

The Church and Ministry Debate Between the Missouri and Wisconsin Synods

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[Essay delivered to the St. Croix Conference of the Minnesota District of the WELS, June 12, 2001]

The history of the Church and Ministry debate between the Missouri and Wisconsin Synods has always been of great interest to me since my second year at the seminary. During that year, I came across some Church-Ministry files in the Seminary library that I believe once belonged to Professor J.P. Meyer. The files contained correspondence between the faculties of the Concordia and Mequon seminaries, as well as other documents such as the minutes of meetings and thesis statements prepared by the faculties. The information contained in those files aroused my interest in the history of the Church-Ministry debate. Consequently, I decided to write my Senior Church History paper on the history of the Church-Ministry debate between the Missouri and Wisconsin synods.

The Church-Ministry issue was and still is one of the most debated and discussed doctrinal topics within Lutheran circles. The Church-Ministry issue has been debated not only between the Missouri and Wisconsin Synods, but also within the Missouri and Wisconsin Synods. The Church-Ministry debate has also figured prominently in smaller church bodies that once left the Missouri Synod.

This paper will focus primarily on the *history* of the debate between the Missouri and the Wisconsin Synods. It is not my intent to give a definitive presentation on all the doctrinal aspects of the Church and its Ministry. My purpose is to analyze the *historical* development of the Church-Ministry debate between the two former sister synods and its lasting implications for our church body today.

In analyzing the historical development of the Church-Ministry debate, it is a prerequisite to have a clear understanding of the basic differences in doctrine between the two synods. Just what exactly were those differences between the two sister synods in regard to the Church and its Ministry? At this point, let us state the *status controversiae* by citing an evaluation of the controversy by the former president of the Missouri Synod, Frederick Pfothauer:

As I see it the following:

1. St. Louis: The local congregation is of divine arrangement, the synod by human ordinance.
Thiensville: Local congregation and synod lie on the same plane.
2. St. Louis: The pastoral office in the congregation is of divine arrangement; synodical offices are of human ordinance.
Thiensville: Both offices lie on the same plane.
3. St. Louis: The exercise of church discipline, which our Savior describes in Matthew 18, can only be carried through in a local congregation.
Thiensville: The exercise of church discipline, which our Savior describes in Matthew 18 may be carried through any group of Christians, which is assembled in Jesus' name.ⁱ

With the benefit of hindsight, one could state that the preceding analysis of the Church-Ministry debate is somewhat of an oversimplification. A study of the Church-Ministry debate is a very complex subject. What makes a study of the Church-Ministry issue even more complex is the fact that within the LCMS (past and present) there has been more than one "St. Louis" position. If we had the time to do so, we could examine statements from LCMS theologians and church practices that come very close to reflecting the "Thiensville" position.

From our perspective, we, however, will proceed with the understanding that the Church-Ministry debate centered on two primary issues:

- “We hold it to be untenable to say that the local congregation is specifically instituted by God in contrast to other groupings of believers in Jesus’ name; that the ministry of the keys has been given exclusively to the local congregation.”
- “We hold it to be untenable to say that the pastorate of the local congregation (*Pfarramt*) as a specific form of the public ministry is specifically instituted by the Lord in contrast to other forms of the public ministry.”ⁱⁱ

In analyzing the Church-Ministry debate between the Missouri and Wisconsin Synods, these four steps will be taken:

- I. Setting the Stage
- II. The Development of the Debate
- III. Hopes for Harmonization
- IV. Past and Present Perspectives

I. SETTING THE STAGE

A. European and Early American Antecedents of the Church-Ministry Debate

It was the verdict of C.F.W. Walther that “the decisive battle of the Reformation which our church fought against the papacy centered in the doctrine of the church and ministry.”ⁱⁱⁱ Roman legalism and externalism had established the Catholic Church as the only true visible church and the pope himself as the vicar of Christ and the head of the Church. Hence, any individual who was not a member of the Catholic Church and subject to the authority of the pope was declared to be not a member of the Holy Christian Church. Pope Boniface VIII codified this principle into his famous bull, the *Unam Sanctam*.

The tragic result of Rome’s external view of the Holy Christian Church was that the truths of justification by faith and the universal priesthood of believers were all but lost. The power of the keys (which were given by Christ to all Christians) were taken from the laity and given to a hierarchical system of priests.

Luther’s ecclesiology differed from Rome’s system in that Luther sought to restore the Scriptural truths of justification by faith alone and the universal priesthood of all believers. Luther emphasized the individual rights of common Christians over against the authority of the pope and a hierarchical system of clergy.

However, when the writings of Luther are used to support a special institution for the local congregation and the parish pastorate, it becomes necessary to examine more closely what Luther has to say about the essence of the church and the ministerial office. The reason for doing so centers on the charge that the Wisconsin Synod has developed a new teaching differing from Luther, the Confessions, and Walther. By examining select quotations from Luther’s writings, we are not attempting to “prove” a certain doctrinal position. Luther does not establish doctrine. The word of God does.

One of the primary aspects of Luther’s view on the church is that he does not confuse the essence of the church with its outward manifestations. Luther explains the essence of the Church in this way: “Faith shows us clearly what the Church is, namely, a Communion of Saints, that is, a group or gathering of such people as are Christians...”^{iv}

As far as gatherings of Christians at specific localities, Luther makes no claim for the divine character of such a gathering other than the believers present at that locality:

Therefore, whoever says that an external gathering or unity establishes a communion of Christians is rashly expressing his thoughts without proof. For this reason all who consider the Christian unity or communion as physical and external, like other communions, are real Jews.

For they are also waiting for their Messiah, who at a specified external place, namely, Jerusalem, should establish an external kingdom and thus abandon the faith which alone makes the kingdom of Christ to be spiritual and inward.^v

Against the Roman errors concerning an external priesthood separate from the spiritual priesthood of all believers, Luther writes that the public ministry is simply a “different phase of the same priesthood.”^{vi} For Luther, there was no other office than that of preaching the word. However, Luther did believe that there is a necessity to differentiate between the priesthood of believers and the public ministry to avoid complete confusion in the church “so that all things are done decently and in order as Paul has taught.”^{vii}

From Luther’s writings, it is clear that he wrote much concerning the divine character of the pastorate. But, it is also clear that Luther describes other forms of the ministry together with the parish pastorate: “It is, however, something different (than the spiritual priesthood) when one speaks of those who have an office in Christendom, such as sextons, preachers, pastors, or ministers.”^{viii}

From the evidence, it is obvious that Luther considered the above offices divine not because of any special word of institution. The external arrangement had nothing to do with the divine character of the office. The office’s were divine because they preached the word of God.

The next period of Lutheran orthodoxy saw the classical dogmaticians interpreting Matthew 18 in terms of existing state-controlled churches. Government control of theological learning centers removed the church’s right to transmit a call into the ministry. This unfortunate infringement on the rights of the congregation was due to Calvin’s political emphases coupled with the fact that the Prussian Hohenzollerns converted to Calvinism in 1613.^{ix}

The tragic upshot of the dogmaticians’ views would later be felt in America. When Pastors Stephan and Grabau held firmly to their views on church polity, they felt they were only upholding the views of their traditional Lutheran Church.

Thus, the church in Germany became a state-controlled church. The church was tax-supported and was supervised by a government agency that was responsible not only for the external affairs of the church, but also what liturgies, hymnals, and doctrinal standards were to be used.^x

The result of such church polity was an onslaught of pietism, rationalism and unionism. Unionism was especially prevalent during the reign of Frederick William III of Prussia. The Congress of Vienna had decreed religious freedom for all Christians in German state. However, this caused confusion in areas represented by both Lutheran and Reformed Churches. Eventually, Prussia proposed a union of the Reformed and Lutheran bodies on Sept. 27, 1817. The “Prussian Union” was to go into effect on Oct 31, 1817.^{xi}

Staunch confessional Lutherans did not accept the union. By 1830, the Prussian government was required to take stern measures to correct the situation. Lutherans who refused to accept the decree were removed from civil service, pastors were imprisoned, and congregations disbanded.^{xii}

As a result, many Lutherans left Germany and immigrated to America. The promise of religious freedom guaranteed by the American Constitution seemed to be an answer to their problems.

While the American policy of the separation of Church and State was a great blessing to the politically oppressed Germans, it did, however, pose another problem. How were the new churches in America to be organized? The earliest Lutheran organizations in America were known as “*ministeria*.” According to this form of church polity, laymen had no voice in the matters of their church. The Lutheran Church in America was in principle an extension of the state-controlled churches in Germany.

It was to this form of church polity, which was so common among Lutherans both in Germany and early America that C.F.W. Walther directed his treatise on the Church and her Ministry. He “regarded the denial of the personal right of self-decision in religious matters to the humblest believer in Christ and of his supreme authority in the Church as wicked arrogance.”^{xiii}

The decisive victory over this spiritual deterioration would be achieved when a group of immigrants arrived from Saxony. The victory would be significant for a few reasons. First, the correct Scriptural principles regarding the doctrines of the Church and its Ministry would be restored as they were under the guidance of

Luther. And secondly, the encounter with the Buffalo Synod would be a major force in shaping the Missouri Synod position on the doctrines of the Church and its Ministry.

B. Martin Stephan and J.A.A. Grabau

The title page of Walther's treatise "*Die Stimme unsere Kirche von der Frage über die Kirche and Amt*" states that this work was written to repel the attacks of Pastor Grabau of Buffalo, New York. However, the Church and Ministry controversy actually began on our continent with the arrival of Martin Stephan.

In November of 1838, Pastor Martin Stephan immigrated to America with about 750 people. In all, there were six pastors, 10 candidates for the ministry, and four teachers. Before arriving in St. Louis in the early part of 1839, Stephan compelled his followers to sign a document demanding obedience to Stephan in both religious and secular matters. Stephan had in fact elected himself bishop in high church fashion and had placed himself in control of the common treasury.^{xiv}

As the settlement began to arrange itself according to Stephan's standards, many of Stephan's followers soon became aware of the fact that the venerable Pastor Stephan had committed sins against the sixth commandment. Stephan was deposed from office and subsequently banished from the settlement.^{xv}

The real tragedy in this whole situation was the despair experienced by many of Stephan's followers. Since they had been brought up to view the state church as God's church on earth in Europe, they now felt that they were breaking away from the Christian Church, outside of which there is no salvation. Serious doubts began to plague both clergy and laity alike. Were they a Christian Church? Did they have the authority to call pastors? Did the pastors have divine calls? Even Walther himself admits to being tossed about "by doubts and fears."^{xvi}

The situation eventually led Walther to search the Scriptures for the true teaching on the church. The Holy Spirit opened Walther's eyes to the truth that the Church cannot be understood in terms of outward organization. Walther's findings were arranged in eight theses and were presented in a public debate in Altenburg. Walther's opponents in the debate were two lawyers, one of which was Adolf Marbach. Walther's theses comforted the troubled souls of the Saxons with the Scriptural truths of the invisibility of the Christian Church and that faith alone is the prerequisite for membership in the true Church. Furthermore, the Saxons were confident that as members of the universal priesthood of believers, they had the authority to call ministers to serve them.^{xvii}

Eight months following the arrival of Martin Stephan, Pastor J.A.A. Grabau arrived in America with about 1000 others and settled in Buffalo. Earlier in Prussia, Grabau energetically opposed the efforts of King Frederick William III to bring the Lutheran and Reformed churches of Germany into one state-controlled church, better known as the "Prussian Union." Grabau was imprisoned twice for his efforts to negate the royal mandate, which he felt was "an intolerable coercion of his Christian conscience and a fatal infringement upon his religious liberty as guaranteed by the peace of Osnabrueck in 1648." Grabau was able to reach a compromise with the king and he and his followers were allowed to set sail for America.^{xviii}

Grabau reached the conclusion that when he and his followers were immigrating to America, the church itself was in fact immigrating to America. This idea was figuratively expressed in the very seal of the Buffalo Synod. A woman was pictured with an infant in her arms fleeing from a dragon. On the basis of Rev. 12:6, the symbolism was thus explained: The woman is the Church of Christ; the dragon, the Prussian Union; the wilderness, America.^{xix}

For someone who had been diametrically opposed to the Prussian Union and a state-controlled church, Grabau was certainly not one who practiced what he preached. Once in America, Grabau intended to organize his "church" according to the old Pomeranian statutes that had been enforced by the civil authorities. In his new home of America, the separation of Church and State made it necessary for Grabau to establish a strong church government in order to fulfill his plan for establishing the "church." In Grabau's estimation, the "church" was the visible gathering of ministers and laymen. The ministers' duty was to direct the affairs of the congregation, and the laymen's duty was to listen and obey.^{xx}

The paths of Grabau and Stephan met so to speak on Dec. 1, 1840. On that date, Grabau sent his famous *Hirtenbrief* to the former followers of Stephan in Perry County. In the pastoral letter, Grabau shared with the Saxons his idea of the “Church.” The Saxon ministers soon became aware of the fact that Grabau’s letter contained the same errors that they had encountered with Martin Stephan. On July 3, 1843, Pastor Loeber acted on behalf of the Saxon pastors and sent Grabau a critique of his proposal. Loeber’s critique, however, drew the ire of Grabau and soon the Saxons were branded as heretics holding to the American concept of democracy. By refusing to join the Buffalo Synod, the Saxons were publicly denounced as “mobs,” “rebels,” “renegades,” and “apostates from the faith.”^{xxi}

These events ushered in a period of controversy between the Buffalo and Missouri Synods. When dissatisfied members of the Buffalo Synod sought counsel from Missouri Synod pastors, the pastors were denounced as proselytizers. Because of the Romanizing practices of the Buffalo Synod, many of its members were improperly excommunicated. The Missouri Synod pleaded for a colloquy. But Grabau denied any such colloquy. Eventually, Grabau placed the ban of excommunication on the whole Missouri Synod.^{xxii}

At the fifth convention of the Missouri Synod in 1851, C.F.W. Walther clarified the issue when he submitted his treatise on the doctrines of the Church and Ministry. The treatise was discussed in eight sessions, and the convention unanimously voted its approval of Walther’s work and ordered its publication. The first edition appeared in 1852 from the printing press of Andreas Deichert and was subsequently followed by four later editions.^{xxiii}

The Stephan-Grabau incident had a tremendous impact on the Missouri viewpoint regarding the nature and powers of the synod. From the outset of the debate between our two former sister synods, the Missouri Synod has been reluctant (in theory, but not practice) to assign any of the prerogatives of the Church to the synod, most notably that of church discipline. With the benefit of over 100 years of hindsight, we can ascertain that one of the factors that shaped the Missouri mindset in the early years of Church-Ministry debate was an overreaction to the Romanizing tendencies of Stephan and Grabau.

Certainly we should applaud the efforts of the Missouri Synod theologians who sought to uphold the rights of individual Christians. Placing ourselves into the shoes of a Missouri Synod theologian at that time, we also might be unwilling or reluctant to assign any of the prerogatives of the Church to the synod. No doubt, the example of improper excommunications by the Buffalo Synod would be a very strong factor in influencing our mindset.

Thus, it becomes evident that the Missouri Synod was very reluctant to assign the rights and privileges of the church to the synod. Their purpose for doing so was in an effort to prevent the abuse of ecclesiastical authority over the local congregation. Here is just one sample of their way of thinking:

But is there not a danger that in joining a synod a congregation may lose its independence, the right of self-government? The founders of our synod kept this danger in mind. In fact, the first church in our synod in St. Louis, Old Trinity, of which Dr. Walther was pastor many years, would not join synod until it was made definite that Synod in relation to the congregations is only an advisory body.^{xxiv}

The fear has been expressed that in assigning church privileges to the synod, the door is then open for the possibility of creating an authoritative church organization. Unfortunately, such a way of thinking can only see the synod as a supervisory body and nothing else. Such a way of thinking cannot see the synod as an equal and coordinate body with the local congregation, but only as a governing body over it.

C. C.F.W. Walther and the Church-Ministry Debate

It is with good reason that we have chosen to examine the Church and Ministry debate from its very inception on the American continent. The need to keep in mind the historical context of the day is vital for several pertinent reasons.

One such reason centers on the need for a correct understanding of how the historical situation at the time influenced the writings of C.F.W. Walther. Just as Luther had stressed the rights of the individual Christian over against the authority of the Pope and the clergy, so Walther had emphasized the rights of the local congregation over against the authority of the German state-controlled churches, the “*ministeria*,” and the abuse of pastoral authority by Grabau and Stephan.^{xxv}

In addition, we need to keep in mind this historical context so that we do not read thoughts into Walther’s theses on the Church and Ministry, which Walther did not *specifically* express. The title page for Walther’s treatise states that it was intended to repel the attacks of Grabau. This is important to remember. For when we examine Walther’s treatise in light of the historical setting, we can see that his treatise was by no means intended to be the final word on every aspect of the Church and Ministry question. Walther himself recognized this in the preface of the 1852 edition. There he states:

It could, of course, not lie within our attention to present the doctrine of our church in its entirety concerning the church and its ministry. Whoever wants this will find it in the larger dogmatical works of the teachers of our church, among others in the masterful works of a Chemnitz or Gerhard.^{xxvi}

Unfortunately, instead of heeding Walther’s words and realizing that his treatise was not intended to be the final word on the subject, theologians from both the Missouri Synod and the Lutheran Churches of the Reformation have used Walther’s theses in an attempt to show how the Wisconsin Synod has deviated from the Biblical and Lutheran teachings regarding the Church and its Ministry. We should emphasize that since the publication of Walther’s theses, new aspects of the Church and Ministry have come under discussion. Points such as the divine character of the synod and offices in the Church other than the parish pastorate were issues that Walther did not treat as completely as possible because the historical situation at the time did not require him to do so.^{xxvii}

In the Church-Ministry debate, Walther’s writings have often figured prominently in the discussions. While Walther’s 1852 theses and his other writings on the Church and Ministry stand as a landmark in American Lutheranism, it would be inadvisable for anyone to make a doctrinal argument on the basis of his writings. As we have noted earlier, Walther’s treatise was developed for a specific situation in the history of the Lutheran Church. It was not intended to be the final word on every aspect of the Church-Ministry debate. In addition, Walther’s own writings do not always speak consistently on the issues at hand, and at times, Walther’s own writings can lend themselves to differing interpretations. J.P. Koehler makes the following observation:

...It has been indicated that owing to Walther’s style of mainly submitting quotations from the fathers there is much room for misunderstanding the fathers or Walther himself, and that even Walther himself misunderstands at times.^{xxviii}

One fact that is often not appreciated is how similar the WELS’ Church and Ministry Position is to Walther’s position. For example, in Thesis IV of Walther’s treatise on the Church and Ministry, Walther states: “It is to this true Church of believers and saints to which Christ gave the keys of the kingdom of heaven.”^{xxix} “This true Church” Walther explains as being the communion of saints. It is interesting to note that Walther in his treatise says nothing about the view that the public administration of the keys has been entrusted solely to the local congregation. The keys have been given to believers with no specification as to the locality or formation of the groupings of believers.^{xxx}

Perhaps one area where we might have wanted further clarification and elaboration from Walther to avoid misunderstanding is in Theses VI and VII dealing with the Church. In Theses VI and VII, Walther claims the power of the keys for the local congregation and designates the local congregation as a church. By the bare wording of Theses VI and VII, one might deduce that Walther is claiming a special institution for the local congregation. The question we need to ask at this time is this: On what basis did Walther make the claim that

the *Ortsgemeinde* possesses the keys and other church rights? In Walther's words, the local congregation possesses the keys and other church rights "because of the invisible church of true believers which is found in them."^{xxxix} Nowhere in Walther's theses on the Church does he claim that the local congregation is a "church" because of a special word of institution by our Lord. Walther explains the local congregation as being nothing other than a gathering of believers "in which the word of God is preached and the holy sacraments are administered."^{xxxix}

Similarly, the wording of Theses I and II of Walther's treatment of the Holy Ministry can lend themselves to varying interpretations. Theses I and II read:

- I. The Holy Ministry of the Word, or pastoral office is an office distinct from the priestly office, which all believers have.
- II. The Ministry of the Word, or pastoral office is not a human institution, but an office which God himself has established.^{xxxiii}

From the bare wording of the theses, it is not difficult to see how one could reach the conclusion that Walther is supporting a special institution for the parish pastorate in contrast to other forms of ministry in the Church. Once again, we may wish that Walther had made a clarification, particularly in the expression "the Holy Ministry of the Word, or the pastoral office." By placing the two expressions "Ministry of the Word" and "pastoral office" side by side, the impression is given to the reader that the "Ministry of the Word" is the "pastoral office" alone. Hence, the contention is that Walther spoke of the parish pastorate as the only God-ordained office in the Church.

To avoid misreading Theses I and II, we need to note the distinction between the German expressions for "ministry (*Predigtamt*)" and "pastoral office" (*Pfarramt*). The point that needs to be emphasized is that there is no essential difference in meaning between the two terms as used by Walther in his theses. The terms *Predigtamt* and *Pfarramt* can be understood as synonymous, interchangeable terms. In support of this statement, we note how Luther used the terms interchangeably in his "Confession Concerning the Lord's Supper" and in his "Sermon on Keeping Children in School." In both instances, Luther uses *Pfarramt* as an expression covering every phase of the public ministry. That Walther was cognizant of the synonymous usage of the two terms is evident from the fact that he adduces the quotations from these writings of Luther in support of his first thesis. Consequently, it is incorrect to assume that Walther is writing in support of only one form of the ministry, namely, that of the parish pastorate.^{xxxiv}

Theologians supporting the view that the local congregation and parish pastorate are the only forms of the Church and its Ministry claim to follow in the footsteps of C.F.W. Walther. However, it cannot be proven conclusively that Walther considered the local congregation and the parish pastorate to be the only, divinely instituted forms of the Church and Ministry. The theologian most likely responsible for shaping the LCMS' position that the *Ortsgemeinde* and *Pfarramt* are the only forms of the Church and Ministry was Walther's theological successor, Franz Pieper.

D. The "Wauwatosa Theology"

As we consider the WELS' participation in the Church-Ministry debate, we need to recall the exegetical emphasis endorsed by Professors Koehler, Pieper and Schaller in the first part of the 20th century. The historical-exegetical approach to the study of Scripture, also known as the "Wauwatosa Theology," became the primary mode of theological training at our synod's seminary in the early part of the 1900's. Although the expression "Wauwatosa Theology" may mean different things to different people, as far as this writer can determine, the Wauwatosa Theology's main emphasis is on examining Scripture in its historical context in the original languages of the Old and New Testaments. Intellectual independence on the part of the individual interpreter was stressed, as preconceived dogmatic formulations were placed aside in favor of an exegetical study of Scripture in the original Biblical languages.

The emphasis during the formative years of our synod's history was on making our synod a truly orthodox, Lutheran church body. A strong confessional stand had been taken by our synod under the leadership of Hoenecke in the 19th century as the early leaders of our synod sought to establish orthodoxy in line with Luther and the Confessions.^{xxxv}

The emphasis in the early part of the 20th Century began to shift in another direction. The theologians at our seminary saw that a danger existed which could lead to a mere formalistic repetition of all the correct doctrines. To combat such formalism, the Wauwatosa faculty emphasized independent study of the Scriptures in the Hebrew and Greek languages.^{xxxvi}

Koehler has often been claimed as one most responsible for the development of the "Wauwatosa Theology." Perhaps a more accurate description of Koehler's relationship to the development of the Wauwatosa Theology would be to say that he was its popularizer and most articulate exponent. Koehler's writings such as his *Kirchengeschichte*, "The History of the Wisconsin Synod," "The Analogy of Faith," and "The Importance of the Historical Disciplines for the American Lutheran Church of the Present" have all provided enlightening insights into the thinking of Prof. Koehler.

How does the Wauwatosa faculty's emphasis on exegesis relate to the Church and Ministry debate? The Church and Ministry issue actually becomes an excellent illustration of seeing the historical-exegetical method in action. When the doctrines of the Church and Ministry became an issue, the three Wauwatosa men placed aside preconceived doctrinal formulations and the pronouncements of the earlier theologians. Instead, a fresh approach to the study of these teachings was made on the basis of the original texts studied in their proper contexts.

One fact should be noted at the outset. The work done in the Church and Ministry issue was a team effort. It would be a mistake to assume that since Pieper did the bulk of the writing in the *Quartalschrift*, his two other colleagues did not contribute in any significant way, thereby concluding that the Wauwatosa view was Pieper's "amtslehre." Likewise, it would be a mistake to assume that J.P. Koehler was the sole originator of the Wauwatosa position, and that August Pieper merely plagiarized his ideas. In this instance, we serve the cause of the Wauwatosa faculty best when we state that the faculty's influence on our synod's doctrinal position was the result of the combined efforts of all three men. Professor Koehler himself assesses the situation in the same way:

It remained for three men after the synod had washed its hands of the Cincinnati Case to clarify the thinking regarding the doctrines of the church and ministry...In the ensuing controversy about the Church and her Office of the Ministry, as precipitated by the Cincinnati differences, the three Seminary men stood shoulder to shoulder.^{xxxvii}

The position held by the Wauwatosa professors was extensively presented in the issues of the *Quartalschrift* in the early years of the second decade of the 20th century. Admittedly, Pieper did the bulk of the writing. John Schaller contributed articles on "The Origin and Development of the New Testament Ministry," and "Von der Entlassung aus einer Ortsgemeinde." Schaller's thoughts on the development of the parish pastorate can also be found in the preface to his *Pastorale Praxis*. Koehler, on the other hand, was limited by the need to provide a text for church history and therefore was not able in his estimation to do his part of the writing. However, an ample supply of Koehler's thoughts can be found in a book review on Stoeckhardt's commentary on First Peter, in his *Kirchengeschichte*, and in his "History of the Wisconsin Synod."

It is not within the scope of this presentation to give an exhaustive study of the writings of Pieper, Schaller, and Koehler. It will suffice to present a few of the salient points of their writings, especially in view of the influence that their writings had on guiding our synod's doctrinal position.

In analyzing the scriptural position held by the Wauwatosa professors, one principal concept that runs throughout their writings is "that in the New Testament no external legalistic form is ordained by God."^{xxxviii} In contrast with the Levitical Priesthood and the ceremonial laws of the Old Testament, New Testament believers have been granted the freedom to arrange the affairs of the Church in whatever manner best suits the spread of

the gospel. As far as how Christians are to gather for worship and arrange the office of the public ministry, the New Testament gives no binding, legalistic regulations.

That Christians are to gather for worship is made clear by the writer to the Hebrews: “Let us not give up meeting together as some are in the habit of doing” (Hebrews 10:25). Groups of Christians gathered for worship are “churches” in the Biblical sense of the word. But on what basis is a gathering of believers a “church?” August Pieper states that the “outer association does not make the true congregation, but the faith of any gathering of a number of people.”^{xxxix} The only basis for which a congregation can claim divine status is on account of the believers present at that locality. Jesus states: “For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them” (Matthew 18:20). To assume that Jesus is limiting his words to solely to the local congregation is to read thoughts into his words that are not present. The emphasis in our Savior’s words is not on the institution of an outward gathering, but on the “two or three gathered in his name.” When Paul addressed the Christians gathered in Rome (“To all that are in Rome, beloved of God, called to be saints...”), he does not say whether they are united outwardly in any other way than by living in the same locality. He does stress, however, the inner, spiritual union they have through their common faith in Christ. Therefore, Pieper is right when he states that “the presence of a number of called saints in a locality constitutes the presence of a congregation in a locality.”^{xl}

How then is a true Christian Church to be recognized? According to our Savior’s words, the believers are gathered “in his name.” Consequently, the marks by which a true church can be recognized are “the preaching of the gospel and the right use of the sacraments.”^{xli}

In the preceding, we have limited ourselves solely to the scriptural basis for the divine character of the local congregation. But what about other gatherings of Christians in Jesus’ name? What about conferences, circuits or synods? To this we answer that there is no one form of the church that has been specifically instituted by Christ.

Thus the synod, as sum of all its member congregations and Christians, the synodical convention as its representative and as a Christian congregation, is a Christian confessional church and in fact a communion of saints, and the Lord is in its midst according to His promise with all the blessings he has gained for the salvation of sinners.^{xlii}

Since a synod is a gathering of Christians, and therefore a true church “in the strict sense of the word,”^{xliii} “therefore it has all ecclesiastical authority, the power of the word, the power of the keys.”^{xliv}

The objections raised against the position espoused by the Wauwatosa professors were the result of misunderstanding the relationship between the local congregation and the synod. In some theologians’ opinions, the existence of the synod presents the possibility of the local congregation losing its independence (no doubt in part due to the example of the Buffalo Synod). Such a way of thinking can only see the local congregation as a subordinate body, not a coordinate body, to the synod.

With regard to the office of the Public Ministry, the position expressed by the Seminary faculty had the same underlying principle as that of the Church, namely, that “in the New Testament no external legalistic form is ordained by God.”^{xlv} If there is a specific word or command for the divine institution of only one office in the Church, that of the parish pastorate, where is that specific word of institution?

August Pieper states that

from Ephesians 4, 1 Corinthians 12, and other passages it is clear at a glance that the Lord did not give his Church only one type of office and one type of gifts for their execution, but many kinds of offices and many kinds of men to execute them.^{xlvi}

John Schaller also notes: “We can also consider it as settled that nowhere in the New Testament can a definite command be cited that Christians should establish a particular form of the public ministry in their midst.”^{xlvii} From what the New Testament indicates about the diversity of gifts and services in the Church (Eph. 4:11, I

Cor. 12:28), it is evident that there are differing forms of service for the building up of the Church, the body of Christ. Nowhere does the New Testament indicate that one form of service is more divine than another office in the Church, as though the parish pastorate alone is the New Testament Ministry. Consequently, “one is not permitted to jointly identify the New Testament Ministry, as Scripture describes it, with the parish pastorate, as a fixed congregation arranges it.”^{xlvi}

The Wauwatosa professors noted that as circumstances and situations change throughout the history of the Church, the Lord gives his Church on earth the freedom to arrange the office of the Ministry in whatever way best suits the spread of the Gospel. Prof. Koehler states that the “pastoral office is a species of the preaching office which first arose in the Middle Ages in Germany.”^{xlix} Schaller adds that the “pastorate is in each time and in each place that which the Church so names.”^l In other words, as far as the outward arrangement of the office of the Ministry is concerned, the Lord has given the freedom to believers to call servants of the Word to whatever particular form of service is needed by a group of believers. “All forms of the public ministry have in each individual case the established marking which the congregation gives to them through the call of the servant.”^{li}

Does the same hold true for synodical offices? Are synodical offices to be placed on the same plane as that of the parish pastorate? If we keep in mind that the power of the Keys has been given to individual Christians, the answer to this question is not difficult. Therefore, if a group of Christians such as a board of control comes together to call a teacher for a synodical school or an area Lutheran High School, that group of Christians can be certain that they are issuing a divine call. By the same token, “since the synod is a church, and only for that reason, does it have the authority to give out a call to a permanent teacher of the Word such as theological professors, professors at teaching seminaries...”^{lii}

In a review of a I Peter commentary written by George Stoeckhardt, J.P. Koehler gives a succinct summary of the Wauwatosa Theology’s view on the Church and its Ministry:

Whenever and however a gathering of Christians motivated by the power of the gospel sets about to arrange for the administering of the word and sacraments so that the gospel may have free course among them, that has come about by the agency of the Holy Spirit.^{liii}

II. THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE DEBATE

The Wisconsin Synod became a part of an intersynodical controversy over the Church and Ministry question in the early part of the 20th century. The so-called “Cincinnati Case” became the situation, which brought the LCMS and WELS into conflict.

The Cincinnati Case began in the fall term of the 1899 school year when a Mr. Schlueter withdrew his son from an LCMS (Trinity Lutheran) parochial school. The father wanted his son to attend a public school so that his skills in English could improve. At a later time he intended to send his son back to the congregation’s parochial school.^{liv}

During the next weeks, the congregation demanded an explanation for his actions. The explanation came in the form of a written statement acknowledging both his appreciation for the congregation’s parochial school together with its shortcomings. The congregation demanded that Schlueter apologize and return his son to the parochial school. When Schlueter refused to do so, he was then considered as one who had excluded himself from the congregation.^{lv}

The Cincinnati Case soon reached synodical proportions. District officials and professors Dau and Pieper disagreed with the congregation’s dealings with Schlueter. Eventually, Pastors A and F von Schlichten together with the Trinity congregation were suspended from Missouri Synod membership.^{lvi}

Soon the congregation applied for membership in the Wisconsin Synod. Our synod’s officials demurred due to the fact that the Missouri Synod was still dealing with the matter. In 1905, the application was made again. Wisconsin President von Rohr appointed a committee to analyze the case. The committee reviewed material provided by Franz Pieper and analyzed the testimony of the participants involved in the affair.^{lvii}

Eventually, in 1909, von Rohr's committee made the following report to the synodical convention:

We deem it well to refrain from expressing any opinion of ours; but we do wish to express the hope that the Missouri Synod to whom the case originally belongs, may find ways and means to a God-pleasing settlement.^{lviii}

A settlement was finally reached in 1911 when the congregation ousted F Von Schlichten and the council that had backed him in the dealings against Schlueter. The congregation returned to the Missouri fold and Schlueter was given the opportunity to present his side of the case. Having heard his case, the congregation rescinded the ban of excommunication.^{lix} At that point, the Cincinnati Case could have been considered a closed book.

However, the issue wasn't resolved. The Cincinnati Case soon touched off a controversy between the two sister synods that would continue to have reverberations up until the split in 1961. In 1909, a number of Wisconsin Synod pastors began practicing fellowship with the suspended Trinity congregation and its pastors. Those establishing the ties of fellowship held to the view that since the synod was only a human arrangement, the Missouri Synod's pronouncement of suspension need not be honored. Professors Koehler and Pieper urged that the pronouncement of the suspension be honored by our synod's pastors, since the local congregation was not the only God-ordained institution in the Church. The lines of disagreement formed as Missouri Synod theologians now opposed the Wauwatosa position.

The Cincinnati Case prompted August Pieper to take up the question of synodical discipline in the 1911 issues of the *Quartalschrift* with an article entitled "*Menschenherrschaft in der Kirche.*" Soon there were objections galore, from both within and without the synod. Chief objections were directed against statements that dealt with the subject of church discipline exercised by the synod. The objectors though did not examine the context in which Pieper made the statements, and consideration was not given to the purpose for which Pieper wrote the article. The context in which Pieper wrote concerning synodical church discipline was in a clear-cut case of impenitence regarding sins of false doctrine and public offense. Pieper was then emphasizing in his article the need to avoid the abuse of the power of church discipline that has been granted to believers.^{lx}

It is often incorrectly assumed that the Church-Ministry debate developed as a reaction against Wisconsin's position of assigning more powers to the synod than one can claim on the basis of Scripture. Accusations of papism and High-Church mentality are common criticisms of the position that the synod as the sum total of believers of the same faith possesses the power of the keys. The development of the controversy lay not in any attempt on the part of the Wisconsin Synod to ascribe more powers to the synod than Scripture allows, but in the desire on the part of Wisconsin to warn against the abuse of the powers Christians customarily exercised. Pieper seems to be writing with the Cincinnati case in mind when he states: "One can't excommunicate anyone in a congregation because he doesn't send his children to parochial school or he finds many things wrong with the parochial school."^{lxi}

The misunderstandings that developed as a result of the Pieper article led to the arrangement of a synod-wide pastoral conference in Manitowoc on Sept. 27-28, 1911. At the conference, Pieper submitted a paper dealing with the doctrine of the Church, of Synodical discipline, and doctrinal discipline. The conference by no means immediately settled the differences, but it was a step toward achieving unanimity.

Several weeks later, Prof. Ernst prepared 16 theses dealing with the synod and congregation, and the issue of synodical discipline as opposed to congregational discipline. The theses reflected the concept of the "human" element of synodical gatherings and discipline. Subsequent issues of the *Quartalschrift* refuted the objections and gradually the Wauwatosa faculty's position became the general consensus within the WELS.

III. HOPES FOR HARMONIZATION

While intrasynodical unanimity was achieved on a gradual basis, intersynodical unanimity was another matter. From 1914 up until the split between Missouri and Wisconsin, intermittent attempts were made to

harmonize the differences between the two sister synods. Our attention will be directed to three primary attempts at harmonization, together with the events leading up to and directly following each attempt. The three efforts at harmonization were the Wauwatosa Theses, the Thiensville Theses and the Synodical Conference proceedings.

To get a proper perspective of the attempts at harmonization, an analysis of the issues, the extent of agreement between the two synods, and points of difference is a necessity. The issues will clearly define for us the direction of the intersynodical attempts at harmonization. The extent of the agreement between the two synods will show the common ground from which all differences would need to be settled. The points of difference will give us a picture of the gaps that would have to be bridged in order for an agreement to be reached.

The issues in the Church and Ministry debate can be summed up as follows. Regarding the Church, the issue is whether the essence, name, and ecclesiastical rights of the “Church” apply only to the local congregation, or may pertain to other bodies of Christians such as the synod. Regarding the Ministry, the issue is whether the biblical office of the “Ministry” is limited solely to the local congregation’s pastor, or may pertain to all who are called by the Church to serve in the function of publicly preaching the Gospel.

The two synods were and are in agreement on certain aspects of the Church and Ministry. In the area of the Church, both sides are in full agreement that the “Church” is nothing other than the Communion of Saints, that the essence of the local congregation is ordained of God, and that congregations in their Christian liberty can associate together with those of the same faith for the furthering of the work of the Church. In the area of the Ministry, both sides acknowledge that the proclamation of the Word is a command given to all believers. It is agreed that the proclamation of the Word has different species “wherever and whenever the Word is used.”^{lxii} It is agreed that the essence of the pastorate is derived from the priesthood of all believers in that the called pastor acts in behalf of the congregation who has called him. Therefore, there is agreement that the local pastorate is ordained by God.

However, points of difference existed (and still exist) before a complete agreement could be reached. On the doctrine of the Church, it was disputed whether the local congregation and synod could equally be considered “Church,” whether the synod as well as the local congregation possessed the rights of the Church (such as discipline), and whether the local congregation has a special word of institution that other gatherings of believers do not have. On the doctrine of the Ministry, it was disputed that the term “Ministry” is applicable to offices other than the *Pfarramt*, that other offices involved in church work such as synod offices are of divine origin, and that the pastorate has a word of special institution that other forms of the ministry do not have. In order for an agreement to be reached, it is obvious that the claim for the special *Stiftung* for the *Ortsgemeinde* and *Pfarramt* would have to be resolved.

At the 1914 meeting of the Synodical Conference in Milwaukee, Professors Pieper, Metzger, and Fuerbringer of St. Louis met with the Wauwatosa professors on two occasions to voice their disagreement. One meeting was held in Trinity parish hall and the other in a seminary classroom.^{lxiii}

The minutes of the meeting held at Trinity on Aug. 11, 1914, show that both sides were given the opportunity to voice their objections at the outset. St. Louis’ objections centered on the *Quartalschrift* articles that equated suspension with excommunication and teachings concerning the ministry, which differed from those of Walther and Stoeckhardt. August Pieper answered the objection of synodical suspension by stating that his critics did not notice that his words were directed against those guilty of false doctrine. The St. Louis men still felt that the terminology of the article might be misleading. Later in the meeting, Prof. August Pieper delivered six theses reflecting the Wauwatosa position on the ministry. He concluded his sixth thesis by stating that the

proof for the special divine institution and moralistic obligation of the Apostolic episcopacy on the basis of Titus 1, Acts 20, and Acts 13 is impossible and vain. Whoever maintains this, must be able to point out a clear and specific word for it or prove, that it is contained in either the Law or the Gospel.

Professors Koehler and Schaller were asked if they agreed with Prof. Pieper's theses. They answered in the affirmative. Thereupon, the St Louis professors charged that "the Wauwatosa men denied the divine institution of the pastorate."^{lxiv} Needless to say, the meeting settled nothing.

The meetings of 1914 were followed by a written protest by the Concordia faculty in 1915. To achieve a unified position for the Wauwatosa faculty, it was agreed that each professor would assemble their own statements on the doctrines. Because of the brevity of Koehler's theses, Schaller moved that Koehler's be accepted.^{lxv}

On August 3, 1916, the theological faculty of St Louis addressed a letter to the faculty of the Wauwatosa Seminary stating that they were disturbed by statements, which differed from the theses of Walther's Church and Ministry. Three objections were voiced against the Wisconsin position:

- 1) One is that the divine arrangement of the public pastoral office is pushed too much into the background, even openly denied.
- 2) The second point is: As far as we can see, you deduce the concept "congregation" (*Gemeinde*) from the etymology of the word *ekkleesia* and from the very general statement in Matt. 18:20.
- 3) The third point is connected with this. Because you hold a different concept of congregation (*Gemeinde*) you place various synodical offices, etc., on the same plane with the pastoral office.^{lxvi}

The first objection seems to be a reaction to the Wauwatosa position that Paul in Eph. 4:11 outlines various offices in the Church and the position that the pastorate of today is not an exact replica of the pastorate in Apostolic days. The Concordia men stated: "We could not with quiet hearts say of the clear passage of Acts 20: It is to be expounded according to the interpretation of Ephesians and in harmony with the evident historical development of the episcopacy." It is interesting to note the proof they produce for the preceding statement:

What is most compelling for us: Throughout the whole New Testament the public ministry is spoken of in such terms as can be used only of a divine arrangement. Though we are indeed able to offer *no word of specific institution* (emphasis mine), yet the whole New Testament shows us that divine ordering is involved.^{lxvii}

It is interesting to note in this correspondence that the primary *status controversiae*—the specific word of institution—regarding the doctrine of the Ministry is admitted by the St. Louis professors not to exist in a words of Scripture.

Similarly, the second objection bases its support from Scripture not on any word of specific word of institution from Scripture for the local congregation. The Concordia line of reasoning in the objection declares that *ekkleesia* is used of the *Una Sancta* and of individual local congregations such as the one at Corinth. That *ekkleesia* is used of the *Una Sancta* in Scripture is no point of contention. But the point that *ekkleesia* is used only of local congregations such as Corinth is a matter of dispute. One might remind the Concordia faculty of the basis for which Paul calls the congregation at Corinth a "church." In Paul's own words, he explains the basis in the appositional phrase: "to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be holy" (I Cor. 1:2). Paul makes no other claim for the divine status of the church in Corinth than on the basis of the saints in her midst. Where is the specific word of institution? If congregations consist of believers, and synods consist of believers, why is the synod not a "church?"

Finally, objections were raised to Wisconsin's position that all offices of the public ministry involved in the proclamation of the Gospel lie on the same plane. The St. Louis faculty contended that the ministry is "spoken of only in connection with the local congregation."^{lxviii} In addition to overlooking the variety of forms of ministry in Eph. 4:11, the weakness of this contention is that the "church" seems to be understood only in

terms of the local congregation. Therefore, the St. Louis faculty contended that the public ministry is spoken of only in connection with the local congregation. However, we might ask these questions: If the body of Christ consists only of local congregations, what must we say about believers scattered throughout the world who are not officially members of local congregations? Are they then not members of the body of Christ? What about ministers who do not serve in organized local congregations? Are they not truly ministers of the Word?

The date for the first of the “agreements” eventually reached by the two faculties was Dec. 20-21, 1916. The site was Chicago. The Wauwatosa faculty of Pieper, Schaller, Koehler, and Herman Meyer met with a committee from St. Louis consisting of Mezger, Pardieck, and Bente. Prior to the meeting, each faculty prepared a set of theses on which an agreement was hoped to be reached.^{lxi} The agreement resulting from the meeting came to be known as the “*Wauwatosa Theses*.” These theses read as follows:

1. The church in the intrinsic sense of the term is the sum total of all those who have come to faith in Christ through the Gospel.
2. Local congregations are organizations of Christians who, conforming to the will of God, according to locality and circumstances, have associated themselves for the public administration of the Means of Grace and for joint work in the kingdom of God. They are associations formed according to the will of God. An occasional and casual meeting of Christians, also in the name of Jesus, is no local congregation in this sense.
3. The parish pastorate (*Pfarramt*) is the ministry delegated by the congregation to persons with the required aptitudes in order to exercise the rights of the spiritual priesthood of all Christians on behalf of the congregation.
4. The office is of divine institution, and its functions are exactly appointed in the Word of God. Hence, the establishment of this office is not a matter of Christian’s option. The external form and arrangement of this office God has left to the wisdom and liberty of the Christians under the leading of His Spirit.^{lxx}

The “agreement” proceeds from the common ground that any agreement would have to proceed, namely, that the “church” is “the sum total of all who have come to faith.” Proceeding from that common denominator, it would seem as though agreement could have been attained on the disputed point regarding what makes a gathering of believers a “church.” Wauwatosa claimed it was the believers in their midst (which is no doubt how they interpreted the “agreement”). St. Louis claimed a divine institution. Although the words “divine institution” do not occur in the theses, the expression “conforming to the will of God” would seem to be an adequate substitute for their view that only the local congregation has a word of specific institution from God. According to the wording of the first two theses, both sides could hold to their concept of the Church.

The same can be said about the theses dealing with the ministry. That the parish pastorate is the ministry delegated to the local congregation is no point of quarrel. That the office is divinely instituted is no point of controversy. That the office is divine in contrast to other offices in the Church is a point of controversy. And yet, St. Louis could easily understand the theses to say that the *Pfarramt* is the only form of the ministry. By the same token, Wauwatosa could interpret the expression dealing with the “external form and arrangement” of the ministry to reflect their view that Christians have the liberty to arrange the external form of the ministry to best suit the needs of a church in its particular situation.

In addition to allowing the wording of the theses to cover both points of view, the other glaring mistake of the Wauwatosa Theses was that they dealt superficially with the issues at hand. In the theses dealing with the Church, the point of disputation concerning the divine essence of the synod was not even mentioned. Nothing is said of church rights possessed by gatherings of believers other than the local congregation. In short, the theses do not come out and specifically answer the questions: “Is the synod a church?” “Are there offices in the church other than the parish pastorate?” At best, the Wauwatosa Theses were not an agreement, but a compromise.

Due to the ambiguous wording and the possible variety of interpretations, the long-range effect of the Wauwatosa Theses was limited. By 1929, renewed study of the doctrines became necessary on both an

intrasynodical and intersynodical scale. Intrasynodically, August Pieper records that “disturbances” in the synod (more than likely the Protes’tant controversy) led to an attack on certain practical cases of synodical suspension.^{lxxi} Intersynodically, the theological faculties at Thiensville and St. Louis exchanged theses which would form the foundation for the renewed meetings between the two faculties. Correspondence was exchanged in an effort to settle the differences, and plans were made for a future meeting of committees from both faculties.^{lxxii}

The prospect of another opportunity to harmonize the differences was welcomed on both sides. A Wisconsin committee consisting of Professors Meyer and Pieper, President Bergemann, and Pastor Sauer was informed by William Arndt that a meeting was desired by the Missouri men on Oct. 31 and Nov. 1, 1930, with the site being Thiensville. Eventually, a meeting was held on Dec. 20, 1930. Theses were approved by subcommittees headed by Professors Meyer and Arndt. Once again, however, the disputed point of divine institution was circumvented at this time by interjecting the expression “*Gottes Wille und Ordnung*.”^{lxxiii} This expression would also reoccur in the later agreement known as the Thiensville Theses.

Dissatisfaction concerning the theses adopted on Dec. 20 led to the proposal of another meeting on Feb. 14, 1931.^{lxxiv} The time was subsequently set one week later for Feb. 21, and the site selected was Chicago. The theses adopted at this meeting read as follows:

1. That it is God’s will and order that Christians establish local congregations.
2. That they have shepherds and teachers who on behalf of the congregation discharge the office of the Word in their behalf.
3. That Christian local congregations give expression to their unity in the faith with other congregations and help to discharge the work of the kingdom also outside their own midst, somewhat as occurs among us in the free form of the synod.^{lxxv}

The lasting effect of the theses adopted at Chicago was limited. On November 22, 1931, Prof. John Meyer directed the following question to Prof. Engelder: “What is the prescribed form of the local congregation and where is the direct Scriptural proof for it?”^{lxxvi} Engelder responded: “What external form, according to circumstances, this congregation must assume, *on that Scripture gives no directions* (emphasis mine).” And to the question, “Which form of the local congregation, with its office, did our Savior institute?” Engelder’s response was: “*I cannot answer* (emphasis mine).”^{lxxvii} Once again, *no specific word of institution can be shown for the local congregation and the parish pastorate*. And yet, the Chicago agreement was short-lived because harmony could not be achieved concerning the contention that God has “commanded” the formation of local congregations.

The seeming lack of progress in the church-ministry discussions led President Pfoth to remark: “I am of the opinion we should call it quits. (Otherwise) we shall be moving in a circle without prospect of progress.”^{lxxviii}

Surprisingly enough, on April 16, 1932, the Thiensville faculty together with representatives of the St. Louis faculty adopted four resolutions known as the Thiensville Theses. On June 9, Prof. Graebner submitted the theses to the St. Louis faculty for approval. They were unanimously approved. In four theses, the faculties reached an agreement on the doctrines of the Church, of the Ministry, and of exclusion from the Church (excommunication). The Thiensville Theses read:

1. It is God’s will and order, as we understand from Holy Scripture, that Christians living in the same locality also enter into outward union with one another, in order jointly to exercise the duties of their spiritual priesthood.
2. As we understand from Scripture, it is furthermore God’s will and order that such local congregations of Christians have shepherds and teachers who in the name and on behalf of the congregation carry out the ministry of the Word in their midst.

3. As we understand from Holy Scripture, it is also God's will and order that local congregations of Christians give expression to their unity of faith with other congregations and carry on the work of the Kingdom of God jointly with them outside their own circle also, as for example this is done among us in the free form of the synod.
4. Since every Christian possesses the keys of the kingdom of heaven, a judgment pronounced in agreement with the Word of God by a single Christian or by a number of Christians in any kind of combination has validity also in heaven. But, as we understand from Holy Scripture, it is God's will and order that an action against the sinning brother shall not be regarded as having been concluded until his local congregation has acted. The disciplinary action of a local congregation and synodical discipline, if matters are handled correctly, cannot come into conflict with each other, because the local congregation excludes from the local congregation and not from the synod, and the synod excludes from the synod and not from the local congregation. Note—The exclusion executed by the local congregation we call excommunication, in agreement with ecclesiastical usage.^{lxxix}

The long-awaited agreement was reported by both the *Northwestern Lutheran* and the *Lutheran Witness*. The latter publication described the theses as a “happy conclusion of a matter which has threatened the peace of the church.”^{lxxx} A sigh of relief was also given on the Seminary hill in Mequon by a man who spent long hours clarifying the doctrines for his synod and negotiating agreements with the synod from which he had received his seminary training. Following the agreement on April 16, August Pieper entered a seminary classroom and told his class: “Boys, how happy you can be. It's over with. We have come to an agreement. It's a closed book. You won't have to deal with it any more.”^{lxxxii}

While the Thiensville Theses were hailed as a “conclusion” to the Church and Ministry debate, it soon became apparent that the agreement was not satisfactory for achieving unanimity between the two synods. Once again, ambiguous wording allowed two views to be interpreted and a failure to directly deal with the issues involved resulted in the dissatisfaction. This is essentially the assessment of the situation by members of both synods. August Pieper notes:

We shall not be surprised that they (the theses) do not satisfy in any quarter. Already during the sessions of your general synod last year they were described to me by a number of its important members—even by a president—as a compromise. Later some of our pastors also, even a conference and to me personally, protested against the mode of expression of the Theses. - With reason! For especially the fourth thesis has a so-artfully-contrived sound that both your and our view can be covered by it. It is unclear.^{lxxxii}

Perhaps a more favorable interpretation would be to view the 1932 agreement as the beginning of future efforts at achieving unanimity. It is a fact that subsequent dealings in the debate would be based on the Thiensville agreement. In the course of the Synodical Conference proceedings, a tentative agreement was reached in 1952 on the basis of the 1932 theses. While no immediate meetings were scheduled for the future, doctrinal indifference cannot be considered the culprit as attention was being focused on Missouri's involvement in ALC-ULCA discussions.^{lxxxiii}

After a gap of about six years, once again the debate was resurrected. On Dec. 11, 1939, President Behnken of the Missouri Synod received the following resolution of the Concordia faculty:

Resolved, that we inform President Behnken through our secretary, that as well as in the *Quartalschrift*, also in the *Gemeindeblatt* (Prof Zich's book review, Pres. Brenner's synodical address) utterances were made which do not stand in harmony with the teaching of the Church and Ministry, about which the Missouri and Wisconsin Synods have become unified.^{lxxxiv}

The statements regarded as divisive from the 1932 agreement were a book review of Koehler's *Summary of Christian Doctrine* by Prof. August Zich and a synodical address published in the *Gemeindeblatt* by President Brenner. Zich's book review expressed disagreement with a statement made in Koehler's book, which stated that, the "local congregation is the only organization of the visible church recognized in scripture."^{lxxxv} Brenner's sermon opened with the attention grabbing statement: "The synod is only a human institution. So it is often said."^{lxxxvi}

Fingers were pointed both ways as each faculty held the other responsible for reopening the issues. Missouri charged Zich and Brenner as the ones responsible. While Wisconsin held that it was statements made by Dr. Theodore Graebner (*Lutheran Witness*, May 17, 1938) and Prof. Edward Koehler.^{lxxxvii} In any event, the debate was reopened and steps were taken to harmonize the differences.

Soon the issue became one of interpreting the Thiensville agreement, particularly Thesis III. How was the agreement to be read? Concordia expressed their interpretation in this way:

The reviewer overlooked that while the paragraphs of the agreement pertaining to the local congregation and the office of the holy ministry (Nos. 1 and 2) begin with the words "*Es ist Gottes Wille und Ordnung*," the third paragraph which treats of cooperation between various congregations is introduced by the words "*Es ist auch Gottes Wille*." Very definitely the form of these two paragraphs indicates that Christian congregations and synods are not to be placed on the same level. The reviewer ignored that while, according to the agreement, in two instances we are dealing with definite directions of God, in the third the directions are indefinite and general.^{lxxxviii}

On the other hand, Thiensville interpreted the coordinating "*auch*" between theses 2 and 3 as indicating that there is no special institution for the local congregation.^{lxxxix}

The steps taken to bridge the gaps of interpretation began late in 1941. Upon consultation with Dr. Ludwig Fuerbringer, President Behnken made the following proposal to President Brenner:

As a result of that meeting, I am suggesting to you that some of our faculty meet with members of the Thiensville faculty to discuss the doctrinal issue "The Church and Ministry" on the basis of the former Thiensville Agreement or Theses.^{xc}

At the 1941 Wisconsin Synod convention, the resolution was passed to refer intersynodical cases to a "Committee of Six." President Brenner approved of committee's formation and informed President Behnken that he saw no reason why the church-ministry debate could not be referred to such a committee. Brenner stated: "Our committee... will be glad to meet your committee at any time you may designate..."^{xc}

Plans were formed for a meeting on Sept. 1 and 2, 1942, in Milwaukee. The committee representing Concordia expressed the desire to deal with the following issues:

- 1) We are anxious to be shown how the opening sentences of Pastor Brenner's address agree with the theses adopted by the two faculties unanimously in 1932 as expressing the true doctrine of the church.
- 2) The views expressed by Prof. Zich in his review of Dr. Koehler's book... are in direct disagreement with the theses of 1932. We would like to be shown why these views were nevertheless published in the official periodical of our Wisconsin brethren.^{xcii}

The committees representing each of the faculties met on Sept. 1, 1942, at Grace Church in Milwaukee. The presidents of each synod were present. The committee from Concordia was represented by Professors Engelder, Hoyer, and Laetsch. In accord with the desire of the St. Louis faculty, the purpose of the meeting was

“to hear and discuss the charges brought by the faculty of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, against sentences in a sermon preached by President Brenner...as well as against statements in a book review by Prof. Zich...”^{xciii} The morning session was directed toward dealing with the Brenner sermon, while the afternoon session was spent dealing with the third thesis of the Thiensville agreement.

The divisive statements from Brenner’s sermon were read aloud. After the reading, Prof. Engelder stated that he did not consider the statements “serious enough to take any action regarding them.” Engelder and his colleagues’ chief concern was that of the Zich book review.

The matter was not dropped, as Pres. Brenner demanded that the charges against his sermon be dropped immediately. Brenner explained that the point of his sermon was aimed at those who were neglecting their duties to synod because they took the stand that the synod is only a human institution. Dr. Engelder was “greatly pleased” with the explanation, and a motion was made and passed that all matters be dropped for the time being so that the faculties could take up an examination of the disputed third thesis.

The afternoon session was devoted exclusively to the examination with each of the faculties giving their interpretation. St. Louis stated: “The synod is a free form, i.e., a human institution, in contrast to the local congregation, which is a divine institution.” Thiensville interpreted the expression “free form” in this way: “God has not ordained the outer form in his word, which we call synod, just as little as he has or ordained an outer form for the local congregation in his word.”

It soon became obvious that the two views differed radically, and “thus the fond hope was shattered that Thesis III expresses full agreement between the two faculties on the essential characteristics of the synod.” The meeting did end on a positive note as both faculties resolved that they should “meet again in order to make every effort to come to an agreement.”^{xciv}

That the faculties did earnestly desire an agreement was evidenced by the correspondence that continued between various members of the faculties. However, the next attempts at harmonization would not be handled through the faculties, but through committees formed by the Synodical Conference.

The involvement of the Synodical Conference in the Church and Ministry debate came about as the result of a request on the part of the Twin City Mixed pastoral Conference. The conference requested that “the Synodical Conference study the problem of the chaplaincy...since it has been a source of disagreement between the constituent synods of the Synodical Conference...”^{xcv}

The Floor Committee that was appointed to study the chaplaincy question submitted a report to the Synodical Conference that advised the formation of an “Interim Committee.” The Interim Committee would be formed of three men from the Missouri Synod, three from the Wisconsin Synod, one from the Norwegian Synod, and one from the Slovak Synod. The Floor Committee resolved that

this committee study, in the light of God’s Word, the Army and Navy chaplaincy question and all other matters relating to the doctrine of the call, the ministry, and the church, where there has been disagreement, with the aim of achieving complete agreement.^{xcvi}

The records show that from 1946-1948, the Interim Committee held six conferences, with three to five sessions at each meeting. The Interim Committee consisted of the following: Pastors Bouman, Nickel, and Mr. John Kirsch of Missouri; Pastors H. Eckert, A. Westendorf, and Mr. A. Schwantes of Wisconsin; Pastor Jaroslav Pelikan of the Slovak Synod; Pastor H. Theiste of the Norwegian Synod.^{xcvii}

Originally, the committee was formed in an effort to deal with the chaplaincy question. But before discussion could begin on the chaplaincy, there had to be a unanimous position on the Church and Ministry. Later Synodical Conference reports show that the Interim Committee never did really deal with that issue. Pastor Eckert explained to me personally that the committee never did fully take hold of the chaplaincy question “because horns were locked over the Church and Ministry.”^{xcviii}

When it became evident that the Interim Committee would not achieve complete agreement within its own circle, Pastor Eckert volunteered to resign. However, at the urging of E. Benjamin Schlueter, Pastor Eckert agreed to remain on the committee.^{xcix} The result was that at the next meeting of the Synodical Conference, two

reports—a Majority Report and a Minority Report—were given by the Interim Committee. The purpose for allowing Pastor Eckert the opportunity to prepare a Minority Report was “to avoid an indefinite stalemate.”^c

The Majority Report representing the view of the seven members in agreement stated that disagreement was found to exist in questions such as the nature and powers of the congregation as contrasted with the synod, and the placement and duties of the chaplain. Due to the limited time the committee had in discussing the matters, the report noted that the chaplaincy question was not given “the study it requires.” Consequently, the majority of the report consisted only of five theses reflecting their concept of the Church and Ministry, and proof adduced from Scripture passages and other theologians.^{ci}

A thorough analysis of the Majority Report was prepared by Professors Meyer and Kowalke. Upon request of Wisconsin’s Committee on Church Union, professors Meyer and Kowalke attended a meeting of the Interim Committee on Oct. 25-26, 1949, in Milwaukee. At the close of the meeting, Meyer and Kowalke were asked to submit their report.^{cii}

Meyer and Kowalke’s report termed the Majority Report as “confusing, because it does not describe a Christian congregation according to its essence, but only according to its function.” The report noted that “churches” in the biblical sense of the word are “groupings of believers,” and in this sense, both congregation and synod are “church.”

Further weaknesses noted were the inability to produce a specific passage quoting the “command” to form local congregations, and the confusion resulting from limiting *ekkleesia* solely to the local congregation. Similarly, proof-text methodology was abused to the point that context was virtually ignored in some of the “proof passages” cited. For example, how would Gal. 6:2 (“Bear ye one another’s burdens”) fit into the concept that synods have been formed to carry out duties that congregations cannot carry out and therefore exist only by human right? The context deals with restoring the sinful brother, and the passage concludes: “And so fulfill the law of Christ.” If this passage were to be quoted as “proof” for the formation of the synod, one would have to conclude that synods also exist by the command of God.^{ciii}

Finally, concerning the quotations from Hoenecke, Luther, Walther, and Pieper, the analysis notes:

Since pronouncements by teachers of the Church are not the source of doctrine, and since for a correct understanding of them they must be viewed on the *background of the circumstances under which they were written* (emphasis mine), a discussion of the quotations from Luther, Walther, Hoenecke, and Pieper might lead to endless, fruitless discussions. For example, the quotation from Luther is lifted out of its context, omits a word, and fails to add Luther’s own conclusion in the case.^{civ}

Professor Meyer and Professor Kowalke touched on one of the key reasons why the harmonization attempts often failed to fully achieve their purpose. The more one studies the Church-Ministry issue, the more obvious it becomes that a great deal of time and effort has been expended in making an argument on the basis of the writings of Luther and Walther. This is not intended to demean or minimize the writings of Luther and Walter. A theological debate will only move in circles if excessive amounts of time are spent studying the writings of “human” authors. Pastor A.T. Kretzmann once made this interesting observation concerning the Church-Ministry debate:

Countless articles have been written in support of the different positions held on the doctrines of the Church and the Holy Ministry. In most cases the emphasis has been on what eminent scholars have held and taught. It is the contention of the writer that this controversy can be settled only being an unbiased look at the Bible passages adduced in support of these differing positions.^{cv}

In spite of the stalemate, meetings of the Interim Committee continued, and at the 1952 Synodical Conference, the committee recommended that since the Thiensville Theses “correctly express the Scriptural

principle of this doctrine,” the Synodical Conference should move to adopt the theses. Any practical applications of the theses were then to be submitted to the faculties of the theological seminaries in the Synodical Conference. Regarding the chaplaincy question, the Interim Committee advised that the matter be taken up by the “Committee on Intersynodical Cases.”^{cvi}

The Floor Committee approved of the suggestions of the Interim Committee. The adoption of the Thiensville Theses, the referral of practical cases to the seminaries in the Synodical Conference, and the referral of the chaplaincy question to an Intersynodical Committee were recommended by the Floor Committee. The convention adopted the Floor Committee’s recommendations.^{cvi}

In spite of the actions taken at the 1952 convention, complete agreement was not achieved. Later, the Church-Ministry doctrines were to be discussed along with other disputed doctrines, but it was to no avail. When the synods split over the fellowship issue in 1961, the two sides were as divided as they were forty-seven years earlier when the faculties first met with the hope of achieving harmony.

IV. PAST AND PRESENT PERSPECTIVES

When reflecting on the Church-Ministry debate between the Missouri and Wisconsin Synods, it is natural to ask some important questions: “What impact did the Church-Ministry debate have on the WELS’ termination of fellowship with the LCMS?” “Did the Church-Ministry debate help to cause the dissolution of the Synodical Conference?” “Why didn’t the Church-Ministry debate end our fellowship ties with the LCMS before 1961?” “What practical applications of the Church-Ministry doctrines caused disagreement between the WELS and LCMS?”

We might begin by focusing on the question: “What impact did the Church-Ministry debate have on the WELS’ termination of fellowship with the LCMS?”

At this point in time, we could say that the doctrinal differences between the LCMS and WELS did play a subordinate role in the split of the Synodical Conference. Prof. Edward Fredrich noted:

The long-range view may eventually suggest that the church-ministry conflict tended to add to the climate of conflict and controversy and thus may have helped in preventing the return of better weather.^{cvi}

The differences in doctrine between the two synods were not just a tempest in a teapot, an argument over differing applications of a non-fundamental doctrine. The differences were real. They were described in no uncertain terms as “threatening the peace of the Church,”^{cix} and as “a source of disagreement between the constituent synods of the Synodical Conference for a number of years, threatening true unity among us.”^{cx}

Then why did the two synods not split over the Church-Ministry issue? From the outset of the debate, the differences were not cleanly divided along synodical lines. Some Missouri men held to the “Wisconsin” position, while in the early part of the debate some Wisconsin men held to the “Missouri” point of view.^{cx} Similarly, the practice of the Missouri Synod was not and has not always been in line with its doctrinal position. There were instances when the *practice* of the LCMS was more in line with the WELS’ Church-Ministry doctrinal position than its own position. A.T. Kretzmann makes the following observation:

The “Missouri Position” in *practice* differs from the “Missouri Position” in theory in this respect: The claim that only congregations may carry out the functions of the Office of the Keys in the name of others is not carried out when the work of the church is *done* in the Missouri Synod. If it were true that God has entrusted these matters *only* to the local congregation, then the local congregation would be forbidden by God to delegate it to other groups of professing Christians, such as synods, mission boards, etc. Thus, *in practice*, the Missouri Synod Position is the opposite of that which has been assumed in the theoretical position. Synods and Mission Boards

and Pastoral Conferences are functioning as a Church in certain areas of the Ministry of the Word.^{cxii}

In addition, the Church-Ministry issue did not divide the church bodies, but continued to be debated until the termination of fellowship because there was the hope that if differences could be settled in the Church and Ministry, other areas of difference could be resolved as well. On Oct. 9, 1941, President Behnken addressed President Brenner: “As soon as this matter (church-ministry) has been decided, we can come to some conclusion as to the proper procedure toward a settlement of the intersynodical cases, both old and new.”^{cxiii}

This is basically the same sentiment expressed by Dr. Ludwig Fuerbringer, when he stated:

I can truthfully say that the situation in the Synodical Conference gives me very much concern, and I feel we should do everything in our power to maintain and strengthen the unity of faith and practice within the Synodical Conference and that we should discuss in smaller circles matters of difference which threaten such unity.^{cxiv}

Dr. Fuerbringer’s letter was dated July 13, 1942. Although the Church and Ministry issue was not mentioned specifically in his letter, we can only surmise that the matter was included in the cryptic expression that “everything” should be done to maintain unity. In approximately another two months, a meeting would be held between representatives of the St. Louis faculty and the Thiensville faculty. Though the hope of attaining unity in the doctrines was “shattered” at that meeting, attempts at harmonizing the church-ministry differences continued nevertheless.

With the benefit of hindsight, we might wonder whether or not certain practical applications of the LCMS’ position on the Church and Ministry contributed to more than just a “climate of conflict and controversy” within the Synodical Conference. I would suggest that some particular applications of the Church and Ministry did have an impact on certain issues of church fellowship, which ultimately did divide the Synodical Conference. Even though the chaplaincy question was discussed in the Synodical Conference as a Church-Ministry issue, the chaplaincy question was also an issue of church fellowship. The *Lutheran Witness* certainly understood that the chaplaincy question was more than just a Church and Ministry issue when it stated that “the Wisconsin Synod has in its Saginaw Convention, 1941, condemned Army and Navy Chaplaincies as involving unionism, mixing of Church and State, and offending against the doctrine of the call” (Quoted from a *Lutheran Witness* article entitled “Obstacles of Lutheran Union”).

But did other practical applications of the Church-Ministry differences impact issues of church fellowship? Since the synod was viewed in the LCMS as a “human” institution, scriptural fellowship principles in application to the synod were once described not as scriptural directives, but merely as “synodical resolutions” “arrived at” by congregations gathered in convention.^{cxv} The view (such as the one expressed by the “Statement of 44”) that the local congregation determines fellowship relationships may have also helped to foster a decline in doctrinal unity and cases of doctrinal pluralism within the LCMS. Finally, the position that the local congregation alone possesses the power of the keys may have also contributed in part to a periodic failure to decisively deal with instances of false doctrine on the part of LCMS pastors and professors.

Professor Edward Fredrich once stated: “How much indirect effect the church-ministry difference had in the splitting process is an interesting question that at this early date perhaps will never be conclusively answered.”^{cxvi}

Even though the Synodical Conference split specifically over the issue of church fellowship, certain practical applications of the Church and Ministry doctrines did impact some areas of church fellowship. Consequently, in this writer’s view, the Church-Ministry debate did play a subordinate role in the dissolution of the Synodical Conference.

CONCLUSION

The Church-Ministry issue will, in all probability, be an issue that will continue to be debated years into the future. Someone once appropriately described the Church-Ministry debate as the “seemingly eternal controversy.” After my graduation from the seminary, Professor Martin Westerhaus wrote to me at this “whole subject keeps coming up not only with reference to the Missouri Synod, but also (with reference to) the small conservative groups that left Missouri.”^{cxvii}

My ongoing personal study of the Church-Ministry doctrines and the history of the Church-Ministry debate have been very rewarding for me. The study has led me to a greater appreciation of the unity and fellowship we share with one another in the WELS. United by our common faith, we work together to carry out our Savior’s Great Commission. We cooperatively support home mission work, foreign mission work and the training of future pastors and teachers. As individual congregations, it would be difficult for us to effectively carry out this work. It is a blessing to join hands with our fellow Christians in the WELS to “work together for the truth” (III John 8). In the same way I am grateful not only for the faithful service of the parish pastors in our church body, but also for the ministry of those who are not specifically called to the parish pastorate: parochial school teachers, area Lutheran High School teachers, synodical professors, mission counselors, mission administrators, planned giving counselors, etc. These servants of the Word have been called to perform an important function in the Lord’s Church today. We recognize that their service to the church is valuable in spreading the gospel and strengthening the body of Christ.

As Professor J.P. Koehler concluded his history of the Wisconsin Synod, he made the following statement:

So, the present writer, in bringing to a conclusion his history of the Wisconsin Synod, is reminded of the two theological issues for which the Wisconsin faculty stood over against others. They were not the heart and core of the gospel...but they concerned the problem of exegetical exactness in theological work to the last detail.^{cxviii}

I believe that one of the two issues to which Professor Koehler cryptically refers is the Church-Ministry debate (the other is probably the “Analogy of Faith” issue). Koehler’s comments are a reminder to us that the Church-Ministry debate can serve as a guide for future doctrinal discussions. “Exegetical exactness” is the key to resolving doctrinal issues such as the Church and its Ministry. “Exegetical exactness” is part of our responsibility as servants of Christ, who have been called to say, “This is what the Lord says.” “Exegetical exactness” will help us to build consensus where there has been controversy.

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ⁱⁱⁱ Clyde Nehrenz, “Missouri, A Changing Church Body.” *The Christian News*, Vol. 23, (Jan. 7, 1985), No. 1, p. 8.

^{iv} August Pieper, “Luther’s Doctrine of Church and Ministry,” *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, Vol. 60 (April 1963) No. 2, p. 96.

^v August Pieper, “Luther’s Doctrine of Church and Ministry,” p. 98.

^{vi} August Pieper, “Luther’s Doctrine of Church and Ministry,” p. 248.

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^x Walter Baepler, *A Century of Grace*, Concordia Publishing House, Saint Louis, Missouri, p. 50.

^{xi} Walter Baepler, *A Century of Grace*, p. 11.

^{xii} Walter Baepler, *A Century of Grace*, p. 12.

^{xiii} *Walther and the Church*, Concordia Publishing House, Saint Louis, Missouri, p. 50.

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- ^{xxxiv} Carl Lawrenz, "An Evaluation of Walther's Theses on the Church and Ministry," p. 126-127.
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- ^{xxxvi} Immanuel Fry, "Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, 1863-1963," p. 211.
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- ^{xliv} August Pieper, "Die Suspension noch einmal," p. 140.
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