuss a possible reorganization of the congregation, on the basis of the Evangelical Lutheran Confessions. [...] At this meeting, the congregation declared their connection with the Presbyterian Church to be canceled, defended the teaching of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of the Unaltered Augsburg Confession, adopted the name of "Saint John's Evangelical Lutheran Church," accepted the church regulations of the Wisconsin Synod, and sent in an application requesting to be accepted into the Synodical fellowship.⁴¹

39 Presumably, a Reformed preacher.

40 At that time, this would have been Saint Jacobi Lutheran Church, formerly located on land that is now the intersection of WI-28 and CR-AY in the Town of Theresa.

41 Saint John's Ev. Lutheran Church, translated by Nathan Zastrow, *Eine kurze Geschichte der Ev.-Luth. St. Johannes Gemeinde zu Mayville, WI, Zur Erinnerung an das fuenfigjaehrige Jubilaeum Zusammengestellt 1871-1921*, (Saint John's Ev. Lutheran Church, 1921)

Pastor Conrad was soon called to be the full-time pastor at Mayville (together with his other congregations) and seems to have been very devoted to his flock. Still under his leadership, two years later, the congregation would go a step further and declare that it would never again accept a church order that was inconsistent with the teachings of the Lutheran Church and the Unaltered Augsburg Confession. One might easily say, “Well that had nothing to do with Pastor Conrad!” But due to a thorough understanding of his character, I am not convinced.

The fifty-year anniversary booklet cited above goes on to tell the story of a unification effort that came underway between the newly-Lutheran Saint John's congregation and the existing Saint Paul's congregation of Mayville.⁴² I find the story quite telling about the character of Pastor Conrad. Knowing (or at least assuming) that he himself would likely be considered the largest barrier between uniting the two groups,⁴³ he stood at one of the earliest meetings (in 1878) and announced his desire to resign the pastorate at Saint John's if it meant that the Saint Paul's group would be willing to combine with them. (At that time the Saint Paul's congregation was being served, probably somewhat irregularly, by aged “Old Lutheran” Pastor Erdmann Pankow from Lebanon, WI.) Negotiations fell apart, it seems largely due to personal conflicts.

The point of this particular story is this: As a Lutheran pastor – devoted to the teaching of the Holy Scriptures, with a uniquely Lutheran understanding of law and gospel, etc – what would you do when you hear about a gathering of Christians, Lutheran or not, who are “like sheep without a shepherd,” looking for someone to preach to them? And all the more if they request you to be there? I thank God for men like both Jacob Conrad, who at least resolved to go to them and see what they could make of it. Who knows how many of our own Wisconsin Synod congregations were started out of just such groups? The very beginnings of many of these congregations is uncertain, since official recording of the history often did not start until official incorporation, which in that age seems to have come almost exclusively upon the arrival of a

42 At that time, however, Saint Paul's was known simply as “Machelsgemeinde,” German for “the Macheels congregation,” named after the family in whose home they were meeting. Machelsgemeinde would incorporate later as Saint Paul's Lutheran Church in Mayville (now ELCA).

43 This author, with choppy self-taught German skills and online translation and reference resources, cannot find any reason explicitly mentioned that Pastor Conrad would have believed himself the barrier to union. The booklet seems to imply that there were a few members that left Saint John's for Saint Paul's on poor terms, and that might have been the issue. Another reason that I suspect may have been conflicting personalities of the pastors. Pastor Conrad is understood through the history books as being consummately evangelical and accommodating, while Pastor Pankow in his respective histories comes off as being a lot more inflexible.

trained minister.

The early proceedings of the Wisconsin Synod conventions note many such cases in which its pastorate (early on, dominated by New Lutherans) debated about what do concerning the conflicts in their parishes. (Such conflicts were often between Lutherans and Reformed, sometimes including Catholics, and sometimes between Old Lutherans and New Lutherans). The first job of the pastor was always seen as to shepherd, counsel, and educate first (as it would be today) before dealing with still-remaining doctrinal differences through discipline.

As a side note, Zion (Town of Theresa) is another example of a congregation that was already calling themselves Lutheran when they reached out for someone to serve them, again to Pastor Conrad, in 1863⁴⁴. As a matter of pastoral instinct, what decent shepherd would turn down an offer to share God's Word with those who ask him?

“SO WHY DOES IT MATTER?” OR, “WHAT HAS CHANGED?”

Since I've spent so much time establishing what I see as the principle reasons for the large concentration of Lutheran congregations in the area, some are bound to ask, “So why does it matter? We have a lot of congregations that are very close together. So what?” The purpose of this next portion of the paper, then, will simply be to present some of the reasons that I see for the proposed vision that I will make toward the end of this paper, which is a brassy proposal to significantly reduce the number of individual campuses east of the Marsh. My reasons will fall into these main categories:

- General gloom among the smaller sisters
- Inefficient use of human capital
- Inefficient use of other capital

GENERAL GLOOM AMONG THE SMALLER SISTERS

Perhaps among the stronger reasons that I personally decided to dedicate myself to this thesis was the sympathy that I feel toward the congregation of my youth. If I owe thanks to any single group of people for making me who I am today, I owe it to my family more than anyone. But only shortly after them – and even mixed in there to some degree – is my home congregation, particularly the school that they provided for my kindergarten through eighth grade

44 Zion Ev. Lutheran Church, *Centennial Jubilee – 1863-1963 – Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church – Town Theresa, Dodge County, Wisconsin – July 1963*, (Zion Ev. Lutheran Church, 1963)

education. As noted in the introduction to this thesis, I believe that the leaders, teachers, role models and lessons learned in those years remain irreversibly imprinted in both my memories and personality. All were bound up in (and dedicated to) the presentation and application of God's inspired Word.

And so it was with a heavy heart a few years ago (in 2006), but also with an obligation to the realities of the day, that I cast my vote at a congregational voters meeting. I voted to close the school that I had loved (once provisions had been made for continued ministry to the young lambs of the congregation). Though I loved the school, together with the experiences I had there and the people I knew there, I was also faced with a difficult reality. For whatever reason, there were not enough students to justify the expenses of keeping it open. Why did I cast my vote the way I did if my love was sincere? (At least one person has asked.) It's because I recognized that it was ultimately not the building or the history that made it special. What made it special was the family that God had created there. What made it special was the work of his Holy Spirit and his Word. That Word was taught and practiced under the skilled hands of dear teachers, devoted parents, and even fellow classmates who had taken it upon themselves to be peers and role models. While I had once believed the school to be unique, my time away in high school and college (which were both Lutheran schools of the same confession) had led me to realize that my grade school (as such) was in fact not unique: Its best quality really lies everywhere that confession and forgiveness of sins is preached and practiced in Jesus' name.⁴⁵ Wherever that happens, God always creates a community. Now I understand that the real community that I loved (and still love) is the invisible Christian Church.

The point of the anecdote is to be a simple reminder that sometimes we Christians take our high and precious regard for the invisible Christian Church and we project it onto our own local contexts. As someone who has held those thoughts myself, and as a future pastor, that's what I often see in the hearts of many of Lutherans east of the Marsh. For the most part, that perception does not manifest itself obviously as being destructive to the work of the local congregation. It does become destructive, however, when the purposes of that attitude (*"I love ministry how we do it"*) begin to seriously conflict with the purposes of the Holy Spirit and the

45 "The kingdom of God does not come with your careful observation, nor will people say, 'Here it is,' or 'There it is,' because the kingdom of God is within you" (Luke 17:20-21, NIV).

invisible Christian Church (“*We do ministry because we love people*”). The conflict between those two attitudes is revealed more obviously when an organization is struggling to define the future; a struggle that the smaller congregations feel much more heavily and urgently than do the bigger ones.

It's worthwhile to remind ourselves that this is not strictly an *either/or* kind of mentality, as has often been commented to me in casual conversation by a few frustrated individuals: “The real problem is that they want to maintain their building more than they want to maintain their faith,”⁴⁶ said one observer, intending no harm. But that is not the real problem at all. To say that it is projects degenerate or idolatrous hearts onto the very people of God. As I related from my own experience, the real problem is often a failure or inability to distinguish between the two: My faith and its context.

Some might take me to task for saying it –because attitude is a hard thing to quantify– but I think that it is still fair for me to say that there is a general gloominess or desperation that characterizes many of the smaller congregations in the area I am studying. That gloominess may not be seen or heard on the average Sunday, but it often becomes evident in voters meetings, elders meetings, or council meetings. There is a general sense that the future of the organization is uncertain, perhaps even the present is without clear direction, and therefore the whole business and ministry of the congregation is colored in shades of doubt, if not outright crippled by indecision.

“Something's gotta give,”⁴⁷ said one interviewee, noting the tension between a desired future of his or her congregation and the reality of numbers and resources.

“I know that [my congregation]... you know... there might be the possibility that it would be closing in the next couple years,”⁴⁸ said a member of another congregation. “Things are really tough right now.”

There is nonetheless present among these congregations a tenacity for survival which I believe to be based on real, honest love for the preaching of the gospel, albeit not yet successfully disconnected from the externals like buildings, history and personal experience. What that means, practically speaking, is that the tenacity for survival is often directed at

46 Anonymous Interview Reference #1

47 Anonymous Interview Reference #2

48 Anonymous Interview Reference #3

keeping things going as we have known them rather than *doing whatever it takes to move forward*. Both approaches may well lead to survival of some kind, but the first requires waiting for the world to change in our favor, while the second gives us some purposeful challenges to work through for both the present and the future.

The two predominant attitudes that I have noticed common in my interviews and mentioned above (love of a congregation and a determination for its survival) are both, in their Scriptural forms, perfectly righteous. God *calls* us to love and support each other in faith. A Christian's dedicated devotion to his congregation is a healthy and Spirit-prompted fruit of faith. But when these attitudes become corrupted by sin, they are destructive. They're destructive particularly because they are now limited: "*my church*" (as opposed to "*the Church*") and "*for the sake of being*" (as opposed to "*for the sake of preaching*").

Neither are these victim-less errors. On the contrary, particularly in a congregation that is getting smaller and struggling more every year, the confusion between "my congregation" and the invisible Christian Church makes a victim of everybody, and every ministry of the church. Evangelism suffers for poor motivation: Who wants to become a member of a self-interested organization? Members also suffer for unnecessary fear and guilt. Though they seldom express it this way, the question "Is my congregation failing?" can easily begin to feel like "Is the Christian Church failing?" The thought was clearly present in a good many people that I interviewed who expressed their opinion that their congregation was suffering because of the culture: "People don't prioritize it anymore," or "It's not important to them."

Such interpretations, though they may seem innocent, are themselves damaging. Who are "they" or "them" to whom the church is no longer important? At best it is the strangers on the street, who ought to be viewed as the Church's mission rather than her enemy. At worst it is the delinquent members, the already burnt-out volunteers, the exasperated church council or the discouraged pastor – all of whom are in dire need of more help and encouragement than criticism.

Students of the Scriptures, however, have always understood that the success of the Church has never relied on the culture of the world outside. The un-Christian world (and to the same extent, any sinful human nature) is always, only, ever opposed to the Church. The best thing the invisible Christian Church (and its visible manifestations) can do is to set about

preaching and living the Word of God. It is the Word of God alone which creates the Church by changing hearts for Christ.

INEFFICIENT USE OF HUMAN CAPITAL

I doubt anyone that has ever been involved as the leader of a volunteer effort, big or small, would begrudge me this principle: The easier you are on your volunteers, the more you see of them. As a part-time job while attending school, I currently manage an English-as-a-Second-Language outreach and evangelism program in an immigrant-heavy neighborhood on Milwaukee's south side. Before we started up the program this school-year after a long summer break, one gentleman who had been volunteering for years told me that he could not help this year because he was just too burned out. Shortly thereafter, upon learning that I was writing lesson plans and preparing the lessons ahead of time, he came back and volunteered his help for another year. You see, for the year prior, volunteers had been left to prepare their own lessons – which provided just enough frustration after a long day at work to make it no fun for him to help us out.

The easier you are on volunteers, the more you will see of them. That very idea played a part in at least two people's understanding of why many aspects of ministry were so difficult at some of the smaller congregations in the area:

“It gets to be a stressful situation to do even the basics,”⁴⁹ said one, referring to attempts at extra-Sunday congregational activities in general. Another said,

“You always have the same people all the time, trying to do stuff, but then they just get burned out. So they get so frustrated that they don't even want to do anything anymore; even the simplest little things.”⁵⁰

A third, speaking about a congregation with many committees and different positions to fill, described it this way:

“Basically it's a beggars list, trying to fill all the spots, and it's not worth it because you get some people on there and basically they say yes, but they don't show up to the meetings because...”

“Because they said yes out of obligation? (NZ)”

“Yeah. And then they avoid church when that time comes around again so that they don't

49 Anonymous Interview Reference #4

50 Anonymous Interview Reference #5

get asked [again]...”⁵¹

These types of frustration are certainly known to larger congregations as well, but at a larger congregation there is a broader base of talents, time, and treasures to draw from. Where a smaller congregation needs to be extremely careful not to burn out its volunteer base, a larger congregation can often find new volunteers simply by dusting off the membership roster and personally asking a member or two that did not respond to an impersonal appeal printed in the bulletin.

But taken as a whole, the argument could still be made that it is better (from a human capital perspective) to have many smaller groups than several bigger ones. Doesn't it make sense, after all, that there would be more opportunity for more people to be engaged in smaller groups? Yes and no. There is a point of diminishing returns. One member said, referring to a theoretical evangelism effort:

“The problem is that when you have forty-odd people at church every week on a Sunday and you decide to throw a special event for the community during the weekend, you know how many people [*implied*: members to help] are going to show up? Maybe five. What can you do with that?”⁵²

Perhaps one of the most compelling takes on the issue of human capital is that of a pastor far removed from the Dodge County area of this study, who is proposing and working toward an amalgamation of sorts between several congregations that bear some strong similarities to the Lutherans east of the Marsh:

“It's always been a working relationship. We're too close to not have a working relationship. And to some degree it's even a little odd for someone on the outside to look and see all these churches in such a small space. Like, 'Why? How come?'... So... if we have four pastors preparing a sermon every week; Wouldn't it be easier if there was one pastor preparing a sermon, and the other three could focus really intently on youth, or really intently on school, or really intently on visitation, or really intently on outreach?”⁵³

His point is one that is essentially related to time: four pastors, spending ten hours each week to individually study a text, write a sermon, practice and memorize it, amounts to forty hours. On the other hand, one ministry team (comprised of four pastors) can designate a preacher for that week and soon discover thirty more hours between them to dedicate for excellence in any other

51 Anonymous Interview Reference #6

52 Anonymous Interview Reference #7

53 Anonymous Interview Reference #8

portion of ministry.

The same type of perspective can easily be applied to talents of both called workers and volunteers. My practical education at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary consisted of two years on ministry teams (as opposed to being a lone ranger or a “general practitioner,” as one pastor put it). One was my vicar year, which I spent at a congregation comparable in membership with the largest congregations of the thirteen east of the Marsh. The second was an emergency call at an area Lutheran high school. In both cases, there was a general skill set and job description that I was required to fill. But equally as important, there were others around me with different skill sets and different perspectives who were equally dedicated to the overall mission of the organization (church or school). They applied themselves diligently to their own calls, in areas that I would not have been able to fill – either for lack of skill, experience, or time. One of the reasons that the extremely varied ministries were able to operate at a strong level at both organizations was the fact that where one person lacked, another stepped in with his or her own different strengths.

How much frustration is suffered by the pastor who struggles to relate to teens and is still charged with running the youth group? (Or perhaps, just as telling: How much frustration is suffered by teens who are obligated to spend awkward time with a pastor unable to relate to them?) How much better would it be for one pastor who is passionate about outreach to have that much more time to visit the young couple that was in church last Sunday, while his associate dedicates himself to planning Lenten worship? Wouldn't it be easier on everyone to coordinate according to talents, rather than trying to make every man a jack-of-all-trades?

INEFFICIENT USE OF MATERIAL CAPITAL

The same principle that applies to the time and talents of volunteers and pastors also applies to our buildings and money. Like the thirty hours that a team of four pastors could find in their schedule each week by designating and streamlining their ministries, imagine what the Lutheran set east of the Marsh could discover among their resources if they made a transition from thirteen independent and separate buildings! Instead of thirteen lawns to mow, thirteen roofs to replace every so often, thirteen sanctuaries to heat in the winter time – how about 4, 5, or 6? That's potentially a drop of 50% of the maintenance budget for properties in the area. (Understandably, there would be many variables to this number.) The extra resources garnered by

streamlining all those material costs could be directed into continuing education for called workers, the local missions and ministries of the congregations, world missions, or simply improvement of whatever building becomes primary.

“HOW DOES OUR HISTORY SPEAK TO OUR PRESENT?”

These are all compelling reasons, I think, to take a serious look at the way that ministry is presently being done east of the Marsh. Allow me to do just that, in a theoretical way, with a nod to the historical section of my paper. I'd like to explore the present and the future of the Lutherans east of the Marsh by re-ordering and rephrasing the four basic historical reasons for the initial founding of these congregations. The questions I'd like to entertain are:

- Do these congregations exist for the sake of preaching Christ?
- Are we structured, located, and organized because of our confession?
- Are we structured, located, and organized in a convenient way?
- Are we doing what we are doing because of conflict?

First,

DO THESE CONGREGATIONS EXIST FOR THE SAKE OF PREACHING CHRIST?

To ask a question like that assumes (which in this case we can do, by the grace of God) that the members understand the Word of God in both law and gospel. They understand what sin is, from its damnable nature to its unavoidable conclusion. They know who God is: The author and source of everything, the only righteous Judge. They know that by nature, he is terrifying Perfection to our perverse and crooked souls. They know that our sin-corrupted souls earn us nothing but hell from him.

But they also know Jesus. They know that God did what man could not: He bore the burden of his own righteous judgment, so that we would not have to. He took the anger earned by our perversion and turned it toward his own Son, and heaped it upon him as he hung on the cross. And what do we get in return? We get new life – on earth and in heaven. On earth it takes the form of faith, the “new man” in us, which lays hold of the promise that God's judgment is past, allows us to live in thanks to him, and gives us confidence, peace and a purpose in him. In heaven we'll see that new life when we get there.

In the meantime, the invisible Christian Church (and to the same extent, the visible Christian Church as well) exists to preach the same message that we have known, in all human

contexts, and in all its intricacies and glory. This what Jesus meant when he said, “The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent” (John 6:29, NIV). This is the job he gave us to do when he said, “Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned” (Mark 16:15-16, NIV). For the Christian Church, preaching Christ is neither a burden nor a trivial task, because the very eternity of our friends, family, and neighbors is bound up in it:

The purpose which theology is to accomplish in man after the Fall is to save men from eternal damnation, incurred by every member of the human race, or, to state it positively, to lead men to eternal salvation (σωτηρία, salus aeterna). This purpose is stated by St. Paul when he says (1 Tim. 4:16): “In doing this [taking heed unto the doctrine, performing the office a Christian teacher] thou shalt both save thyself and them that hear thee.” So also Jesus: “Every scribe ... is instructed unto the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 13:52). Because of this high purpose of theology the ministry of the Christian teacher is the most excellent office on earth, the “good work” (καλὸν ἔργον) par excellence (1 Tim. 3:1).⁵⁴

This work of being a “Christian teacher” belongs to all of us as members of the invisible Christian Church, to be used and practiced as we are able. To be taught, encouraged, confronted and comforted by God's Word is the lifeblood of the Christian Church here on earth, so we do it to ourselves and to our neighbor. Doctor Martin Luther said as much by defining the church this way:

The Gospel is the one most certain and noble mark of the church [...] since the church is conceived, fashioned, nurtured, born, reared, fed, clothed, graced, strengthened, armed, and preserved solely through the Gospel. In short, the entire life and being of the church lie in the Word of God, as Christ says: By every word that proceeds from the mouth of God man lives (Matt. 4:4).⁵⁵

This resolve to know and apply the Word of God to the hearts of people does not limit itself to four walls. Neither is it exclusively reserved for the membership roster. No, rather it is the consuming purpose of the Christian Church to preach Jesus Christ and him crucified to the world in general – every nation, tribe, people and language; male and female, Jews and Greeks, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free – in hopes that they might find life in Jesus Christ (Galatians 3:28, Colossians 3:11). But the more specific question still remains, then: “Do these congregations exist for the sake of preaching Christ?”

54 Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics, Vol. I*, (Concordia Publishing House, 1950), 103

55 Ewald M. Plass, *What Luther Says*, (Concordia Publishing House, 1959), 263

This is a hard question that cannot be answered easily for any individual person, much less any individual congregation. Certainly, when it comes to being a light in the world and representing our Savior to our neighbors, we all fail dramatically in different ways, every day of our lives. It is most certainly granted – I hope! – that any congregation which is asked this question would say, “Yes. We exist for the sake of preaching Christ.” It would just as certainly be a false dichotomy to say, “Either you must change in 'x' way or you cannot preach Christ.” Indeed, in fulfilling the mission of the invisible Christian Church, there is a strong element of “Do what you can, with what you have, when you have it.” Saint Paul did not fail to preach Christ even when he was in chains, despite that he never would have planned to go to prison as a mission-strategy (Acts 16).

At least one person that I interviewed (an active Sunday school teacher) felt that although the future seemed bleak for their small congregation, they would stick it out to the end *for the sake of preaching Christ*:

“I look at [my congregation] and I have a pretty broad range of things that I can try. [...] That's how I decided that I guess I'm going to just sit and wait until they say we're done, because right now I can help kids [...] I know that I can play a part in their faith, and hopefully help their faith grow. I feel like I can have a part in it; why would I leave now? If I can help them, why would I not want to help somebody grow in their faith?”⁵⁶

But the question of preaching Christ may be more directed when we consider asking it this way: “What about the way we do things now hinders or helps the preaching of Christ?” Almost universally, the people I interviewed could see areas where improvements could be made. Even the members of congregations that were large by the standards of the area and were very happy with the ministry happening within their walls occasionally expressed a desire to do better in reaching the community. Assuming as I did, that in some cases the sheer remoteness of a few of the congregations was a barrier to this effort, I occasionally challenged people with the specific idea of teaming up ministry in ways that would displace them from their building or their congregational name (for the sake of joining formally and permanently with nearby brothers and sisters in Christ). What I noticed was a tendency to suddenly place the preaching of Christ secondary to another goal – or at least to conditionalize it to a certain set of circumstances. First, as you might expect, was the building. I asked,

56 Anonymous Interview Reference #9

“What would keep people at [this church] or [that church] from saying, “Let's lift up, combine our efforts, and operate strategically for the future?”

“What keeps them from doing it? Personally, I know it's just a building, but that building has a lot of history for me and my family, and it would be hard to see that history not there anymore. That's a little thing...”⁵⁷

Another person, commenting on the same idea, said:

“That's very much a 'this area' thing. Wanting to hold on to the name, hold on to the building, holding on to all of that...”⁵⁸

And I asked a third, this one the member of a larger congregation,

“Do you think, for example, that [your congregation] would be willing to give up it's name and take on a new one for the sake of joining with other congregations in the area?”

“I doubt it. I really doubt it.”⁵⁹

Practically speaking, what I discovered in my interviews was that while all things were *theoretically* on the table when it came to being mission-minded for the preaching of Christ, theory seldom played out in real life. Buildings and cemeteries were the largest barriers making a significant change like location. The second largest barrier was the perception, on the part of members of the smaller congregations, that their voice would be lost in the setting of a larger group. What accommodations, if any, would a larger entity be willing to make for the sake of helping smaller sister in Christ? And if none – then why none?

ARE WE STRUCTURED, LOCATED, & ORGANIZED BECAUSE OF OUR CONFESSION?

As noted in the historical portion of this thesis, one prominent reason that so many churches cropped up east of the Marsh were reasons of confession. Whether “Old Lutherans” or “New Lutherans,” or even various stripes of both, it was often a matter of doctrinal confession that made the pioneers of that county realize that they needed to separate from each other. Separation is, in fact, God's appointed way of dealing with what our theologians have dubbed “persistent errorists,” that is to say, false teachers of any degree.

The fact that unity in faith is the unique condition for cooperation in and (mutual expression of) that faith is evident all throughout Scripture, where appeals for unity abound. It

57 Anonymous Interview Reference #10

58 Anonymous Interview Reference #11

59 Anonymous Interview Reference #12

follows that since we have only one God and one source of his revelation among us (the Bible), not every stripe of Christian or Lutheran can claim to be correct: Either assertions must be made apart from Scripture or certain doctrines of Scripture must be ignored for variation in teaching to exist. *A faithful visible expression of the invisible Christian Church must be one.* Many a preacher has asked his Bible study to count the “one-words” in this section of Ephesians:

Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit – just as you were called to one hope when you were called – one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. (Ephesians 4:3-5, NIV)

It is exactly for that reason, and for the sake of said unity, that Saint Paul gives this order to the Christian congregation at Rome:

I urge you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them. (Romans 16:17, NIV)

And from the inspired pen of Saint John to the church at large, regarding those who had gone so far as to deny the divinity of Jesus and yet continued teaching in his name:

Watch out that you do not lose what you have worked for, but that you may be rewarded fully. Anyone who runs ahead and does not continue in the teaching of Christ does not have God; whoever continues in the teaching has both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not take him into your house or welcome him. Anyone who welcomes him shares in his wicked work. (2 John 8-11)

So we can see that the Scriptures place a high priority on doctrinal unity for the sake of preaching Christ, even within the visible Christian Church. Due largely to the influence of non-Lutheran (perhaps better, *non-Scriptural*) teachers and parishioners, poorly educated Lutheran pastors and teachers, etc, that unity was often not present among our pioneer ancestors. The question left for us to answer is, “Does that unity of faith exist among us today?”

This question, I can joyfully report, is relatively easier to answer: Yes! Based on the public confession of the northeastern Dodge County pastors of the Wisconsin Synod, their teaching of that public confession, and their parishioners' subscription to it, we can happily conclude that Scriptural unity of confession abides among us. Very little experience is needed to demonstrate what a rare and beautiful gift that is! Our pastors study together, worship together, and seek each others' advice for their pastoring. “How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity!” (Psalm 133:1, NIV)

The same is true of our parishioners, who can attend any Bible study among these Wisconsin Synod congregations and be generally certain that no sly tricks, turns-of-phrase, or subjective dismissals are being made of God's Word by an unfamiliar pastor. While we are not above Scripture's warnings to keep watch – certainly not! – we have every reason to be happy that an emphasis on *real, uncompromised, Scripture-based* unity has created an environment among us that holds God Word above any man, in order to be a comfort for every man.

Unfortunately, as we have already noted, some of the early relationships that existed between congregations of the area have had to be severed for the sake of preserving unity. Congregations that ended up in the Missouri Synod or Iowa Synod (and eventually the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America) are often now further away from us (doctrinally speaking) than ever before. Nonetheless we are bold to pray for their return.

Perhaps a more pointed question, in view of our history, would be this: “How ought we to be structured, located, and organized in view of our common confession?” Now that question is a bit harder to answer – since the answer will always have to be contextual. Unlike the previous difficult question (which was one that is *felt* more urgently on the smaller congregations) this one would likely pertain more to the larger congregations, which for logistical reasons must take the lead in any effort to express unity. One thing is for certain – we don't *always* do a great job of expressing that unity. I asked one interviewee:

“How aware do you think [your congregation] is of these smaller ones in the country?”

“Not very. Yeah. I think it's because [my city] is there, but everything else is just outlying area... Everything is right here.”⁶⁰

Another interviewee, referring to a set of meetings that had gone on for a time in this very area relating to the very topic of greater cooperation said,

“It seems like around here, when you're doing fine, you're doing fine. 'I don't need to talk to anybody else.' And we even when had those meetings, the joint meetings, some of the churches that were doing fine were like, 'We don't need that, we're doing fine. No, we don't need that.' but it's like, 'No, *we want* you there...’”⁶¹

Although it may cost extra effort, extra responsibility, and perhaps initially some extra time, a congregation that is dedicated to enjoying and expressing unity with its nearby sister-

60 Anonymous Interview Reference #13

61 Anonymous Interview Reference #14

congregations will always find ways to do it. What degrees of cooperation will follow? That, too, will always depend on a hundred variables. But our commitment to one another ought never be half-hearted. It should never be lip-service. “Make every effort,” said Saint Paul, “to keep the unity of the Spirit” (Ephesians 4:3). That includes watching each others' backs and bearing each others' burdens. James stingingly reveals the dangerous disconnect that so often happens between “professed unity” and “practiced unity” among Christians:

Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, 'Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed,' but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. (James 1:15-16, NIV)

Another question we can ask ourselves about the way we do ministry is,

ARE WE STRUCTURED, LOCATED, & ORGANIZED IN A CONVENIENT WAY?

It is interesting to note that many of the observations made under the earlier heading which explains that many of our congregations were founded “for the sake of convenience,” actually find their complete reversal in today's modern idea of what is convenient. In the mid-to-late 1800s, it was both convenient and ideal to have a church located within 3 miles or less of your house, particularly when *everything* was rural. It limited travel time for everyone; only the pastor may have needed to travel further each week. In the process of my interviews, I posed the question to a few members, “Where would it be really convenient to have a church today?”

“On the main drag,”⁶² said one, probably thinking from a community-presence and evangelism perspective.

“I guess somewhere within about ten miles [*implied: from home*],”⁶³ said another, thinking in terms of ease of travel.

“Probably somewhere in town, I think. Then it would be easier to go out to eat after church or run some errands.”⁶⁴

While there were certainly those who felt that yes, it was still convenient to have their church nearby – even if nothing else was nearby – the argument loses its steam when applied to the other considerations above. For example, evangelism instantly becomes problematic. If the church's purpose is to preach Christ *to people* – wouldn't it be more convenient to be located

62 Anonymous Interview Reference #15

63 Anonymous Interview Reference #16

64 Anonymous Interview Reference #17

where most of the people are? As someone who enjoys the work of an evangelist, I can tell you that I'd be hard-pressed to write an evangelism plan for a congregation with fields on all sides. *I am not saying that it is impossible, or even more difficult* to do evangelism in rural areas. (On the contrary, I have not had the experience to even try – and only a fool makes assertions without experience.) What I am saying is that in my own experience, it is easier to make connections with more people – in hopes of connecting them to Jesus – when they feel like they have a connection to you. Something as simple as, “Oh! I drive past your church all the time!” is a degree of familiarity with the unchurched prospect that a far-removed congregation typically does not enjoy.

This question of convenience also resonates with the comments made above about finding volunteers for events, ministries, and opportunities that a congregation presents regularly to its members or to the community. It is simply true that many hands make light work, and duplication of efforts (where there is not sufficient need for it) can sometimes serve only to wear people out. For example, think of the pastors that are serving dual-parish situations. Think of the amount of time and effort it takes – in simple, regularly-scheduled council meetings – to do something as easy as changing service times. A relatively simple act that can be proposed, discussed, passed and enacted with one group now becomes disproportionately difficult between two groups – and the pastor must be involved with both. The same is true with establishing a budget, coming up with a ministry plan for the future, etc. In view of so much common history in the area and a common confession among the members, wouldn't it be more convenient for us and for our pastors to have locations, councils, services and ministries in common as well?

To be fair, there are already some good examples of cooperation and coordination that already happen and have been happening in northeastern Dodge County for some time: School enrollment arrangements, youth groups, joint meetings, etc, have all been previously mentioned here. These efforts certainly are commendable and convenient for the people involved. But these efforts have also been limited and seem downright cursory when compared to other considerations like buildings, constitutions, and an overall “us-and-them” mentality.

For example, a congregation that has agreed to send its youth to a sister-congregation's campus for Christian education still refers to the school as “*their* school.” That unfortunate choice of pronoun may easily come to be reflected in offerings, support, and participation when

resources get stretched. And it works both ways: “*They send their kids to our school,*” is a sentiment that has been heard more than once in this interview process. Wouldn't it be more convenient if we dropped the language of non-investment and *we all* had a school?

Which leads me to my next question:

ARE WE DOING WHAT WE ARE DOING BECAUSE OF CONFLICT?

I pray sincerely that up to this point, I have done justice to some of the problems and issues that the Lutherans east of the Marsh face in their congregational ministries as they look forward to the future. I also sincerely pray that the conclusions I have reached are fair, and that I have managed to express them without doing unnecessary harm to my brothers and sisters in Christ who live there. But I suspect that if there are to be any red flags raised in the minds of potentially defensive readers, this question will trigger them. “What are you saying?” some might find themselves asking, “Are you implying that we can't get along?”

The answer to that question is, “No, that is not what I am saying.” But in light of who God calls us to be as Christians, the question bears our asking nonetheless. For the purposes of this thesis I will ask it this way: “Is the way we do ministry in northeastern Dodge County in any way motivated, propped up, limited, or defined by conflict, imagined conflict, or fear of conflict?” If we find that the answer to that question is yes, then we know exactly where to start when we look toward solving that problem: We need to start with ourselves.

When Christians, prompted by the Holy Spirit, abandon their selfish interests and rely wholly and completely on his plan for them – we do not conflict with each other. This is a foundational truth about what the Christian Church is: *It is one.*

Think back to Ephesians 4:3-5, where Paul encourages the Christians in view of their one faith, one God, one Church, to express that oneness also in the way they live their Christian witness. He begins his appeal with these words: “Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:3, NIV). Such encouragements, in positive and negative examples, exist all throughout Scripture. We already saw some of the negative examples; warnings from the apostles to avoid people who are bent on destroying the unity of the church. There are also examples where apostles had to reprimand the Christians that *among themselves* they were acting in ways contrary to their unity. For example, Paul expressed his extreme disappointment to the Corinthians that they were not mature enough to handle conflicts with

God-pleasing humility:

If any of you has a dispute with another, dare he take it before the ungodly for judgment instead of before the saints? Do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if you are to judge the world, are you not competent to judge trivial cases? Do you not know that we will judge angels? How much more the things of this life! Therefore, if you have disputes about such matters, appoint as judges even men of little account in the church! I say this to shame you. Is it possible that there is nobody among you wise enough to judge a dispute between believers? But instead, one brother goes to law against another—and this in front of unbelievers!

The very fact that you have lawsuits among you means you have been completely defeated already. Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be cheated? Instead, you yourselves cheat and do wrong, and you do this to your brothers. (1 Corinthians 6:1-8, NIV)

Paul casts the fact that there were lawsuits among the Corinthians as evidence of his disappointment in their conflict-management skills, but we dare not minimize these words to a mere tirade against lawsuits. It's not strictly the lawsuits that caused Paul to be disappointed. That can be seen by the last paragraph, where he says, "The very fact that you have lawsuits among you means you have been completely defeated already." Paul's disappointment is in the lack of a servant-mentality among the Christians, and a lack of brotherly love which is willing to cover over another brother's sin. No earthly congregation, no matter how pure, can exempt themselves from this piercing law. We cannot think, "We don't have lawsuits, so we're alright."

Another thing worth noting in these verses is that Paul casts the failure of the Christians at Corinth also in the light of the *mission* of the Church – to preach Christ. By their inability to reflect the love of Christ in their lives among each other, they were undermining the preaching of his love to the world. The idea is that unbelievers ought never be able to say of Christians: "I can see that Christ makes no difference to you, so what difference would he make to me?" Paul says, "One brother goes to law against another—and this in front of unbelievers!"

Now let's look at a positive example that Scripture gives of how one Christian community looked after their hearts had been transformed by the gospel:

All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all. There were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need. (Acts 2:32-35, NIV)

Sounds like a rather Utopian existence doesn't it? What on earth could have prompted such a thing? What about these people could have affected such a great change? You know. It was the gospel. The same change still takes place today. It took place in our pioneer ancestors in rural Dodge County – and it has also taken in place us – by the power of the Holy Spirit. It is God alone who truly enables us to live selflessly for our neighbor. And since by Christ we live in him, it is to his Word that we look to examine our own hearts and to better imitate his. The answer to my question, “Is our ministry in any way defined by conflict?” will always be yes to some degree. But the Christian pursuit is nonetheless always after the heart of God, in thankfulness to God.

Some may still well say, “But just because we should be united in Spirit does not mean we *have to* be united in buildings and other external things for the sake of preaching the gospel.” And I would certainly concede that point. The invisible Christian Church is not limited in any way concerning the forms and expressions that it can take.⁶⁵ Nonetheless, at the specific request of a few, I would like to present (in very minimal conformity to the actual requests) what I would consider to be an idealized future for this northeastern section of Dodge County, as well as presenting some of the reasons for the thoughts that I have. The question in this case might be phrased,

**IN VIEW OF OUR MISSION AND OUR UNITY,
HOW WOULD OUR MINISTRY LOOK?**

Again, I would like to reiterate the idea that these answers are situational. Unlike the clear prerogatives of Scripture (which tell Christians to seek and express their unity, and to preach Christ to believer and unbeliever alike) the exact form that these prerogatives will take at any time and place is not defined by our God. Neither should we *ever* reach conclusions or set rules to how God may seek to bless our efforts with regard to preaching Christ: We cannot say, “A church must be located here, it must conduct 'x' kind of worship, and be filled with 'x' kind of people in order for God to bless it.” Church after church and pastor after pastor have proven such assertions wrong, time and time again. Nonetheless, there are some practical considerations that I believe to be consummately important when we are thinking strategically about fulfilling the Church's mission in the future. Specifically, I believe that with regard to preaching Christ, our

⁶⁵ John F. Brug, *The Ministry of the Word* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2009), 85ff.

congregations will ideally be:

- Located where the members are
- Located where the non-members are

And with regard to seeking and maintaining our unity, I believe that our congregations would ideally:

- Honor the heritage of all the members
- Seek the participation of all the members
- Rather be wronged than need to be right
- Relentlessly move forward in view of the mission

First, we would be

LOCATED WHERE THE MEMBERS AND NON-MEMBERS ARE ...

Location is probably the most tricky part of this whole business east of the Marsh. On the one hand, it cannot be argued today (as it could have a century ago) that it is convenient or necessary to have so many independent congregations and their buildings so close together. All considerations taken, it seems decidedly *inconvenient* in view of the culture that exists among these congregations with respect to individual members “moving around” a bit. Someone wrote to me:

Growing up, we very seldom went to other churches because we had our own. And I remember when we had visitors, they were from “other” places, not the neighborhood, because they had their own church. I remember not going to [a church about three miles away] until [my high school] choir sang there. I was 17. We went to [another nearby church], of course, because we sang there and they sent kids to our school. We went to [a nearby church] and [another nearby church] because we have family that went there. But it was almost like you didn't go out of your territory. And why not? Because we had a church. Why would you want to go to other churches? Plain and simple. Period. Don't push the issue.⁶⁶

This author readily admits that in a moment of righteous frustration about some of the same matters, he once blurted out to someone close to him: “Argh! I just wish that *people could see that the only things that separate them* are the walls of their own churches!”

On the other hand, to say that *any* congregation in this area is without a mission field because of their location would also be a dramatic overstatement. A serious study of the families

66 Anonymous Interview Reference #18

surrounding our churches would reveal that. One pastor mentioned,

“Well it's interesting that we did a study through the School of Outreach a number of years ago, I want to say seven or eight years ago, where we did a five-mile circumference – you know – drew a circle five miles around [this congregation], which actually would incorporate three or four of these congregations, and came to find out that fifty percent of that population were unchurched [...] in that five-mile radius, which I think goes against what people might assume.”⁶⁷

So I believe that we would do ourselves a disservice to use as our principle question, “Does 'x' congregation have a mission in its current state?” The answer to that question for all visible expressions of the Church will always be yes. Rather, the question at hand ought to be, “As a community of believers in northeastern Dodge County, WI, seeking to reach out to our community as a whole, what is the best strategy to do that?” We are then tasked with the double-challenge of evaluating ourselves (as we currently stand) alongside our community, and making our conclusions from there.

I believe that if the Lutherans east of the Marsh can get to a level of trust in one another whereby they'd be willing, collectively, to lighten the burden of all their separate campuses and identities, that the best thing they could then do to fulfill the mission of the Church is to locate within the cities and villages. I believe that to do so would have the double benefit of eliminating many of the uphill battles that are continually fought by many of the super-rural congregations. It could also refresh and reinvigorate our Lutheran presence in some of those population centers.

There is a real evangelistic benefit of having a building in the middle of the people you work with and the people you hope to reach. One benefit is that the congregation is at least perceived as being part of the community. The reality of living in a time when vast areas are accessible to most people (via daily use of a car) is that a congregation located “in the middle of things” is viewed by outsiders as being just that – in the middle of things. Even a congregation that participates very minimally in the community – when it makes its presence known as a group or as individuals – is easily remembered by unchurched people who come into contact with them. Often it's as simple as that they can picture the place in their minds. Unfortunately, the opposite is sometimes also true. The “far-removed” congregation is often viewed as being just that – far removed.

67 Anonymous Interview Reference #19

Many men that have studied, compared, and found patterns that exist among thriving churches all stress the fact that one strong indicator of a healthy congregation is that it is an outward-looking congregation. A healthy congregation knows what it has to offer the community (and its members) and it actively seeks more and better ways to do just that. In the context of this thesis, we would say that the healthiest congregation is one that puts the preaching of Christ first and acts on it:

By now it's pretty obvious what it takes work to do outreach well. You will have to understand your community and then reach it. [...] [Healthy] churches have worked hard to reach out – and the dividends are eternal. Outreach involves much more than just getting people to come to Christ or visit your church. [...] We should constantly help more people get to their heavenly home. If we are to see more churches make a turnaround, we need to be more intentional with church evangelism and discipleship. The end result will be transformed churches and transformed lives.⁶⁸

Being in-and-among the people that it intends to serve is one of the easiest ways a congregation can seek to be outreach-minded. Neither do I believe that my logic (more people equals greater strategic priority) is flawed. God himself used the same logic with Jonah, as the prophet fussed over a vine outside of Ninevah:

But the LORD said, “You have been concerned about this plant, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. And should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left – and many animals as well?” (Jonah 4:10-11, NIV)

Some of the more defensive hearts that just read my last recommendation will be tempted to interpret it this way: “He's saying we should close my congregation and move us all into that other one!” Dear brother or sister, *no!* I am not recommending that we *close* any congregation at all. I am recommending that we *continue* all of them together. All of my recommendations are built upon the theoretical and theological hope that we could begin to think of ourselves as one group before we ever talk about making changes like that. If we are to think, act, and function as one group, however, there will have to be some ground rules. One of the things that we will have to make a special effort to do is to

HONOR THE HERITAGE OF ALL THE MEMBERS ...

If the area is to move forward in unity, it must therefore also be charged with

68 Ed Stetzer and Mike Dodson, *Comeback Churches: How 300 Churches Turned Around and Yours Can Too* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group), 115.

remembering and honoring all the history of all its members. One of the most profound lessons that I myself learned in trying to research the history of these congregations was this: Congregations that continue forward (regardless of form) are remembered because they still have an impact. Congregations that dissolved, failed, or fell away are not remembered beyond the people who were adolescents when they ended. What do I mean by this?

Take as examples the congregations of Saint Jacobi or Saint Petri – both ultimately congregations of the Wisconsin Synod, both located in the Town of Theresa, both dissolved in the late 1940's. Although both were older than many congregations in the area (Saint Jacobi was among the oldest) the actual histories of these congregations have been essentially forgotten between their closing and today. This author had to go to significantly greater lengths to find even basic information (lists of pastors, date of founding, etc) on Saint Jacobi and Saint Petri compared to the easily accessible and detailed histories of the still-extant churches. Because each group had “merged” into another group, they were typically remembered by one or two lines in later church anniversary booklets: “In 'x' year, 'x' congregation located near us dissolved, and the remaining members became part of our congregation.”

It is exactly this kind of relegation to history that the members of smaller, more struggling congregations fear when they are faced with the prospect of moving from their own building. They know that they (as members) would be received elsewhere, but they fear that their own proud heritage would be lost in the meantime. That's why I feel that it's necessary to honor the history of these congregations in more intentional and more effective ways.

I am the product of two schools that are “mergers” of sorts as well: Luther Preparatory School in Watertown, WI, and Martin Luther College in New Ulm, MN. Neither of these schools existed under their current names until 1995. Yet on both of their official school seals appears the date, “1865.” How can this be? Simply because of their history. Both of these schools are the result of mergers or amalgamations. Both exist on sites that were “non-neutral,” that is to say, campuses that were already being utilized by one of their pre-merger bodies. Yet at both campuses, the history of their predecessor bodies is remembered in more than a cursory way: They do not consider themselves a “new thing” as though they have no roots in the past. Why not? Because while neither school is a *direct* continuation of their predecessor bodies, they are both continuations. Each school has adopted the history of its predecessors as its own – and very

rightly so! The two schools are in fact a direct continuation of the mission, the spirit, and the heritage of the four schools that combined to form them.

There is enormous power to something like a name: A name is what causes us to think of ourselves as who we are. In the case of the congregational “mergers” I mentioned above (Saint Petri and Saint Jacobi), you can see that in either case “merger” is not a word that truly reflects the reality of what happened. “Absorption” would probably more accurately reflect the nature of the relationship. Certainly, the congregations that opened their doors to receive the members of the fallen congregations were good to do so. In both cases, sets of circumstances would not have allowed the continuation of separate ministries as such anyway. But the reason that these two congregations were largely forgotten was basically all in the name: Of the two independent bodies involved in each “merger,” one name, site, and constitution continued and another didn't. The final (unsurprising) result is that one entity continued and the other didn't. How else would you write that history book?

Yet interestingly, the sons and daughters of the folks who left the fallen bodies, because they grew up in the new context, felt neither cheated nor robbed of the heritage of the old. Why? Because even if their parents had grown up in the fallen congregation, they had only ever known the new. Are there members of Saint Paul's (Town of Lomira) that have any less appreciation for that congregation today, simply because their grandparents arrived there from Saint Petri? No! Do any members of Saint Peter's (Kekoskee) less appreciate that congregation today, simply because their grandparents moved there from Saint Jacobi? No!

In other words, history is for the living. If we are going to show a true and real commitment to the members of congregations that we are asking to make enormous sacrifices of their own heritage, their own memories, and their own felt identity, then *everyone* must be willing to do the same to a degree. We must honor each other by honoring each other's history, rather than simply waiting until we can stamp our own history over that of a brother or sister. This will be a challenge that must be faced by all the northeastern Dodge County Lutherans.

What accommodations are the larger congregations (which tend to be better situated regarding buildings and locations long-term) willing to make for the smaller ones who would outwardly sacrifice more? If nothing – then why nothing?

It should also be noted that, as in the case of the amalgamated schools mentioned above, a

change in name and a new identity ought never be viewed as a denial of the old. Wouldn't it be great, for example, if any combination of the Wisconsin Synod congregations toward the north of this study-area found a common basis for cooperation, established themselves strategically for the future, and named their endeavor "Saint Jacob Ev. Lutheran Church"? Such a thing would be a stealthy tribute to all of their combined histories – a common reference to the Biblical patriarch Jacob, the disciples named James,⁶⁹ the pioneer pastor they hold in common (Jacob Conrad) and the congregation that seeded most of them (Saint Jacobi).

Although it would be a battle, and initially painful, for certain elements to leave a building that has served as their place for ministry for generations, I submit that it would not be as painful as to simply watch said brothers and sisters in Christ close up shop in five, ten, or twenty years. The story would continue. *Our story* would continue, and we would make it include *all of us*. The history would go on – and it would be a noble history, guided by a mission, which we could pass on to our own descendants and spiritual descendants. Our children would not have to say of us, "Our parents let history do the job they would not or could not." Rather they could say, "My parents took the lead in defining that history."

That thought is what brings me to my next point. In order for any effort to accurately reflect the goals and unique concerns of the group, it must

SEEK THE PARTICIPATION OF ALL THE MEMBERS ...

If we are to respect each member in their history, then we must also respect them in their present. One of the biggest fears that members of smaller and outlying congregations have is that their voice and their contributions would be lost in a larger group setting. Leaders and pastors will have to intentionally make efforts to ensure that all people are given a fair share at using their time, talents, and energy to serve their Lord in any new context. One member said:

"For me, I have learned how important it is that I have to be able to have a pastor with a certain kind of personality that I feel comfortable with. And I didn't realize that until years later, but I have to be able to feel comfortable talking to the pastor without being judged, or, 'Hey I'd like to be able to try something...' you know... 'What about this idea?' In my younger years I would never have been able to even talk to the pastor. But I had to learn that I didn't have to be scared – and that's what it was. I was scared."⁷⁰

69 The names "Jacob" and "James" are the same name in the original Hebrew/Greek testaments, as can be seen more evidently in other languages. "Saint Jacobi" is an Anglicization of the German for "Saint James".

70 Anonymous Interview Reference #20

Books have been written on how pastors and congregational leaders can ensure that their members are kept engaged in the ministry of the church.⁷¹ It seems obvious when it's written down in front of you, but it's easy to forget as the leader of any kind of congregational ministry: Engaging people in the work of the Church connects them to the mission, to each other, and (provided that our mission is centered on preaching Christ) to their Savior. All of this serves to build a stronger congregation, which when unleashed into the community, almost always has the side-benefit of bringing more people through the front doors as well. Ed Stetzer describes a common thread that he discovered among churches that “came back” from a dire present and grew into lively, mission-minded congregations:

Comeback leaders shared the ministry. Being an effective leader involved the process of getting the people connected in the ministry of the church. Repeatedly, comeback leaders mentioned shared ministry as a key to effective leadership. They emphasized the importance of intentionally training and empowering God's people to fulfill their ministry purpose in serving the body of Christ and reaching out to the lost. Comeback leaders worked to develop and promote an atmosphere of teamwork.⁷²

If the Lutherans east of the Marsh can offer and encourage the participation of all their members in the process of pursuing and expressing greater unity among themselves, nobody would be allowed to feel left out. There are *more than enough* ministries to be carried out east of the Marsh. There are *way many more* talented people who could be engaged in planned and unplanned outreach to the community, beautifying our churches, beautifying our worship services, commemorating history, encouraging pastors, teachers, and other leaders, engaging and encouraging elementary school students, encouraging and supporting shut-ins, ministering in a hundred different ways to other members – youngest, oldest, and in between. All of these ministries, put under the umbrella of preaching Christ, could leave no one disengaged.

As a matter of fact, from a sociological perspective, this author believes that a coordinated effort under one name and one congregation would allow for *more* opportunity than do coordinated efforts between smaller, more independent congregations. Why? The reasons are varied and complex, but I'll try to summarize it as best as I can: People need close relationships

71 While not directly applicable to this thesis paper, this author highly recommends *Comeback Churches: How 300 Churches Turned Around and Yours Can Too* by Ed Stetzer and Mike Dodson as a good self-evaluation tool for pastors looking for some insights into “missional” methods and leadership.

72 Ed Stetzer and Mike Dodson, *Comeback Churches: How 300 Churches Turned Around and Yours Can Too* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group), 42.

to keep them bound into the group and make them feel like an integral part of their congregation. In larger congregations, sociologists notice “cells” of people – individuals with common interests or personalities that gravitate toward each other, find their place in the congregation as a whole, serve their part, and support each other there. Strangely, it's the competition of cells (I use the word *competition* loosely) that often serves to propel the congregation toward growth: In a “multi-celled” congregation, there is *always* a space for *someone*. What tends to happen in smaller congregations, however, is that they become one “cell.” Members of the one “cell” have a common set of interests, common personality and common perspective. As a result, that “one-celled” organization becomes much harder for newcomers to break into.

Breakout churches understand that church members must get connected with a small group for them to grow in spiritual health and to remain connected to the church.

Members who are involved in worship services alone tend to drift toward inactivity.⁷³

There have been efforts at coordinating ministries like schools and youth groups among the congregations east of the Marsh, in order to accomplish together what each group cannot do particularly well apart. These efforts have had mixed results, depending on the parties involved. But how many of these efforts could be better, stronger, more influential and more permanent if we did them as one entity, rather than many? Lyle Schaller, an advocate of small churches who has published books upon books in order to explain small-church dynamics to people and pastors, said this about cooperative ministries:

The first point that must be made is that most clusters, cooperative ministries, and similar arrangements tend to be very fragile creations. Frequently they are short-lived. Several efforts have been made to study a large group of cooperative ministries. Each of these large-scale studies has found the reputed number of cooperative ministries to exceed the reality. If one were to drive across the country, for every active and healthy cooperative ministry that one would encounter, one would find at least a half a dozen corpses, two or three cooperative ministries suffering from severe malnutrition, and one or two that clearly are on the verge of dying.

This is not to suggest that intercongregational cooperation is a bad idea, nor to discourage efforts in this direction. The intent here is far simpler. Cooperative ministries are very fragile institutional expressions of the universal Church. Unless they are handled with care, they tend to break up, fade away, disappear, evaporate, or dissolve. By contrast, the parish church is a very tough ecclesiastical institution and usually can survive rough handling, shocks, disasters, neglect, and abuse that would be fatal to the

⁷³ Thom S. Rainer, *Breakout Churches: Discover How to Make the Leap*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 106.

typical cooperative ministry.⁷⁴

I believe that anecdotally, some experience in northeastern Dodge County also bears out Mr. Schaller's perception. While he does not advocate formal amalgamation as a solution to the frailty he mentioned (since he speaks in generalities and would be in no position to do so), I do. "The parish church is a very tough [...] institution." Why not also harness the toughness of oneness for the ministries we are currently pursuing cooperatively?

If I have been speaking primarily to leaders in the last two sections, now let me turn for a moment to every member individually; for if the Lutherans east of the Marsh are to seek cooperation at so many levels, we can expect conflict. If we can expect conflict, we must encourage one another to

RATHER BE WRONGED THAN NEED TO BE RIGHT ...

When counseling the Corinthians about how to deal with the lawsuits among themselves, Saint Paul said, "Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be cheated? Instead, you yourselves cheat and do wrong, and you do this to your brothers!" (1 Corinthians 6:7, NIV)

Our brothers and sisters from Corinth, whom we will rejoice to meet in heaven someday, have provided for us a good example of what Christians *do not do* when (by God's grace) they rise above the sinful nature to resolve conflicts between them. But Paul states the same example positively for us to the Philippians:

If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of the others.

Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:

Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be grasped,
but made himself nothing,
taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.
And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to death –
even death on a cross! (Philippians 2:1-8)

74 Lyle Schaller, *The Small Church is Different!* (Nashville, TN: Parthenon Press, 1983), 164.

I have no church guru quote for this point – but it's probably the most important descriptor of what the Lutherans east of the Marsh would look like if they could bring into effect a more coordinated union. Yes; this is what we we'll need to look like if we're going to pull it off. It will take personal sacrifice. It will take time, planning, and pain. It will take tiredness, anxiousness and conflict. More than anything, it will take imitators of Jesus, who are willing to receive blows for the sake of their brothers. If any serious effort gets underway which reflects the proposal of this thesis, there will certainly be conflict. And like our ancestors, how we deal with that conflict may come to define how our ministries operate (or don't operate) long into the future. If I've at all convinced you, Dodge County reader, of the need or benefit for formally uniting for the sake of preaching Christ – then think of the thing you would hate to lose most about how your congregation operates now. Ask yourself, “Would I hang the mission of the Church on it?”

With that thought in mind, my final recommendation of how the future might look is just this: That whatever route we pursue for the sake of preaching Christ, we **RELENTLESSLY MOVE FORWARD WITH THE MISSION ...**

Notice that relentlessly does not necessarily mean rapidly. The pace at which we can honor the heritage of all the members and seek the participation of all the members should be the pace at which we move forward. Nonetheless, move forward we must. Although these characteristics probably apply to all good congregational leaders in general (teachers, councilmen, secretaries, Ladies' Aid presidents) Thom Ranier notices this common thread between pastors of what he calls “breakout churches”:

The breakout pastors tended to approach the role of leadership for change with three levels of awareness. These three patterns seem to be consistent in all of these leaders.

- They desired to communicate clearly their love for the members of the congregation. They did not feel that people should be readily discarded if they disagreed with the vision.
- They recognized that the established church is often entrenched in tradition and therefore change is difficult and often takes time.
- They knew that change must ultimately take place and that goals must be achieved if the church is to move forward. Unlike the peace-makers, they moved persistently and patiently toward their goals.⁷⁵

⁷⁵ Thom S. Rainer, *Breakout Churches: Discover How to Make the Leap*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 104.

The Wisconsin Synod congregations of northeastern Dodge County would only do damage to their mission if they act too quickly. Congregations will need time and lots of dialogue to establish and communicate the vision, address concerns, and listen to God's sons and daughters in our midst. Good leaders understand that the vision never makes a victim of the people: It prepares them, equips them, and motivates them. We dare not steamroll each other.

But since the past is the best predictor of the future, I suggest that the opposite danger is more likely for us. If we decide to move, we must move intentionally. Complacency will want to set in. Sometimes we may wonder, “Who's in charge here?” Other times, objectors that have been answered patiently and evangelically time-and-time-again may threaten to “lie down on the train tracks,” and it may take a someone to call their bluff. The best thing we can do is to set goals for ourselves, and regularly evaluate whether we're moving forward to meet those goals:

Many comeback leaders stated that a key issue in effective, revitalizing leadership was proactive leadership that utilized intentional planning. These leaders refused to be passive. They were willing to make changes. In addition, the comeback process involved setting goals. These leaders understood the proverb – “When you aim at nothing, you will hit it every time.” Establishing tangible growth goals was a key in getting other leaders involved in the revitalization process in these comeback churches.⁷⁶

I would suggest that if action is to be taken, once congregations have had a chance to dialogue among themselves, that committed leaders be tasked with doing just such a thing. Those leaders would need to be representative of the participants as a whole, as well as being able to communicate the overall vision and goals to their respective congregations. Such an arrangement would help preserve both the unity of the group and its perspective on the mission throughout the process (however long the congregations decide it should be).

CONCLUSION

There were times throughout the writing of this thesis paper that the job seemed immeasurably large. There were times when I was not even convinced it was possible. There were times – even now – when I thought to myself, “Well, just get it done. The readers will have to judge what it's worth.”

The difficulty was in trying to capture the problem: What is the problem exactly? Does it lay principally with the struggling congregations, or does it concern them all? Does it lay in the

⁷⁶ Ed Stetzer and Mike Dodson, *Comeback Churches: How 300 Churches Turned Around and Yours Can Too* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group), 39.

form and structure of our ministry as a whole? Does it lay with the leadership somehow? Does it lay in the members themselves? Is there even a problem?

Another difficulty lay the diversity of the congregations: There are big ones and small ones with varying degrees of concern for the future. I even imagined that perhaps there could be varying opinions within each congregation about whether or not it was doing well.

My most basic fears about writing this thesis were largely settled by the interview process. I had gone out of my way to find people that I thought would hold all different opinions on the state of the area as a whole. What I found was that people either admitted to being unaware and uninformed, or else they held strong opinions. And the people that had opinions were united on this front: There is something that needs to be changed.

At the most basic level, everyone understood as I did – that there is an amazing amount of Wisconsin Synod Lutheran churches concentrated in a relatively small area. Most people also understood as I did – that it was a matter of history, certainly not related to current needs. Most people even pined for greater cooperation between the congregations – big or small, struggling or not. It was these generally held opinions that led me to reduce the thesis to the basic questions that you have before you now.

Another tension that I struggled with was between the reality of my influence in the area (virtually none) and the desire of some leaders that I propose concrete suggestions or specific plans for the area. In the end, I decided against such a thing because I am nowhere near qualified. Real logistical plans would be foolish to cast without giving individual congregations the opportunity to opt out first. They would have to engage councils, pastors, members, etc. I ultimately believed that even by creating a fake or imaginary plan with specific congregations named, it would likely only serve two purposes: (1) To reveal myself as being remarkably foolish and/or (2) cause unnecessary offense to certain brothers and sisters in Christ (thus raising barriers before a real understanding could be accomplished) and both would undermine the very purpose I hoped this thesis could accomplish. And so this thesis became more-or-less an effort to raise awareness, foster a mission-based understanding of the issue, and encourage the saints toward action.

Finally, I hope that is exactly what I have done here. I submit it to them for their own consideration. God bless it, and God bless the Lutherans “east of the Marsh.”

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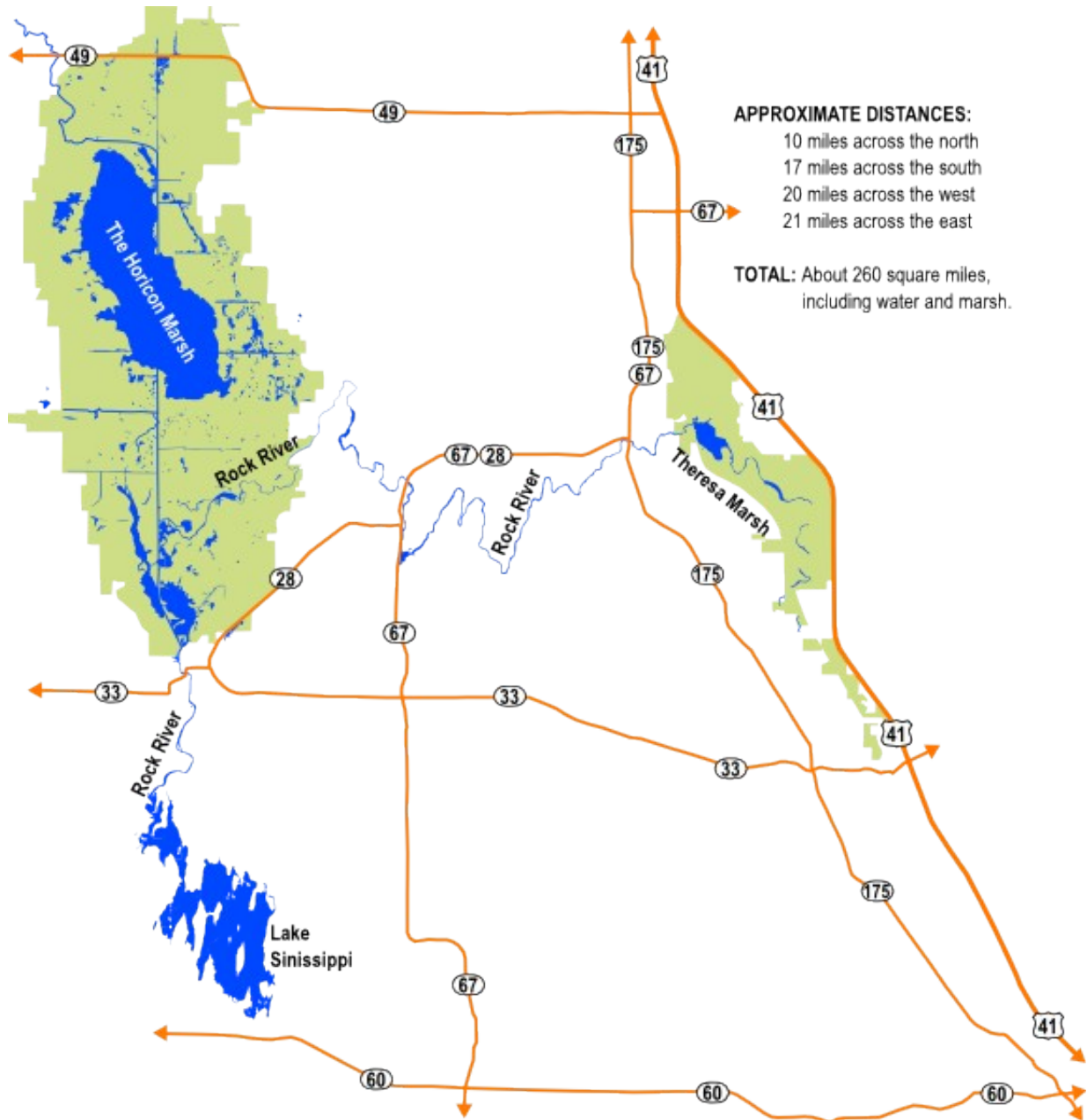
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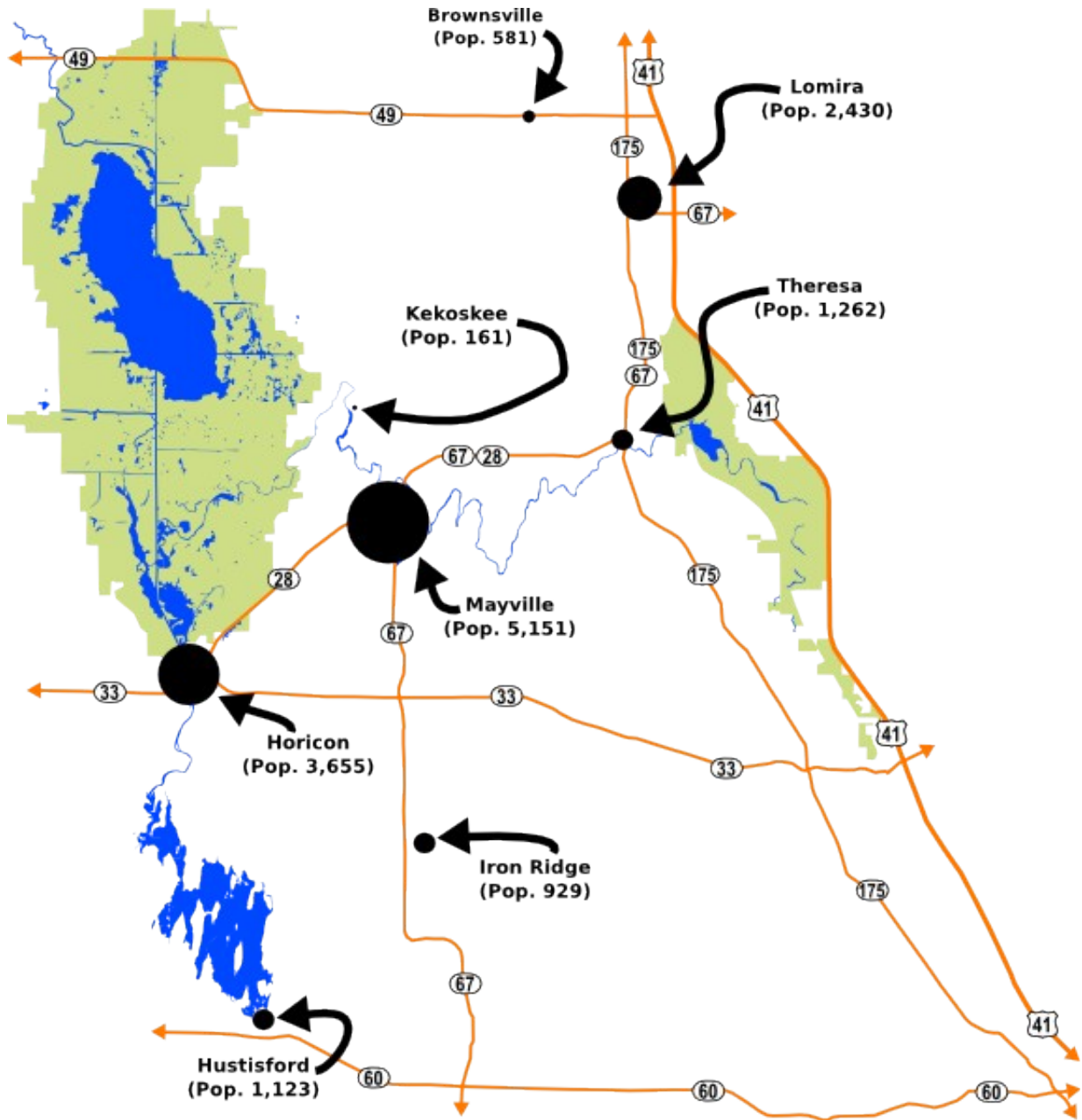
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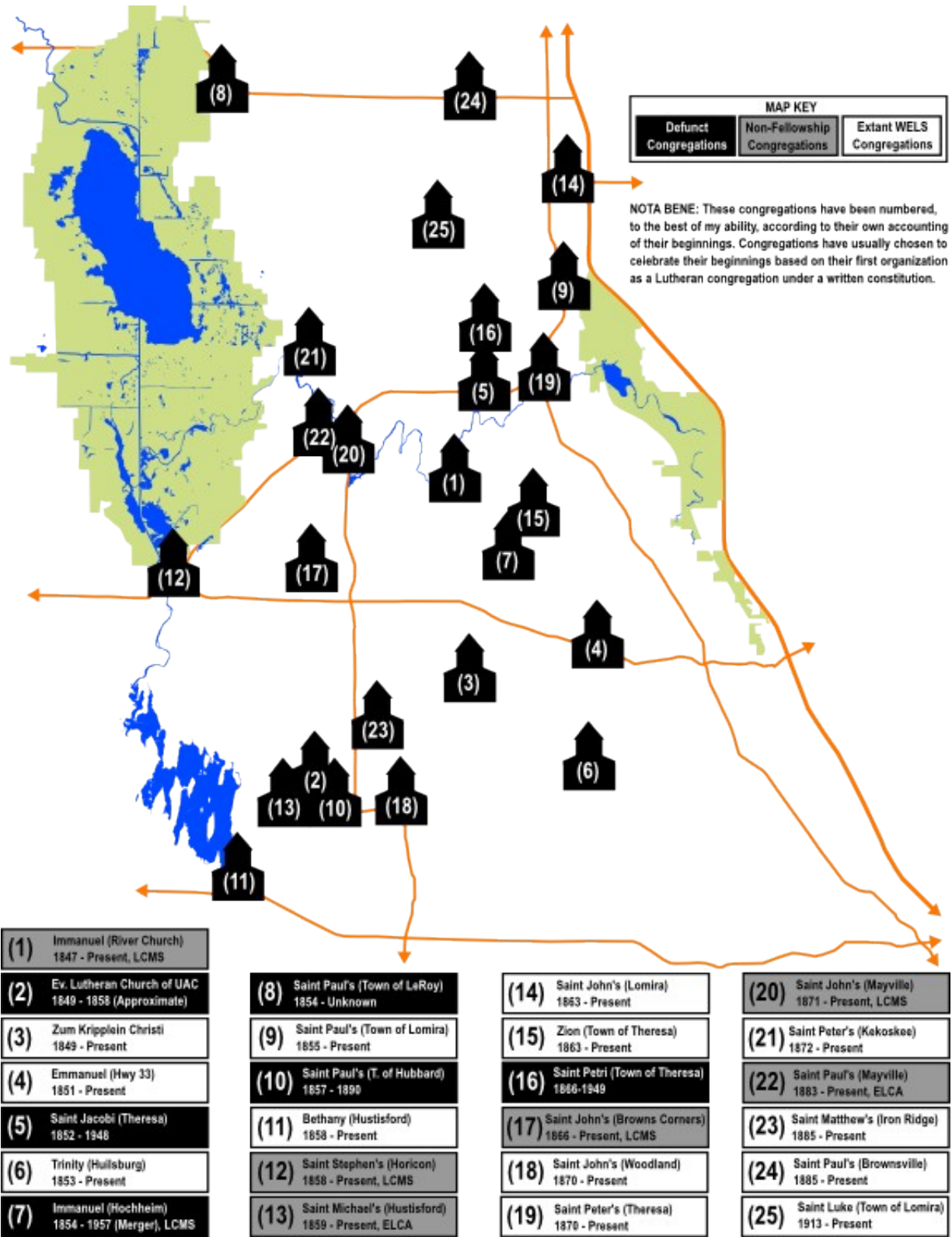
APPENDIX #1 – Map of Geographical Area



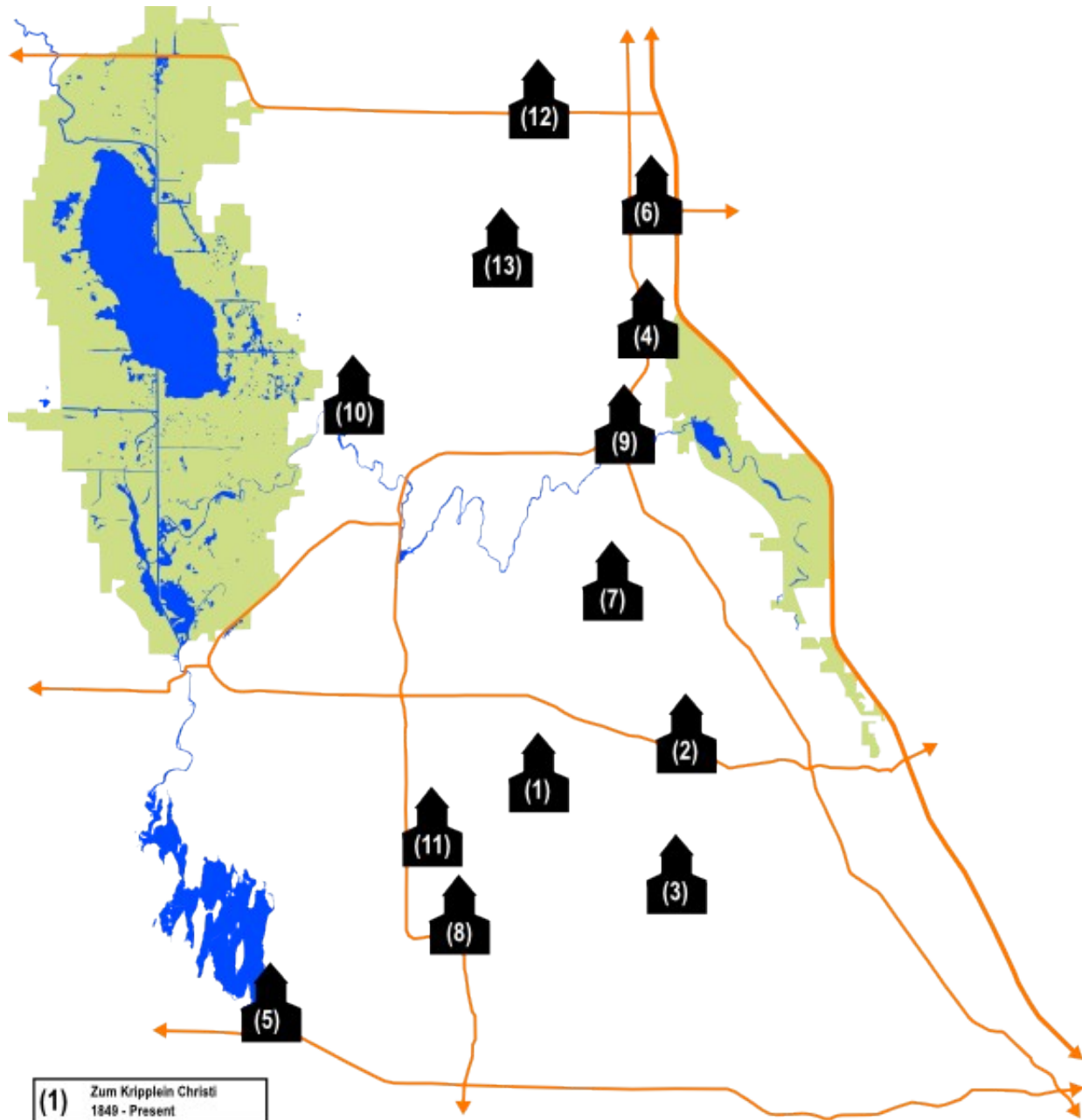
APPENDIX #2 – Map of Incorporated Communities



APPENDIX #3 – Historical Sketch Map



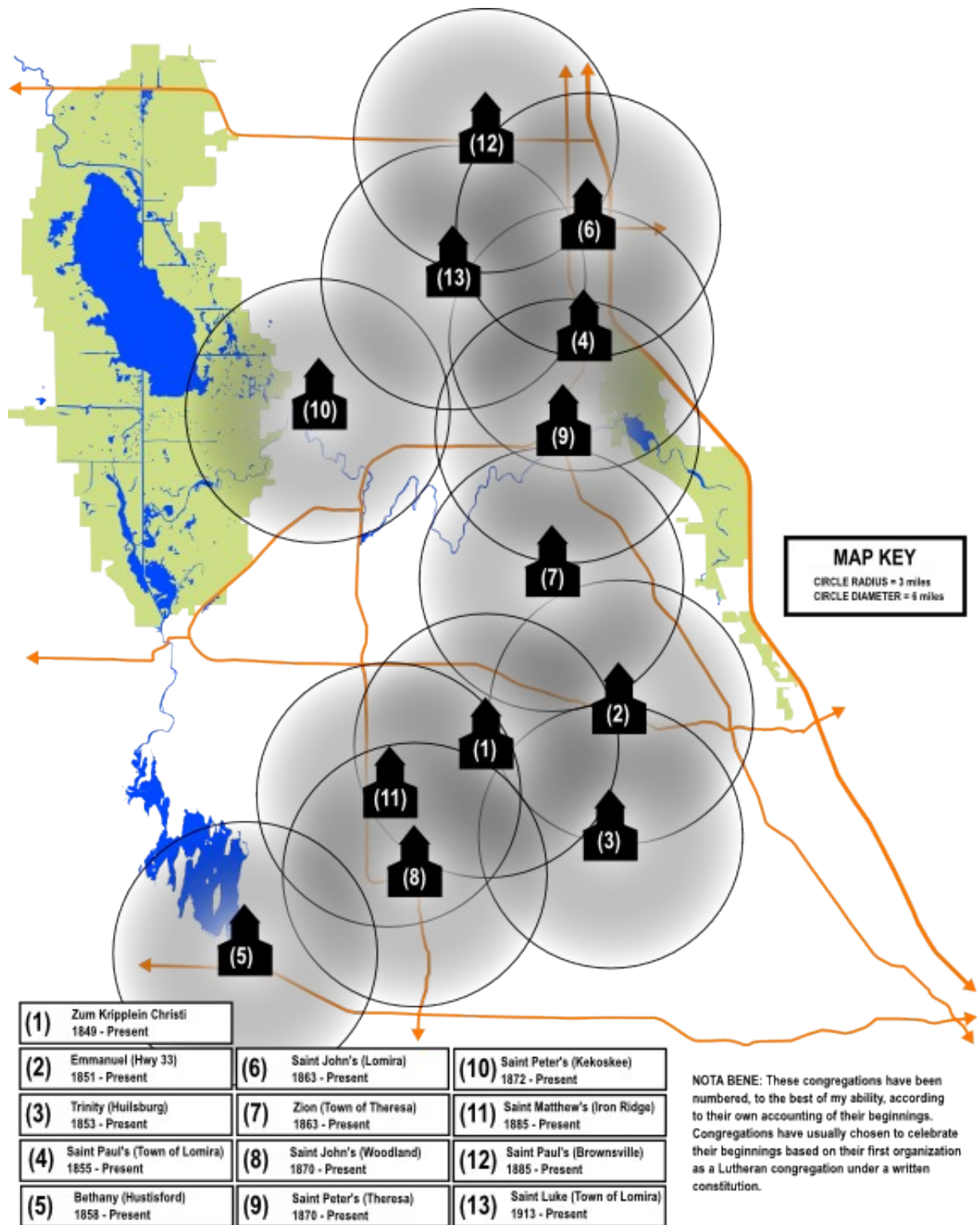
APPENDIX #4 – Map of Extant Wisconsin Synod Congregations



(1) Zum Krippelein Christi 1849 - Present	(6) Saint John's (Lomira) 1863 - Present	(10) Saint Peter's (Kekoskee) 1872 - Present
(2) Emmanuel (Hwy 33) 1851 - Present	(7) Zion (Town of Theresa) 1863 - Present	(11) Saint Matthew's (Iron Ridge) 1885 - Present
(3) Trinity (Hullsburg) 1853 - Present	(8) Saint John's (Woodland) 1870 - Present	(12) Saint Paul's (Brownsville) 1885 - Present
(4) Saint Paul's (Town of Lomira) 1855 - Present	(9) Saint Peter's (Theresa) 1870 - Present	(13) Saint Luke (Town of Lomira) 1913 - Present
(5) Bethany (Hustisford) 1858 - Present		

NOTA BENE: These congregations have been numbered, to the best of my ability, according to their own accounting of their beginnings. Congregations have usually chosen to celebrate their beginnings based on their first organization as a Lutheran congregation under a written constitution.

APPENDIX #5 – Map of Extant Wisconsin Synod Congregations with 3-Mile Radius Circles



Appendix #6 – Statistical Sketch of Membership

Basic Statistics of Membership from Northeastern Dodge County, WI Congregations of the Wisconsin Synod*

	1927 ¹ Souls / Communicants	1967 ² Souls/Communicants	2007 ³ Baptized/Confirmed
Brownsville, St. Paul's	425 / 340	554 / 408	385 / 310
Lomira, St. John's	330 / 240	358 / 246	605 / 439
T. of Lomira, St. Luke's	114 / 82	143 / 106	99 / 93
T. of Lomira, St. Paul's	216 / 160	255 / 185	227 / 181
Kekoskee, St. Peter's	xxx / 180	243 / 165	207 / 180
Theresa, St. Peter's	xxx / xxx ⁴	282 / 215	165 / 138
T. of Theresa, Zion	164 / 109 ⁵	79 / 63	133 / 108 ⁶
T. Herman, Emmanuel	246 / 175 ⁵	206 / 143	91 / 72 ⁶
T. of Herman, ZKC	200 / 100	134 / 107	143 / 110 ⁷
Iron Ridge, St. Matthew	333 / 250	427 / 327	405 / 326
T. of Herman, Trinity	267 / 171	261 / 203	169 / 143
T. of Hubbard, St. John's	275 / 186	180 / 126	141 / 119 ⁷
Hustisford, Bethany	872 / 630	950 / 658	691 / 581

*Statistics are placed 40 years apart for the sake of reference, but 1887 is notably absent from this chart for good reason: The 1887 statistics are listed by pastor, not congregation. For that reason, statistics were combined without distinction for pastors who were serving two or even three congregations, and are not easily useful for the purpose of this thesis.

1 Allgemeinen Ev.-Luth. Synode von Wisconsin u.a. Staaten, *Parochialbericht der Acht Distrikte der Allgemeinen Ev.-Luth. Synode von Wisconsin u.a. Staaten für das Jahr 1927* (Northwestern Publishing House, 1928)

2 Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, Walter E. Zank – Statistician, *Statistical Report 1967* (Northwestern Publishing House, 1967)

3 Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, *2007 Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod Statistical Report*

4 Statistics were not included for St. Peter's in the (Wisconsin Synod) sources that I used because in 1927, that congregation was being served by Pastor E. A. Behrens of the Iowa Synod.

5 It is difficult to determine exactly which set of numbers for the year 1927 belongs to either Zion (Town of Theresa) or Emmanuel (Town of Herman), since numbers recorded in that year were organized by the pastor's name and the congregations were not explicitly named – only given by location. Process of elimination was used to determine which other numbers belonged to which other congregations, but a simple error made it impossible in this case: Pastor Uhlmann, who was at the time serving Zion and Emmanuel, was listed as serving two congregations both in the Town of Herman. This author made an educated guess based on the collective history books of both congregations.

6 No statistics were submitted for 2007. Statistics from 2006 used instead.

7 No statistics were submitted for 2006 or 2007. Statistics from 2005 used instead.

Appendix #7 – Population change in Northeastern Dodge County*

	1875 pop.¹	2010 pop.²	Pop. change
Town of Herman	1,896	1,108	-788
Theresa (Town & Village)	2,098	1,075 (Town) 1,262 (Village) 2,183 (Total)	+85
Lomira (Town & Village)	1,943	1,137 (Town) 2,430 (Village) 3,567 (Total)	+1,624
Town of LeRoy	1,597	1,002	-595
Town of Hubbard	2,240	1,774 (Town) 3,655 (Horicon) 929 (Iron Ridge) 6,358 (Total)	+4,118
City of Mayville	1,069	5,154	+4,085
Town of Williamstown	1,233	755 161 (Kecoskee) 916 (Total)	-317
TOTAL:	12,076		

* The accuracy of these numbers may easily be considered suspect, since there is no clear source given to the 1875 numbers presented in the cited history book. Also, the author of this thesis has simply assumed that populations not represented in the 1875 numbers (e.g. villages of Kekoskee, Iron Ridge, the city of Horicon) had been included in the larger township numbers. This assumption, if wrong, could dramatically alter any conclusions to be reached by the numbers. This information should therefore be taken with a grain of salt.

¹ Western Historical Company, *History of Dodge County, Wisconsin, 1880*, (Chicago: Western Historical Company, 1880) 251

² Current United States Census information available from (<http://www.factfinder2.census.gov>) and accessed on 11/30/12.