

HERBERT PARISIUS--
A PLACE TO SERVE

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Senior Church History
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What does a WELS pastor do when he can no longer be a pastor but is too young to retire? After all, he is trained to be a pastor. His entire educational career is aimed at preparing him for that. It is not the purpose of Northwestern College or the Seminary to make him a businessman, a politician, a journalist, or anything else except a pastor. But what happens when a man trained to be a pastor finds himself *ohne Amt*?

This question is not limited to WELS pastors only. Many great men of the church, long before the WELS officially organized, had to answer this question. For in any controversy in the church, be it doctrinal or otherwise, men have had to face the practical implications of their doctrinal and ideal stances. Whether right or wrong, the man who took an unpopular stand might find the calling body less than eager to retain him. Being right or sincere has never guaranteed job security.

This "What now?" question must have been on the mind of Professor Parisius of Northwestern College in 1924. The "Roaring Twenties" found plenty of "roaring" going on in the newly reorganized Wisconsin Synod. But this was a roaring of impassioned speeches and cracking fellowship.

And Professor Parisius was involved from the start.

1924 arguably marks the beginnings of what later was

labeled the "Protes'tant Controversy." For in 1924, Northwestern College found itself with a serious discipline case. Both Professor Kowalke and Professor Kiessling gave this chapter in Northwestern's history "Stormy Weather." And stormy it was.

In March, 1924, an outbreak of thievery among the students was discovered. The faculty acted quickly in the matter. An initial investigation by the tutors began on Friday, March 28 and lasted well into the night. The faculty called off classes the following Monday so that they could consider each case separately. In that short space of time, the investigation was completed, the boys questioned, and the discipline decided upon.

The over two dozen boys involved were disciplined in one of three ways. Some were expelled. Some were suspended for the rest of the school year. And some were campuses. This would have settled matter--except for one thing.

Strangely enough, the College Board, not the faculty, had always had the authority to expel students. In practice, the Board approved the actions of the faculty. It was more ceremony than anything when the phrase "subject to the approval of the Board" was attached to motions of expulsion.

Yet, properly speaking, the faculty could not expel--only the Board could. And when certain members of the Board did not agree with the actions of the faculty in this particular case, they brought out this dust-covered statue. With this in hand, the Board reversed some of the faculty's decisions. Thus was the stage set for a reservoir of trouble to breach its dam.

Several difficult meetings between the faculty and Board followed and accomplished but one thing. They served to dig the chasm between the two bodies only deeper. Finally, ultimatums were issued. Prof. Koehler reported it this way:

The statements went on, and when it came to Prof. Parisius, Prof. Parisius said what he thought about the matter and then made a remark on which he was challenged by Mr. von Briesen, who asked, "What do you mean?" Prof. Parisius neither was anxious to inject the question of resignation into this, but there was this repeated provocation on the part of Mr. von Briesen, "What do you mean?" Prof. Parisius turned to Prof. Kowalke then and said, "I don't know whether to state this at this time." Mr. von Briesen said, "I want to hear that." And then Prof. Parisius told him, "It means that I resign if this stands." Whereupon Mr. von Briesen turned to me and asked me if that was what I meant. I said, "Yes, exactly." The rest of the Faculty then reaffirmed their stand.1

As it turned out, the Board's will was carried out in spite of the great protest of the faculty. The boys who

were suspended could return. And the boys who were expelled could have their cases reviewed.

And this resulted in the immediate resignation of two of the faculty members--Prof. Karl Koehler (son of Prof. J.P. Koehler) and Prof. Herbert Parisius. And as the faculty and board tried to patch things up in the future, the reconciliation did not come before two more faculty member and two tutors also resigned.

Thus H. Parisius found himself ohne Amt. And the practical considerations for his stand came to the fore. His skills lay primarily in pastoring and teaching. The "What now?" question must have weighed heavily on his mind.

As the events of the Watertown Thievery Case began to make their uncomfortable presence felt in the WELS, another event that would prove to do the same was in the process of happening.

In Fort Atkinson, a problem arose with two of the lady teachers. Without going into the details, the problem eventually became serious enough to call for discipline for the teachers. Seemingly in an effort to help defuse the situation, both teachers were called by Immanuel Lutheran Church in Marshfield. But the Fort Atkinson would not give them an honorable dismissal. A very tangled mess of meetings and actions followed.

With the case of these two teachers, the group that was unhappy about the Watertown Thievery Case had another cause by which to be unified. This group was the beginnings of the Protestants. And it was within the Protes'tant circles that H. Parisius' "What now?" question was initially answered.

Parisius had moved to Woodland, California right after resigning from the Northwestern faculty. But he soon after received a call to serve First Lutheran Church of Rice Lake, Wisconsin. This church happened to be the congregation that Pastor Beitz had been serving.

Pastor Beitz also had a roll in the Protes'tant Controversy. He had written a paper, "God's Message to us in Galatians--The Just Shall Live By Faith." It contained some harsh words directed at the WELS and at the Seminary professors. It provided another opportunity to take sides.

First Lutheran obviously had sided with the Protes'tants. Interestingly enough, they had recently obtained a loan from the WELS Church Extension Fund for \$2500. As the WELS tried to collect, the congregation continued to feel more and more wronged. And one can understand the Protes'tant call of "Beamtentum" better when he reads in a letter by Rev. J. Bergholz, secretary of the Board of Home and Foreign Missions, "Personally, I should

think that the mission officials ought to hold a meeting with the congregation even over the protest of the pastor."2

This situation was resolved when the congregation began to make regular payments to the Synod. However, First Lutheran would never again be part of the WELS. Today, it is a member of the Missouri Synod.

Into the aftermath of this situation came H. Parisius. He served at First Lutheran from 1928-1936. It is during these years that we see a change in how he answered the "What now?" question.

The records of First Lutheran's early years were destroyed by a fire. The only "records" of those years are those kept in the minds of the parishioners who lived at that time. There were several with whom I was able to talk.

According to my sources, Parisius walked into a difficult situation. The congregation was small (about 60 members or so), had a large debt, and was just coming out of troubled times. But this former professor applied himself well. "Extremely energetic," "brilliant," and "highly regarded" were adjectives that all those I interviewed used to describe him.3

And the congregation grew. Though no figures are

available, one of those I interviewed, Mr. Krenski, thought that the church doubled in size. He also said, "He was really an aggressive man, especially in pastoral things. And he always had his eye towards what we call evangelism today."⁴

This continued for several years. But in the early 1930's, the "What now?" question arose once again. But this time the occasion was much different.

These years were bad ones for many at First Lutheran. For the Great Depression had come to Rice Lake. As things continued to decline economically for the country, they likewise continued to decline financially for the members of First Lutheran. And soon the congregation was able to pay only a small percentage of Pastor Parisius' salary. And he had four children.⁵

At the same time, he began to experience throat problems. Mrs. Laverne Harris, who was in confirmation class during that time, remembered, "Rev. Parisius started to have some kind of throat problems...Sometimes he could hardly speak!"⁶

Unable to support his family, and unable to speak as well as he needed to, Pastor Parisius once again had to ask, "What now?". This time his solution came from secular quarters.

He got a job with the welfare department in the nearby town of Barron. He worked here during the week and preached at First Lutheran on Sunday. None of the people I spoke with remembered anyone feeling negatively about this arrangement.⁷

However, Pastor Parisius seemed less than satisfied with it. It must have been obvious to him that he could not serve his people as he wanted. The steadily declining membership must have caused him to ask just one more time, "What now?".

At this time, he somehow received a job offer to be an assistant to the Secretary of Agriculture. No one could remember how that came about. But it was then that Pastor Parisius decided to work in the secular world full time, and he laid down the mantle of the ministry. He moved to Washington, D.C. and seems to have used his abilities well there, too. He was even on the cover of Time magazine in the late '30's. However, in spite of much searching, I was unable to locate the issue. After his arrival in Washington, information about his life from my sources is sketchy.

In seeing what Herbert Parisius did when he could no longer be a WELS minister, I see how hard controversy can be. While it is gratifying to see that he was able to

use his skills in many ways, I could not help but wonder how painful it must have been to ask "What now?" so often. For to give up one's church and one's ministry is not pleasant.

May God preserve the unity and fellowship of the WELS.

ENDNOTES

1. "Transcripts of Watertown 12, 1924 Meeting." Faith-Life, September, 1940, Vol. XIII, No. 9, p.13-19.
2. Bergholz, Rev. J. "Letter to Theo Buuck, Treasurer of Board for Home and Foreign Missions." Sept. 7, 1927.
3. Personal Interviews with members of First Lutheran. April, 1990.
4. Personal Interview with Mr. Krenski (member of First Lutheran). April 9, 1990.
5. Personal Interviews with members of First Lutheran. April, 1990.
6. Personal Interview with Mrs. LaVerne Harris (member of First Lutheran). April 9, 1990.
7. Personal Interviews with members of First Lutheran. April, 1990.

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September, 1940, Vol. XIII, No. 9, p. 13-19.