

History And Work Of The Commission On Inter-Church Relations Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod

[Material prepared by Prof. Carl J. Lawrenz, a former chairman of the commission, served as a basis for parts of this article by the present chairman]

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I. HISTORY AND STRUCTURE OF THE COMMISSION

The Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod has had an official committee charged with the responsibility for inter-church relations since 1941. The predecessor in purpose and function of the present committee was The Standing Committee in Matters of Church Union, popularly known as the Union Committee. This committee was provisionally appointed to study the 1938 resolutions of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod (LCMS) which accepted Missouri's "Brief Statement" and the "Declaration" of the American Lutheran Church (ALC) as a basis for future fellowship with the ALC. The committee consisted of the seminary faculty and the Conference of Presidents. It was to report the findings of its study to the 1939 convention of the synod in Watertown. It was retained as a working committee for the next biennium with instructions to report again to the 1941 convention in Saginaw, Michigan. This convention made it a standing committee. Its make-up was the same as before.

The present Commission on Inter-Church Relations (CICR) came into being when the synod adopted a new constitution in 1959. Its original name was, however, the Commission on Doctrinal Matters. In 1973 the name was changed to the present one to obviate a misunderstanding about its function. In the WELS, watching over sound doctrine and practice within the synod is the assignment of the district presidents, not of the CICR.

According to the synod's constitution, the CICR consists of five pastors and five professors. Three of the latter are to be members of the seminary faculty. These commission members are appointed by the Conference of Presidents, three-four-three members respectively being appointed every two years and confirmed by the synod in convention. The terms are for six years, with a limit of two terms.

II. PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES OF THE COMMISSION

According to the constitution of the WELS, the purpose of the CICR is to "represent the Synod in doctrinal discussions before other church bodies who are, or are not, in fellowship with the Synod in order to 'extend and conserve the true doctrine and practice of the Evangelical Lutheran Church,'" and to "keep itself informed on the doctrinal trends in other church bodies."¹

The objectives of the CICR are:

1. To preserve and strengthen—on the basis of complete unity in scriptural doctrine and practice—the bond of confessional fellowship with those church bodies with which such fellowship already exists.

To achieve this objective, by the grace of God, the commission was instrumental in establishing the Confessional Evangelical Lutheran Conference (CELC). On behalf of the synod it participates in and supports the Conference in the hope that it will grow into a strong international

support group for confessional Lutherans. It seeks to find ways in which smaller church bodies throughout the world can participate in and benefit from the CELC. It strives to work closely with the Evangelical Lutheran Synod (ELS) to express, preserve, and strengthen the confessional unity with which the Lord has blessed the fellowship enjoyed by our two synods. It also aims to offer assistance and encouragement to the Lutheran Confessional Church of Scandinavia (LCC), the Evangelical Lutheran Free Church of Germany (ELFC), and other church bodies of our worldwide fellowship where such assistance would be helpful. In general, the Board for World Missions (BWM) handles requests for assistance that involve money and manpower; the CICR deals with matters of doctrine and the preservation of unity in faith. At present, however, according to guidelines governing the relationship between the CICR and the BWM, the CICR administers restricted funds contributed by WELS members for the support of the LCC and ELFC.

2. To extend the bond of confessional fellowship with other church bodies where complete unity in scriptural doctrine and practice becomes apparent.

To achieve this objective the commission keeps a close watch on church bodies throughout the world with whom WELS once was in fellowship, as, for example, the LCMS, the Free Evangelical Lutheran Synod in South Africa, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church—Synod of France and Belgium. If and when God gives an opportunity, it will work to reestablish fellowship on the basis of complete agreement in doctrine and practice.

3. To extend the true doctrine and practice of the Evangelical Lutheran Church by offering testimony and assistance—outside of fellowship—to groups which show a desire to grow in their understanding of scriptural doctrine and practice.

To achieve this objective the commission carries on correspondence with such groups, supplies them with printed or audio-visual materials to assist them in their study, and stands ready to send representatives, if appropriate, to communicate with them.

4. To keep itself informed on doctrinal trends as they become evident in the church at large.

To this end the commission monitors a large number of religious periodicals and other publications and, when it considers it appropriate, sends representatives to various conferences, conventions, and seminars.

5. To formulate doctrinal statements needed for dealing with other church bodies and, upon request, to address other doctrinal issues.

It was the commission, for example, that drafted *This We Believe*, a confessional statement of faith that was adopted by the synod and that has been translated into German, French, Swedish, Spanish, and other languages.

6. To function in a manner by which the constituency of the synod is kept well informed about the work of the commission.

To carry out this objective the commission prepares regular reports to the synod and its districts, from time to time publishes items in the *Northwestern Lutheran* and *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, produces materials which would be useful to the synod's members, and responds to inquiries that come to it about other church bodies.

III. MAIN EMPHASES OF THE COMMISSION'S WORK IN THE PAST

1939-1961

During these years the commission endeavored to give the synod clear, evangelical leadership in maintaining a scriptural, confessional position toward other Lutheran bodies, especially in its Synodical

Conference relationship, and in taking proper and necessary confessional action. Involved were the interlocking issues of the inspiration, inerrancy, clarity, and authority of Scripture and the scriptural principles of church fellowship. These issues arose out of a unionistic trend in American Lutheranism that mirrored the unionistic or pluralistic spirit of worldwide ecumenism. Consequently, the synod in 1961, in obedience to Romans 16:17,18 and other passages, suspended fellowship with the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod after an impasse had been reached in attempts to resolve the doctrinal differences. This brought an end to a fellowship that had existed since 1868.

1961-1968

After the break with Missouri, the commission worked to achieve within the synod a full understanding of the synod's confessional position and action and an appreciation for it. In 1963 the synod withdrew from the Synodical Conference, of which it was a charter member when the Conference was organized in 1872.² The synod's inner unity was evidenced by its unanimous decision to terminate fellowship with the Synod of Evangelical Lutheran Churches (Slovak), which followed the lead of the LCMS and eventually merged with it.

An international Theologians Conference held at Mankato in 1963 continued conferences previously held in 1960 and 1962 at Mequon³ and attempted to attain greater clarity and unity on the doctrines of church and ministry and church fellowship.⁴

Under the aegis of the commission, a series of seven free conferences was held: Waterloo, Iowa, July 7-9, 1964; Cedar Rapids, Iowa, July 13-15, 1965; Columbus, Ohio, July 12-14, 1966; Chicago, Illinois, July 18-20, 1967; Minneapolis, Minnesota, July 7-9, 1968; Davenport, Iowa, July 29-31, 1969; Rockford, Illinois, July 14-16, 1970.⁵

A free conference was deemed as "a meeting of individuals who meet as free agents, not representing their church bodies as such."

The purpose was "to provide pastors and laymen who are concerned about an uncompromising confession of doctrines currently being jeopardized in the Lutheran Church a forum for mutual strengthening with the ultimate objective to obtain full unity in doctrine and practice." The basis on which the conference was called was "agreement on the doctrine of the inerrancy, inspiration, authority, and historicity of Scripture, and on the necessity of doctrinal unity as a prerequisite for joint worship and church work."⁶ As a result of the free conferences, realignment took place on the part of some pastors, congregations, and lay people.

1968-1988

During these two decades the commission worked to strengthen WELS' fellowship relations and, where necessary, clarify them with Lutheran bodies with whom it had been in fellowship, and, where possible, to establish fellowship relations with additional Lutheran bodies.

Fellowship relations were strengthened with:

The Evangelical Lutheran Synod. This fellowship goes back to 1853, when the Norwegian Synod was organized. It was reaffirmed in 1917, when a small minority of the synod reorganized on the basis of the synod's original sound scriptural position after the majority abandoned that position and merged with two heterodox Norwegian Lutheran bodies. Discussions between the ELS Doctrine Committee and the CICR on the real presence of Christ's true body and blood in the Lord's Supper resulted in the adoption of parallel statements indicating that a consensus had been reached.⁷ Subsequently, the ELS adopted an "Explanation" of its theses that made further discussions necessary. To date, the Doctrine Committee has not completed the restudy of the matter called for by the 1992 ELS convention.⁸ To promote close cooperation between the two synods, the Evangelical Lutheran Confessional Forum was established in 1967. The Forum, which originally met annually, now meets every two years.

The Federation for Authentic Lutheranism. Fellowship was established with this body informally in November 1971 and formally in 1973. When the Federation disbanded in 1975, many of the Federation's congregations merged with WELS.

The Lutheran Confessional Church (Scandinavia) (LCC). WELS was in informal fellowship with this church body ever since the LCC's constituting convention in September 1974 and even earlier with its leaders. Formal confessional fellowship was established in 1975.

Christ the King Lutheran Church in Nigeria, Africa. There was informal fellowship with this church, beginning in 1974. Formal fellowship was declared in 1981.⁹

The Lutheran Church of Cameroon. WELS has had informal fellowship with this church body since 1975.¹⁰

Fellowship relations were clarified and strengthened with:

The Evangelical Lutheran Free Church (ELFC) in Germany. This church, which had its beginnings among lay people who had a desire for scriptural, confessional Lutheranism, was organized in 1876 and entered into immediate fellowship with the Synodical Conference and through it with WELS. Clarifying fellowship relations with this church meant working to overcome the inconsistency of a triangular relationship that developed when the ELFC continued in fellowship with church bodies with which WELS for reasons of conscience did not have fellowship. These included the LCMS; the Independent Evangelical Lutheran Church of Germany, generally known by its German acronym, SELK; the Evangelical Lutheran Church of England; the Evangelical Lutheran Church—Synod of France and Belgium; the Confessional Lutheran Church of Finland; and the Evangelical Lutheran Free Church of Denmark.¹¹ Because of the Iron Curtain, WELS had almost no contact with the ELFC from 1961 until the late 1980s. In 1984 the ELFC suspended fellowship with the Evangelical Lutheran (Old Lutheran) Church (OLC, the Breslau Synod) in the German Democratic Republic, communist East Germany, because of that church's false doctrine concerning Holy Scripture. For that same reason WELS' fellowship with the OLC, which was established in 1947, was broken off in 1987. The ELFC terminated its fellowship with SELK in 1989 because of SELK's unscriptural doctrine and practice.

Unsuccessful were the CICR's attempts at clarifying or establishing fellowship relations with:

The Independent Evangelical Lutheran Church (SELK) in Germany, a pluralistic merger on June 25, 1972, of:

- a. The Evangelical Lutheran Free Church in West Germany (the western part of the Saxon Evangelical Lutheran Free Church, dating back to 1876);
- b. The Evangelical Lutheran (Old Lutheran) Church (Breslau Synod) in West Germany;
- c. The Independent Evangelical Lutheran Church in West Germany (the so-called "old SELK").¹²

The Evangelical Lutheran Confessional Church (Bekennniskirche) in Germany, the successor in western Germany to the Poland mission of WELS, which had its beginnings in 1924.

Fellowship with this church came to an end when it merged with SELK in 1976.

The Free Evangelical Lutheran Synod in South Africa (FELSISA). WELS enjoyed fellowship with this largely German, white church body from 1962 until 1987, when FELSISA refused to break off relations with SELK.¹³

The Lutheran Church in South Africa (LuKiSA). WELS' fellowship with this largely black church was parallel to that with FELSISA, lasting from 1962 to 1987.

The Lutheran Church of Australia (LCA). This church was established in 1966 by a merger of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Australia (ELCA), which was in fellowship with the WELS through the Synodical Conference, and the United Evangelical Lutheran Church of Australia (UELCA), which was in fellowship with the American Lutheran Church in the USA. WELS warned repeatedly against the merger because the two bodies admittedly were not in doctrinal agreement. At the time of the merger, the new LCA broke off all previous fellowship relations.

The Church of the Lutheran Confession (CLC). This body was formed in 1959 by former members of WELS and ELS who felt these church bodies did not act promptly enough in breaking off fellowship with the LCMS. After fellowship with Missouri was terminated, the CLC charged WELS and ELS with unscriptural fellowship principles. Attempts to resolve the difference, notably in 1972, collapsed.¹⁴

The Lutheran Churches of the Reformation (LCR). This group was formed largely by former members of the LCMS who disapproved of Missouri's lax fellowship principles. Fellowship with WELS was precluded by the LCR's insistence that the congregation is the only divinely instituted form of the church and the pastorate is the only divinely instituted form of the public ministry.

The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod (LCMS). Representatives of WELS and the LCMS met after Missouri's 1969 Denver convention and again after its 1973 New Orleans convention to exchange information, but no formal doctrinal discussions were initiated.¹⁵ Although the 1974 exodus of liberal faculty members from Concordia Seminary in St. Louis resulted in a strengthening of the church's doctrine of Scripture, there was no discernible improvement in the fellowship principles of the LCMS despite its breaking off of fellowship with the American Lutheran Church in 1981. It continued participating with other Lutherans in the Lutheran Council in the USA (LCUSA). The CICR sent observers to conventions of the LCMS and continued to monitor the situation in the former sister synod.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church—Synod of France and Belgium (ELC-SFB). The WELS was in fellowship with this church body through the Synodical Conference from the time it was organized as a separate church body in 1927. Prior to that it was a part of the Saxon Evangelical Lutheran Free Church. This fellowship came to an end in 1981 when, in spite of repeated advice by representatives of WELS, the ELC-SFB lifted the protest it had made against the LCMS without the LCMS bringing its theological position and practice fully into harmony with Scripture.

IV. RECENT ACTIVITIES

The commission tries to keep in contact with all Lutheran bodies, groups, and individuals that seem to share our synod's concern for Lutheran confessionalism in doctrine and practice.

The commission carried on correspondence with the Rauter families in Porto Alegre, Brazil, and met with their representative to establish confessional agreement. This led to our present work in Brazil served by a mission team under the Board for World Missions.

The commission has continued to send observers to conventions of the LCMS so as to have accurate, firsthand information on the situation in that body which had been a sister synod for over ninety years. Informal meetings have been held from time to time with LCMS officials to assess their position on the matters that stand between us.

Meetings were held with the Board of Doctrine of the CLC on June 12, 1987; January 13-14, 1988; February 1-2, 1989; January 31-February 1, 1990; and April 5-6, 1990, to determine whether there is agreement now in doctrine and practice so that fellowship might be reestablished.

The ELS was also brought into the discussions. A “Joint Statement” on “The Termination of Fellowship between Church Bodies” was drawn up as a positive first step toward the restoration of God-pleasing fellowship relations. This statement was adopted by nine representatives—three from each synod—of the three doctrinal committees for presentation to the full committees. When the CLC Board of Doctrine refused to accept the “Joint Statement” without a significant alteration, the discussions, which had begun on a very promising note, came to an end. At issue was the CLC’s long-standing charge that the fellowship principles of the WELS and ELS were, and possibly still are, unscriptural.¹⁶

Ever since the 1963-1967 break-up of the Evangelical Lutheran Synodical Conference of North America, a desire was expressed among confessional Lutheran church bodies for a new international organization based on the same scriptural and confessional principles as the former conference. A concrete proposal adopted by the CICR on April 19, 1986,⁽¹⁷⁾ met with a favorable response by conventions of both the WELS and ELS, and a Planning Committee of three members from each synod was appointed. An essay by Pastor Duane K. Tomhave, administrator of the WELS’ Board for World Missions, presented at a meeting of the Evangelical Lutheran Confessional Forum, October 17-18, 1988, in Mankato, Minnesota, provided added encouragement to proceed.¹⁸ Considerable time and effort were spent laying the groundwork for the new federation. A provisional constitution was drafted and submitted to prospective member church bodies. These plans came to fruition when the constituting convention of the Confessional Evangelical Lutheran Conference was held, April 27-29, 1993, in Oberwesel, Germany, with 13 church bodies as charter members and approximately 80 delegates and other participants in attendance. Plenary meetings are to be held triennially, with regional meetings in four areas of the world in the interval.¹⁹

Through correspondence and personal contacts the commission is working to support and strengthen the LCC (Scandinavia) and the ELFC (Germany) spiritually, theologically, and through nonbudgetary offerings by WELS members.

The CICR takes seriously its assigned responsibility to help the WELS carry out its obligation to expend time, effort, and means to strengthen and encourage confessional Lutheranism wherever it may be found.

ENDNOTES

- 1 *Constitution of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod*, Article IV, and Bylaws, Section 9.02b.
- 2 Proceedings of the Thirty-Seventh Convention of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, 1963, p 221; *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* (WLQ, Vol 60, No 4, October 1963), pp 296f.
- 3 *Proceedings*, 1961, pp 171f; 1963, p 204; WLQ, Vol 57, No 4 (October 1960), pp 291-293; Vol 59, No 4 (October 1962), pp 295-300.
- 4 *Proceedings*, 1965, pp 269f; WLQ, Vol 60, No 4 (October 1963), pp 297-299.
- 5 WLQ Vol 61, No 3 (July 1964), pp 206-210; Vol 62, No 4 (October 1965), pp 288-292; Vol 63, No 4 (October 1966), pp 283-285; Vol 64, No 4 (October 1967), pp 304-306; Vol 65, No 4 (October 1968), pp 293-295; Vol 66, No 4 (October 1969), pp 283f; Vol 67, No 4 (October 1970), pp 292f.
- 6 WLQ, Vol 61, No 3 (July 1964), p 207.
- 7 WLQ, Vol 78, No 4 (October 1981), pp 320-322.
- 8 75th Report, Regular Convention of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod (1992), p 80.

- 9 See “*To Every Nation, Tribe, Language, and People*”, Theodore A. Sauer, project director; Harold R. Johne and Ernst H. Wendland, editors (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1992), pp 117-134.
- 10 Ibid., pp 135-140.
- 11 See “The Lutheran Free Churches of Europe” by John F. Vogt, *WLQ*, Vol 85, No (Spring 1988), pp 127-139; also “The ELF Takes Firm Confessional Action,” *WLQ*, Vol.190, No 2 (Spring 1993), pp 144-148.
- 12 See “WELS Efforts at Confessional Fellowship with the German Lutheran Free Churches,” by Carl Lawrenz, *WLQ*, Vol 75, No 1 (January 1978), pp 7-43, and No 2 (April 1978), pp 130-148.
- 13 *Reports and Memorials for the Forty-Eighth Biennial Convention*, Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, 1987, pp 130-132; Proceedings, 1987, pp 106f.
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- 14 *WLQ*, Vol 69, No 4 (October 1972), pp 281f.
- 15 *WLQ*, Vol 71, No 1 (January 1974), p 58.
- 16 For a full account of this episode see the report of the CICR in *Reports and Memorials for the Fifty-Second Biennial Convention*, Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (1993), pp 232-242.
- 17 See *WLQ*, Vol 86, No 2 (Spring 1989), pp 121f
- 18 See *WLQ*, Vol 86, No 2 (Spring 1989), pp 105-130.
- 19 See *WLQ*, Vol 90, No 3 (Summer 1993), pp 218-223.