

Home Mission Moods and Modes—125 Years in WELS

by Norman W. Berg

As one approaches the assigned task of writing a portion of the history of one's church body, one is faced with the awesome question of what is true history. This will of course determine one's approach to the subject at hand.

Your writer is indebted to Professor T.J. Hartwig for his recent paper on "Revisionism in History" presented at the 1976 Faculty Conference at Northwestern College, Watertown, Wisconsin, for helping clarify thinking on the matter.

I would indeed like to approach the given subject in the spirit of Leopold von Ranke, of whom Professor Hartwig says that "von Ranke declared that every age in history is immediate to God, and that its value consists not in what springs from it but in its own existence....He furthermore insisted that it is the historian's business...to enter into the spirit of the past and to recapture that past as *it really was*."

It is my hope to look at the mood of the men of the Synod resulting from the background of their times and to note the modes of operation that resulted in the train of historical events in Home Missions in our Synod.

One hopes to do this objectively. But I am afraid this is possible only for the academician with time and resources for careful research. My approach is that of one active in the developmental stages of the very history I am reporting and herein lie many obstacles to objective writing. Perhaps the most I can hope for is to be a limited resource for a later historian seeing in this writing the prejudice and mood of this time reflected in our view of the past.

What will be written is not for the purpose of learning what to do today or tomorrow in home mission work, for in an absolute sense history does not repeat itself but, as stated by Professor Hartwig, "The Christ-event...assures the Christian that history is forward directed to a goal and is not an endless succession of circles." Thus we wish to note the history of our synod's home missions as a part of that divinely guided, goal-directed history in the great Christ-event between the Cross and the Throne.

I. The Never-Changing Purpose of Wels Home Mission Work for 125 Years

The purpose of the Home Mission program of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS) throughout its 125 years can be summed up in its recent statement of purpose: "The continuing purpose of the General Board for Home Missions is to share the Gospel of Jesus Christ with all people within the limits of the domestic mission fields of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod." This statement is only an institutional way of declaring that the function of the church or any of its visible parts is the following of the Great Commission to go into all the world and to preach the gospel to every creature.

This mission is broader than the term "mission" often implies, as is stated well by Reverend Donald Abdon: "Evangelism (proclaiming the good news) is the fundamental Christian mission of bringing the Gospel to all people, both within the church and outside it."¹

Our home mission program from its beginning until now has been marked by this mission purpose with its *dual* object, proclaiming the good news both to those within the church and to those outside it. This is underlined presently in the first two of three stated objectives of our Home Mission Board:

1. To reach the unchurched primarily by the establishment of mission congregations.
2. To conserve the membership of the WELS.

It has been the changing moods of various times that has brought about a shift in emphasis as to which object of the proclaiming of the gospel received the greater attention, effort, and thought, those within the

¹ Donald Abdon, *Training and Equipping Saints* (Elk Grove Village, Ill.: Parish Leadership Seminar, Inc., 1975), p 2.

church or those outside it. This is especially apparent in the history of our WELS home missions we are to review. We hope to show that the never changing purpose of home missions has been carried out with various modes of operation to fit the emphasis indicated by the mood of the times and their background.

II. The Beginning Period, 1850–1865

As is well-known in our circles, the beginnings of the Wisconsin Synod were the results of what would have to be termed home (or inner) mission work on the part of a number of German mission societies. Although the effort crossed the seas, it was to work with dispersed fellow-Lutherans in contrast to the heathen mission work also done by these societies. In fact, it is to be noted that for most of these societies the *Heidenmission* was the chief goal, the *Sammelmission* or mission of gathering Lutherans in congregations originally was a by-product. But the fact that there was deep concern for the isolated brethren of the household of faith, fellow German Lutherans in the wilds of Wisconsin, is amply attested to by the amount of money and number of men sent to America.

In all three areas where the constituent synods which later formed the General Synod of Wisconsin, Minnesota, Michigan, and Other States were established, the pattern of beginnings was very similar. Laymen of deep religious conviction who assembled for religious worship and instruction without the benefit of regular clergy sent pleas to Germany for help. In Michigan, Jonathan Mann of Washtenaw County wrote to a pastor of the Basel Mission Society; in Wisconsin, Ehrenfried Seebach of Oakwood, the writer's great grandfather, wrote to the Langenberg Mission Society. Upon the arrival of help in the form of missionaries, concern was almost immediately shown for extending regular spiritual care to other isolated groups of German Lutherans. The mood was "serve the children of our people."

In Michigan Pastor Friedrich Schmid, sent by the Mission House at Basel, arrived in the Ann Arbor area in 1833 and established the very first Lutheran Church in the territory of Michigan in Scio Township. But immediately he began to literally walk a circuit of stations throughout southeastern Michigan. In 1839 after receiving the gift of a horse from his father-in-law he extended his circuit west to Marshall and north to Lansing and Saginaw, a circuit 130 miles by 100 miles!

In Minnesota similar events were occurring after the arrival of Pastor Wilhelm F. Wier, the founder of Trinity Church, St. Paul, Minnesota, in 1855, and especially after the arrival of Pastor Heyer, who was very active in gathering groups south of the Twin Cities.

But for the sake of brevity we shall concentrate on the mood and mode of operation in the state of Wisconsin. Already in the *Synodalbericht* (Synod Proceedings) of the first convention of May 1850 it was noted that all pastors should not only conduct day schools and Bible study for the youth, but also mission study. The mission-consciousness of the mother mission societies was to be passed on. During the 1855 Synod convention an appeal was made to awaken among the members the lost mission consciousness. Things do not change!

The June 1851 Synod Proceedings gave special attention to the need for a missionary for the state of Wisconsin to reach German Lutherans both in the many developing small towns and in isolated rural areas. Here was the first official mention of the *Reiseprediger* (circuit-riding preacher) approach to home mission activity. Because of a lack of funds an appeal was sent to the Barmen Mission Society in Germany "for consideration for a preacher" for Wisconsin.

Here, too, the prevailing mood was to reach "the children of our people." This attitude prevailed for the first half century as reflected in President Bading's report to the 1883 Synod Convention when in calling attention to the need to conserve *die Kinder unseres Volkes* he quoted St. Paul's words, "Let us do good unto all men, especially unto them who are of the household of faith." This was the apparent need, and for some time money and manpower were lacking to reach out farther.

But one is struck by the apparent lack of concern for the "heathen" of America. In a lengthy report of the tale of woe of a Pastor Weitbrecht, who had just come from Germany, a horrifying account of the boisterous behavior of his traveling companions, both German and "American," takes up a goodly portion of the 1854 Synodical Proceedings. An account of a similar experience is given by G. Thiele in the November 15, 1866,

Gemeindeblatt. In neither case, however, is any concern voiced relative to the spiritual need of these “heathen” Germans and Americans.

In 1857 a missionary, Pastor G. Fachtmann, was sent from Germany to serve parishes in Washington County, Wisconsin. He almost immediately undertook the function of *Reiseprediger* as a private undertaking. In the 1858 Convention he reported on mission trips in 1857 to “neglected Lutherans” in Sheboygan, Calumet, Fond du Lac, Neenah, Waupun, Hortonville, Berlin, New Leipzig. The 1858 Proceedings reported his journeys also to Mayville, Horicon, Beaverdam (sic), and Columbus as well as to the cities of his earlier circuit. The convention endorsed his work.

In this same convention Pastor Goldammer brought up the extreme need for a synodical *Reiseprediger*. His observation was strongly verified by Pastors Koehler and Sprengling. Three primary questions were raised relative to an official *Reiseprediger* program:

1. Is it the will of God?
2. Does the Synod have a qualified man?
3. Can we raise the necessary funds and from where should we take them?

The action taken regarding question 1 was that the Synod must say *Ja!* The next two questions were referred to the pastoral conference. The secretary was to be given credentials to the German mission societies to take necessary steps to support the *Reiseprediger* program. The infant Synod saw the need but lacked resources in manpower and money.

Upon Pastor Fachtmann’s acceptance of a call to LaCrosse in 1860 the Wisconsin area lost its first unofficial *Reiseprediger*. Pastor Fachtmann’s mission zeal found an outlet in the LaCrosse area and especially later in the Minnesota Synod. Upon the report at the 1860 convention that the Langenberg and Berlin Mission Societies had each pledged \$200 per year for a *Reiseprediger* for Wisconsin, the Synod voted to establish a *Reiseprediger* program with the President of the Synod and its “Senior Pastor,” former President J. Muehlhaeuser, given the authority to call a man.

In a report to the 1861 convention the committee on the position of the *Reiseprediger* (Muehlhaeuser, Koehler and C. Gausewitz) outlined various regulations pertaining to the program. These included the provision that the Synod President, who was to supervise the *Reiseprediger*, was to make sure that his regular report on the work would be circulated among the three conferences with no conference holding the report more than four weeks. This work was to be of importance to all.

In the fall of 1861 Pastor E. Moldehnke, designated by the German mission societies as the candidate for *Reiseprediger*, arrived in Wisconsin and was called as the first official *Reiseprediger* of the Synod. Pastor Moldehnke was based in the town of Germany, near Ft. Atkinson. In less than a year he had already served 15 preaching stations, and in the year between the 1862 and 1863 conventions he served a total of 22 stations plus 5 vacancies. In the following year 23 stations were served. These stations ranged from Waupun (both city and prison) to Stevens Point and Wausau, from Caledonia to Algoma and Green Bay, from Portage to Whitewater, and many places in between.

In establishing preaching stations the primary purpose was to found a permanent congregation, although considerable emphasis was placed on service to isolated Lutherans in areas where no organized congregations could be expected to develop. The President’s 1863 Report on the *Reiseprediger* work stated: “Since most of these stations are so situated that ever more of them could be assigned a pastor, we hope during the summer definitely to establish most of these stations.”

In 1863 Pastor Moldehnke was called to be professor at the infant seminary at Watertown, Wisconsin. After serving one year as professor as well as *Reiseprediger*, he was forced to resign the latter position because of lack of time to do both jobs. Thus in the 1865 convention the Synod President announced that the *Reiseprediger* program would have to be curtailed for a time. And this indeed did close the curtain on a full-fledged circuit-rider mission approach for almost 15 years.

III. Period of Local Outreach, 1865–1880

A new mood and a new mode were ushered in. This was in part because of the legitimate concern for the lack of qualified pastors for the many fields which had been opened and irregularly served, as well as for vacancies in existing fields. The Synod Proceedings of the era from 1865–1880 reflect the concern for the worker-training program in the amount of time spent and the amount of printed space filled. During this period it was not unusual to have no home mission report (*Reiseprediger Bericht*) in the Proceedings at all. Even the 25th Anniversary Convention Proceedings had no home mission report. It is to be noted that in 1879 \$837.91 of mission funds were even loaned to the fund for the educational institutions.

And yet it cannot be said that there was no home mission activity during this period. We note from later records and from the organizational dates of present WELS churches that pastors were reaching out from established congregations into their immediate neighborhoods to found new congregations. This mode of mission operation resulted in rather slow growth. During this 15 year period the Synod grew from 97 congregations with 35 pastors in 1865 to 147 congregations with 85 pastors in 1880, an increase of 50 congregations in 15 years. President Bading's report is indicative of the lack of a vigorous mission program when he comments that the *internal* growth (the schools) was good. No mention of mission activity or growth was made. And yet in this period mission consciousness was kept alive at the congregational level by the introduction of the annual *Missionsfest*. One of the first of what would be many and regular accounts appearing in the *Gemeindeblatt* noted that Pastor Kleinert preached on *Heidenmission* and Pastor Quehl on *Inneremission* at the *Missionsfest* at Centerville (Sheboygan) in the fall of 1865.

IV. "Reiseprediger" Period, 1880–1900

In the 1879 Synod Proceedings a lengthier *Reiseprediger* report reappears. The *Reiseprediger* committee noted that Pastor Mayerhoff had been appointed as superintendent of the program and was actively pursuing the matter of calling a *Reiseprediger* although various men had declined. The need for such a man especially in eastern South Dakota was stressed.

In 1881 it was noted that many pastors of established congregations were vigorously riding circuits in their areas, such as Pastor H. Hillemann in South Dakota and Pastors Denninger and Graebner in central Wisconsin. This was facilitated for these men by following the railroads from town to town. The momentum for acquiring and supporting full-time circuit pastors was growing.

In 1882 the formal reasons given for calling a *Reiseprediger* reveal that although the Synod was aware of the Great Commission to reach all with the gospel, attention was still being given almost exclusively to gathering Lutherans for conservation reasons. In the 1882 Proceedings the reasons given for calling a *Reiseprediger* were:

- Because the command of our Savior obligates also us to carry the gospel as widely as we are in position to do, and
- Because it is children of our people who are involved, some of whom were reared in our congregations and some of whom have come to us through immigration and yet have received their religious instruction according to Luther's Catechism, and
- So that the children of our people might not fall into the hands of the sects or because of lack of preaching fall away from the church, and
- Because the ever increasing number of immigrants is populating especially our state, and
- Because our Synod finds itself no longer in need of preachers which hindered us from establishing the position of *Reiseprediger*.

In the following months the call as *Reiseprediger* was accepted by Pastor Thiele. His first circuit was in the upper peninsula of Michigan and the northern fringe of Wisconsin where he opened 12 preaching stations

by mid-1883. His strength, however, was not up to the rigors of the work, and other men had to be sought for the position. The 1885 Proceedings notes the excellent circuit mission work of Pastor Mohnhardt, who had replaced Pastor Thiele in 1883. In the previous twelve months 5 congregations had evolved from 22 preaching stations served.

Meanwhile the Minnesota Synod was active with the *Reiseprediger* approach in South Dakota, both in the eastern portion around Watertown as well as in the north central section around Bowdle and Roscoe, among the Germans who had immigrated from the Volga region of Russia. Missionaries Johl, Polzin, Volkert, and Lahme are named in the early histories of many Dakota congregations. An effort was even made by Pastor F. Bredlow to establish missions in Alberta, Canada, in the 1890's, but the effort was soon discontinued.

The mood of the synods obviously was to follow the German immigrants ever more widely and vigorously, and the successful mode of operation was the *Reiseprediger* approach. The congregations begun in this 20 year period which survived and are members of our Synod today number about 180. This would indicate the opening of 10–12 missions in a typical year.

A most significant event of this period was the formation in 1892 of the federation of the Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Michigan Synods in the General Synod of Wisconsin, Minnesota, Michigan and Other States. One of the major reasons for the federation was the consolidation and supervision of mission work. Pastor K.F. Krauss in his historical introduction to "Michigan District History 1833–1970" notes interestingly that one of the determining factors for the Michigan District joining the General Synod was "the acquisition of a promising mission field in the West, which was needed, if the Saginaw Seminary continued to produce pastors."

V. Consolidation Period, 1900–1925

The *Reiseprediger* program continued after 1900 especially in the western section of the Dakotas and in the Rosebud Conference of the present Nebraska District. Twenty-five congregations founded from 1900 to 1925 in these two areas survive from the many more begun there.

But several new considerations were coming to the fore in the picture of home missions in the early 1900's. The *Reiseprediger* committee in its report to the 50th Anniversary Convention in 1900 reported (in German), "The Commission also feels constrained to call to attention that ever more frequently in several places the need is apparent to call to life English mission congregations. When this is the case, the participants should associate with the Commission so that the same may help in every way possible and that the matter might be guided in the right path."

In the 1901 report the refrain was repeated, "We must call the attention of the Synod to the fact that also in our circles congregations will be established which will use English exclusively. The Synod should take a position whether it wishes to receive such congregations into membership."

But the Synod was not in the mood to launch out beyond its *Sammelarbeit* mode of operation, for the 1902 Proceedings reported that after survey and study the Commission had come to the conviction "that the beginning of an English mission program through the establishment of an English circuit-riding pastor is premature since the English Lutherans in our congregations at present will be cared for with Word and Sacrament in satisfactory fashion by our German pastors." The commission was encouraged "to keep an eye" on the English matter. And thus we conclude that the prevailing mood of even this period (1900–1925) was to continue to gather and conserve German Lutherans, not to evangelize the unchurched "Americans." And thus the record shows that even as late as 1920 only 54 of the 737 congregations and preaching stations had any English services, and only 9 had English services exclusively.

More concern seemed to be centering around existing fields. Typical would be the situation in the Fond du Lac area where a burgeoning suburb was developing because of the new railroad shops to the north of the city. An article in the June 1, 1901, *Gemeindeblatt* notes that North Fond du Lac "represents a fine mission field" in an area where in 15 months 150 new houses have been built with 800 inhabitants, and 30 more were going up. As a result St. Peters, Fond du Lac, purchased a 90' × 125' lot, and sister congregations were urged to contribute to the cause so that a 26' × 46' chapel could be constructed for \$1,400. The report sounds like a

mission board report of today (except for the figures!) until one notes the reasons for entering the field, which were three-fold: there are many Lutherans there—heretical churches are trying to get a foothold (so far unsuccessfully)—we could lose the field.

In general one gets the feeling that outside of the continued gathering of German Lutherans in the Dakotas with the *Reiseprediger* approach greater effort was being made toward consolidation of existing areas.

The mood of the Synod nevertheless was still strongly mission-directed in the early years of the new century. A report to the General Synod in August 1905 regarding a superintendent for inner missions even made the startling proposal that the President of the General Synod also be the Mission Superintendent and that the dual position be a full-time one, served by a pastor without a congregation. The proposal was referred to the three constituent synods for study. The Wisconsin Synod turned down the proposal in 1906 “for practical reasons” but voted \$700 per year for assistance to the General Synod President. The idea of a full-time executive secretary was broached again at the end of this period in the 1923 Synod Convention and again in 1929.

Another new consideration furthering consolidation was a greater awareness of the need for more adequate places of worship. Outside of occasional efforts to help a needy or small congregation with building funds no synodical program for building loans had developed.

In the 1901 Proceedings the mission committee noted “*dass ein so-geannter ‘Church Extension Fund’ im Kreise unser Synode wohl angebracht waere.*” The suggestion included the provision that loans to the fund be sought from the well-to-do of the Synod. The general concept was approved.

In the 1902 Convention it was reported that the Mission Committee had established a *Kirchbaufond* and that the treasurer was ready to make interest-free loans. There may have been one hitch in the announcement—there was no report of any money in the fund, only the resolution of the body that congregations should support the fund!

Early scanty reports seem to indicate that the first money in the fund was \$82.51 appropriated from the budget in 1903, and the first disbursement was a loan for \$84.51 in 1904 or 1905 to St. Martins, Rapid River, Michigan, followed in 1905 by a \$50.00 loan to Trinity, Wabeno, Wisconsin. In 1911 the CEF shared in a synod-wide offering, *Reich Gottes Kollekte*, in the amount of \$82.00.

The pace of loans made and of cash and loans to the fund was quite slow at first. The first loan paid off was that by the Wabeno congregation in 1909. The tenth loan, to a congregation in Leavenworth, Washington, was made ten years after the *Kirchbaufond* was approved. By 1925 the total fund was less than \$300,000.

The source of funds for the *Kirchbaufond* during this period included periodic appropriations from the Synod’s budget of \$500 to \$1,000. In 1908 the Synod adopted a resolution urging people to make interest-free loans to the fund as well as offerings and bequests. The next year’s report showed the fruits of the plea in a \$100 loan to the fund.

Ample safeguards for the fund were adopted in 1911 in the form of detailed regulations for the CEF. For the benefit of those missions and missionaries struggling with the copious and tedious regulations and forms of today’s CEF procedures we note that the 1911 regulations contained all the elements of today: first mortgages, abstracts, proof of insurance, amortization schedules, incorporation, etc.

Because of the great need and because of the sound financial concept of using borrowed money for capital investment, the Synod in 1920 authorized the Board of Trustees to borrow money from outside sources to be loaned to congregations “mostly” on an interest-bearing basis. By 1929 about one half of the \$370,000 CEF total was in borrowed money on which the annual interest amounted to \$7,000, paid by the Synod.

The mood of the 1900–1925 period appears to have been to continue to reach out through the *Reiseprediger* program in the West, but also to consolidate its strength in existing areas. The mode of operation for the latter was local extension and synodical involvement in providing places of worship. That home mission enthusiasm needed a boost towards the end of the period may be indicated by the theme of the 1917 Synod Convention essay of Professor J. Schaller: “How can we further interest in Synodical Work?”

VI. Depression Period, 1925–1940

The post World War I period brought changes not only socially and economically, but above all in our Synod's home mission program. A shift seems to have begun relative to the time-honored position of the *Reiseprediger*. Whether it was noted at the time or not is not apparent from reports. The 1920 Synod Convention voted a "missionary at large" for work in Arizona, and his work obviously was to be through the medium of the English language. The original function of the *Reiseprediger* as a gatherer of German Lutherans was evolving into that of a missionary with a wider scope. The shift obviously became apparent to some in the Synod as reflected in a memorial (one of many to come) from the Michigan District to the 1929 convention which called attention to the cities of our land where mission work among the unchurched should be done. The memorial noted that our home mission work should not be just *Reiseprediger* work of gathering Lutherans and serving our own but actual work among the unchurched. The memorial emphasized that we are no longer primarily an agricultural land but industrial, and therefore need and opportunities for work in the cities should be brought to the attention of the General Synod by the districts. The memorial also stated the need for a large *Kirchbaufond* for city mission work. The memorial (in German) was referred to the General Mission Committee.

The mood of the Synod in the early years after the 75th anniversary of our Synod seemed to be to begin to reach out to the unchurched of our land. Seventy-two percent of the work in home missions was now in the English language. But then the depression hit and the mood changed. Perhaps even in some cases it deteriorated into the attitude described in the theme of the 1933 Synod Convention essay by Professor Aug. Zich, "Defeatism." The mode of operation almost forced on the Synod was "to hang on."

Money problems faced the home mission effort both as to salaries for missionaries and CEF resources for chapels. In 1935 President Brenner reported that thirty-two graduate candidates were without calls, some of whom had graduated in 1932. Seven thousand five hundred dollars were budgeted in 1935 to employ idle candidates to do some church work. The number of new fields was cut in half from the pace of the period from 1900 to 1925.

Because of the mounting operating deficit money was not available to pay interest on any more borrowed money for the CEF. In fact, it was resolved not to make any more CEF loans until all the money borrowed for the CEF was paid back.

Economic fear and uncertainty as to the future were very understandable and one cannot stand in judgment on those who slowed the expansion of the home mission program in those dark days. The zeal for missions had not waned as is shown in the continuing pleas of mission boards and in the efforts of leaders of the Synod to regain a source of mission funds.

VII. Awakening Period, 1940–1960

The Depression Period dissolved in the turmoil and concerns of World War II. Again vast changes hit the country, socio-economic, cultural, financial. And again the Synod felt their effects. The mobility of the people of our land brought about a keener awareness of other sections of our country and of other ethnic groups. The mood was that of outreach, but there would be some unique obstacles to going all-out in that outreach.

In its report to the 1941 Synod Convention the General Mission Board called attention to the fact that the home mission program had a different "target" than before. Chairman W. Roepke wrote: "Let us free ourselves from the thought that our Home Mission work is done with the same kind of people that were available a generation ago. Then this type of mission work was done almost exclusively among 'those of the household of faith.' Today it is different." What would be the mode of operation to reach them in a day when manpower was available but money was not, neither for salaries nor chapels?

At the end of the 30's the idea of having general missionaries especially for areas like Arizona and Colorado and also among the smaller cities of Michigan came to the fore. The idea had been tested to a degree earlier in the Pacific Northwest after 1910 through the work of Pastor F. Stern, and of Pastor R. Fenske after

1920. The 1939 Synod Convention approved the calling of general missionaries in Arizona and Colorado. Called to Arizona was Pastor F. Stern and to the Colorado field Pastor I.P. Frey. Later Pastor R. Scheele was called to do the same type of work in Michigan.

The pace of mission openings accelerated rapidly from 1941 through 1945. This four year period saw the opening of 88 new trial fields. The new direction of work is attested to by the fact that in 1943 in mission congregations the number of adult confirmands exceeded that of children, a trend which continued throughout this period. The mode of operation of using general missionaries to scout the cities seemed appropriate and effective.

It is possible that the concept of the general missionary in the early 1940's carried with it some vestiges of the old *Reiseprediger* approach of serving everyone everywhere. In retrospect, the new unchurched evangelism flavored with the "scatter-gun" aspect of the *Reiseprediger* approach led us into many mission openings with a limited future for the newly planted church. In one case in the career of a sort of general missionary (not one of the above-named) we have a record of some 50 congregations founded of which less than 20 have survived. Later evaluation of the stations founded earlier may have contributed in part to the slowdown in the 1950's, although other factors obviously were the key ones.

At the beginning of the period the CEF was still frozen. Although the fund was opened up again in 1943, the amount available for investment was small. As a result repeatedly district mission board reports were filled with cries, "The lack of chapels is felt keenly." "The need of chapels is making new missions impossible." The 1955 General Board for Home Missions report disclosed, "The CEF cannot supply 12 chapels per year." This report was made when a huge backlog of requests for existing missions with no hope of granting necessary facilities for the foreseeable future dampened mission enthusiasm at every level.

By 1947 the Michigan District Mission Board terminated the position of General Missionary in the light of the situation not only in the CEF but also because of the looming manpower shortage. This was the next major obstacle to mission expansion for the next decade and more. Lack of staffing for new missions had to curtail their opening.

It perhaps also could be that the very necessary and intense concentration during the late 40's and 50's on the intersynodical doctrinal struggles with the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod engaged our primary efforts and strength. From this struggle, however, arose a very strong sense of confessional identity which is essential both to a sound, but also a vigorously lay-supported mission program. This in part set the stage, humanly speaking, for the next period of our home mission history.

VIII. Expansion Period, 1960–1975

The suspension of fellowship with the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod was destined to have a tremendous impact on the Home Mission program of the WELS. The early predictions as to its effect by those outside our Synod was that the position we had taken on the fellowship issue with all its practical implications as to joint public prayer, Scouting, military chaplaincy, and "cooperation in externals" would project an image to our pluralistic religious citizenry which would stymie all growth from the outside. There were also "Elijahs" and "Jonahs" in our own midst ready to bewail our loneliness and the futility of mission expansion dreams.

Just before the "break" and just after it the general mood probably was that of quiet determination to continue to proclaim the Good News to the extent of our resources. A note of "Joy," and of "Hope," tempered by "Disappointment" because of lack of manpower was sounded in the 1963 GBHM report to the Synod. Attention was called to the beginning of what later became a flood of requests from all parts of our land in response to the Synod's 1961 call to "all who are of a like mind with us in this matter to identify themselves with us in supporting the Scriptural, historical position of the Synodical Conference." How was the possible response to this invitation to be handled by a small group with a manpower shortage and lack of funds both for operation of missions and for providing chapels?

In retrospect, the advantage of the “historian,” we note that the Lord led the Synod to a number of significant decisions prior to the break with LCMS, and to others shortly after, which paved the way for grasping the opportunities for mission work the Lord was to lay before this segment of His church.

A brief listing of them we hope will show dramatically how the Lord was preparing the tools for the mode of operation best suited for those mission opportunities of the 1960’s and 1970’s which shaped the mission mood of the time:

- the creation in 1941 of mission districts with their own mission boards for more intensive work in new outpost areas
- the division in 1955 of the General Mission Board into the General Board for Home Missions and the Board for World Missions with its resulting concentration of effort
- the creation of the Manpower Committee in 1959 which culminated in the present still too small but record number of pastoral and teacher candidates, double the number of a short time ago
- the amalgamation and merger in the late 1960’s of small congregations in areas of declining population to use manpower more effectively
- the decision in 1961 to launch a fiscally sound program of borrowing for the CEF, refined in 1971, which resulted in a fund which grew from \$4,000,000 in loans to missions in 1961 to \$28,000,000 today, with new loans approved in 1975 totalling over \$5,000,000, double that of three years before
- the division in 1963 of the U.S.A. into areas of mission responsibility for the respective district boards which abolished the old policy that the mission boards could not “jump states” with mission openings without Synod authority
- the calling of a full-time executive secretary by the GBHM in 1963 for coordination of the vastly widened scope of work.

We have recounted the responses of the Synod both before and after the traumatic days of our suspension of fellowship with the LCMS to underline the fact that it is the Lord who guides and prepares and equips. It is not a credit to us, because if it had been a result of our wisdom and planning we could have made these decisions many years before. Practically every one of the ideas listed above had been proposed to the Synod anywhere from 40 to 50 years before and many times inbetween. The Lord had His time for their acceptance.

The preparation was the Lord’s, now what would the mode of operation be? The nature of the requests coming from every side and the mood of resolute determination to respond is reflected in the strategy implied by the goals for home missions graphically stated (or maybe overstated) in the 1963 GBHM mottos: “Mission-a-Month” and “Every State by ’78.” These catchy phrases were not motivational gimmicks but expressions of the realistic hopes the Spirit had raised in the hearts of the home mission leaders of the day. The mode of operation indicated was to establish regional outposts in metropolitan areas with good potential for winning the unchurched in these densely populated areas not served by us before. The next step would be to “ring” such metropolitan areas with several missions to more effectively serve the area.

The GBHM reported to the Synod in 1965, “Voices have been heard to say, ‘We’re going too fast and too far!’...We believe it is the Lord Himself who is calling us into new areas through urgent appeals.”

The many calls coming from concerned Lutherans caused the GBHM to list as a third primary objective, besides reaching the unchurched and conserving the membership of the WELS, the objective, “To serve on request people who share our confessional concerns.” A new rubric appeared in the Home Mission statistics in 1969, that of members received “By Profession of Faith,” concerned Lutherans formerly of other synods not in doctrinal agreement with us. The figures in this column are now double those of adult confirmands.

Has the mode of operation from 1960 to 1975 been blessed? Only time will really tell, since numbers can be deceptive. But the Synod has grasped the opportunity to proclaim the gospel in more new places per year than even in the busy days of the early 1940's. Presently 25 new missions are opened per year.

What the mood of the future will be, the Lord knows. He seems to be calling us along similar paths of the immediate past. But He also indicates the need to cross cultural lines to work more intensely in changing neighborhoods of the very places in which He permitted us to begin our home mission task 125 years ago.

IX. "Slow" Growth

A concluding word might well be said regarding the inevitable question that comes up relative to the size of a synod as old as ours. A comparison is often made between the WELS and the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod which are of comparable age but vastly different in size. Such questions are probably sparked even more now when little WELS is the fastest growing major Lutheran body if not the only one.

Various theories and thinking have been advanced for the relatively slow growth of our Synod. Some point to a mind-set at least implied by President Bading in his 1883 report stressing the necessity of giving priority to serving "our own."

Professor J.P. Koehler in his *History of the Wisconsin Synod* stresses another consideration which tends towards slower growth, namely, that concern for the education of its clergy took highest priority. "Not all groups or organizations have the same tasks. There are organizations, like peoples, that remain small in number and in that they have a token of their mission to do intensive rather than extensive work by which the world may even profit more. The Wisconsin Synod had a college that was off to a good start along fundamental educational lines. To maintain and develop that was mission enough for a while."²

Professor Koehler also notes a questioning of the Wisconsin Synod's "expansionism" in the late 1890's by people within the Synod, some of whom may have shared Professor Koehler's analysis, "There is no doubt that the sponsors of the expansion program were interested in mission work for its own sake too, but at the same time there is no question that the unwholesome motives, objectives, and means of expansionism as it appears in political life are not foreign to the church either."³ It could be that such fears slowed later expansion efforts.

Pastor James Schaefer, the Stewardship Counsellor of WELS, in his paper delivered at the 1976 Arizona-California District Convention entitled "Stewards of the Mysteries of God in Today's World" posits the theory that for effective reaching out with the gospel by a church body there are generally four elements which must be present: "First, that church must have a strong sense of *identity*. Secondly, that church must have the *manpower* to carry out its mission. Thirdly, that church must have the *resources* available to fund that mission. Fourthly, that church must have the *opportunity*. In each of these vital areas the infant Wisconsin Synod was notably weak." Pastor Schaefer's review of WELS history amply demonstrated the correctness of his claim that in each of these four areas the Wisconsin Synod indeed was weak and that for almost its first full century. Pastor Schaefer at the close of his essay states, "As of this moment, we have the *identity*. We have the *manpower*. We have the *opportunity*, and how we have the *opportunity!*" And then in expected fashion adds, "It is the question of *resources*."

To argue with the above observations would be to argue with history. But we would not be true heirs of Wisconsin Synod tradition, if we did not have our own theory or at least our own phrase for the situation. One accent that has struck your writer as he reviews the home mission history of WELS is that of "isolation." Since the factors which led me to explain the relatively slow growth of our Synod with this term have been referred to earlier, permit me only to sketch the reasons for the "isolation" which in many respects and areas tended toward slower growth.

In its early years the Synod's constituency kept itself quite aloof from the "Americans" around it. In one congregational history it is noted that to purchase a chapel "the *Americans* loaned us money," referring to the local banker. There was limited identification with non-German fellow citizens.

² J.P. Koehler, *The History of the Wisconsin Synod*, ed. by L.D. Jordahl (The Protestant Conference, 1970), p 196.

³ Koehler, p 195.

Connected with this isolating attitude was the language barrier which remained firm much longer in the Wisconsin Synod than in others. Only seven percent of all congregations had any English services at all, and only about two percent had them every Sunday in the year 1920!

The geographical area of concentrated work up until the last quarter century kept the Synod in a sort of North Central States “ghetto” and even there, with the exception of Milwaukee and the Twin Cities, primarily in rural and small town areas until the 1940’s.

The confessional problems of the Wisconsin Synod also plagued it at various times in its history causing internal problems as it sought to attain and to maintain a confessionally sound position. The struggle of the first decades to stiffen the Synod’s confessionalism also among the laity, the internal strife in the Michigan Synod at the turn of the century, the Protestant problems of the late 1920’s, and the Synodical Conference problems of the late 1930’s through the 1950’s with the resultant leaving of pastors to form the CLC or to join the LCMS—all these had an isolating effect on its outreach.

This very isolation, however, may have been the crucible, used by the Lord, in which to test this portion of His church and to prepare us for the present and the future. Our look back into the history of our home missions proves again that the Lord rules and prepares us for His time and ours. May we recognize the mood of our time and use His gifts, given in abundance, in a mode of operation that will enable us to do our task faithfully through the Word of the Spirit to conserve, to consolidate, but above all to convert in Jesus’ name!