

## **A Table in the Wilderness**

### **Our Legacy as the Spiritual Successors of the Norwegian Synod**

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*2003 Synod Convention Essay*

We, in the Evangelical Lutheran Synod, trace the founding of our American Lutheran identity to a September day under two oak trees at a place called Koshkonong in Dane County, Wisconsin. On Monday, September 2, 1844, more than 150 years ago, a Lutheran pastor from Norway gathered with a small group of immigrants beneath these oak trees in the western part of the Koshkonong settlement. These men and women had come with their families from Norway. Already they had established settlements at LaSalle County, Illinois, in 1834 (Fox River); Rock County, Wisconsin, in 1838 (Jefferson Prairie and Rock Prairie); Racine County, Wisconsin, in 1839 (Muskego); and Dane County, Wisconsin, in 1840 (Koshkonong). Most had come for economic reasons. In their brightly painted wooden emigrant trunks many of them had packed their precious Bible, the catechism [*Forklaring*], a book of sermons [*Huspostille*] and a hymnbook [*Psalmebog*]; but they were lacking pastors to serve them.

By the summer of 1844, there were neither any church buildings nor any fully-organized congregations among the Norwegian immigrants. There were only two pastors serving the Norwegian Lutherans. Elling Eielsen was a lay-preacher who had consented to be ordained by a neighboring pastor. Claus L. Clausen had come the previous year as a teacher and, upon request of the settlers at Muskego, was ordained at that time.

Such was the situation when the twenty-nine year-old J.W.C. Dietrichson arrived in Wisconsin. He was the first ordained pastor to come from Norway. The first of what was to be considered his regular services was conducted on Sunday, September 1, 1844, in a barn in the eastern part of the Koshkonong settlement. The young pastor considered this to be the “starting point” of his missionary labors. The next day, he conducted another Service in the western part of the settlement. That Service was conducted beneath two oak trees. Here he preached a confessional sermon based on Psalm 78:19: “Can God furnish a table in the wilderness?” About sixty persons received the Sacrament of the Altar. Pastor Dietrichson wrote about that day: “This was a clear and beautiful day, a day that I can never forget.”<sup>1</sup> From these simple beginnings came the organization of the synod whose sesquicentennial we now remember.

Those oak trees are long gone—they were felled by a wind storm. The Norwegian Synod which was organized is gone—it was felled by a merger. In 1928, upon the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Norwegian Synod, it was said: “We claim to be the logical successors of the old Norwegian Synod, and I do not think that any one can justly dispute this claim.”<sup>2</sup> We, who today constitute the Evangelical Lutheran Synod, have claimed to be the spiritual successors of that “old” Norwegian Synod.

The gracious Lord yet continues to “furnish a table in the wilderness.” He invites us to dine with Him and He nourishes us as He did those faithful saints who have gone before us. We today glory in God—not in ourselves or in human achievement. Yet by His grace, as the spiritual successors of the Norwegian Synod, we have received a legacy. We may not have inherited

earthly wealth or physical property but we have received a legacy which gives a unique flavor to the Evangelical Lutheran Synod.

Upon the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its organization, we here wish to remember our legacy as the spiritual successors of the Norwegian Synod.

## PART I DOCTRINE

The most significant legacy which we have inherited from the Norwegian Synod is a concern for doctrinal purity. The Norwegian Synod began with a quest for doctrinal correctness and this continued to be a banner throughout the years of its existence. This already was evidenced through the action of the founding fathers 150 years ago.

Although J.W.C. Dietrichson has the notoriety of being the first ordained Norwegian clergyman from Norway, he does not hold the status among us of a Henry Melchior Muhlenberg or a C.F.W. Walther.

... Dietrichson's work does not compare with the labors of such pioneer ministers as Herman Amberg Preus, Vilhelm Koren, and Jacob Aal Ottesen, or of President Larsen for thirty years the head of Luther College ... Dietrichson did not come hither to make his home with us. He was always a stranger in the land, his heart being ever in his beloved Norway. His labors here extended over a period of barely five years.... But to Johannes Wilhelm Christian Dietrichson belongs the honor of being the first Norwegian Lutheran minister in America; and, with all of his shortcomings and mistakes, whatever they were, he deserves to be remembered with respect and gratitude.... Dietrichson bravely bore hardships, trials, annoyances, and downright persecution, that would have driven a weaker, or less devoted, man in despair from the field. His enemies whispered, it is true, that "the black-coated gentleman" was avaricious, was after the wool of the flock—always an easy and effective method to harm ministers of the Gospel. The imputation is, on the face, false and absurd. If it was avarice for Dietrichson to make two journeys from Norway to Wisconsin, and to labor and suffer as he did among the poor settlers on the frontier, all for a promised salary of three hundred dollars, then I pray that we may have more of such avarice.... He made some bitter enemies, but many warm and life-long friends. He made some mistakes, no doubt, but they were mistakes of the head and not of the heart. He held, and sometimes preached, unscriptural opinions, but they never took root among the people. He did not long abide with us, but he did a great and blessed work, and the results of his labors remain unto this day.<sup>3</sup>

Some things remained the same as they had in Norway. As the pastor knelt before the altar wearing his *prestekrage*, the "klokker" would read the opening prayers on behalf of the congregation. But some things were quite different. The collection of money in the church was distasteful to the descendants of the state church. As a result, Dietrichson devised a plan, which had precedent in Norway, whereby the pastor received an "altar offering" on the three great festivals while the congregation's operating expenses were paid by an assessment gathered by the board of trustees. Yet, the unscriptural opinion of Dietrichson was that of "Gruntvigionism."

Nikolai F.S.Gruntvig was a Lutheran bishop in Denmark. He made what he considered to be a "matchless discovery" which he regarded as the key to the interpretation of the Holy Scriptures. The "matchless discovery" was that the true "living word" was found in the Apostles' Creed as it was used in the Sacrament of Baptism and which, he felt, predated the time of the writing of the New Testament. Hence, this "Baptismal Creed" was called the "Word of God" or

the “Living Word” and the Scriptures were to be interpreted in view of this creed. Thus the Scriptures receded more-and-more into the background.

### **Doctrinal Concern**

With the arrival of Pastor H.A.Stub in 1848, there were now three Norwegian Lutheran pastors in America who desired to form a synod. An attempt was made in 1849 at a meeting held at Koshkonong. At this meeting Dietrichson read a sketch of a constitution which he had prepared but, due to poor attendance, no organization took place. The following year Dietrichson returned to Norway for the final time.

The next attempt at organization came in January 1851 when a similar meeting was held at the Luther Valley church in Rock County, Wisconsin. It was here an organization was first formed by three pastors and delegates from eighteen congregations. Pastor C.L.Clausen was elected as president. The new synod adopted a constitution based upon the draft which was prepared by Dietrichson two years earlier. In the second paragraph the adopted constitution said:

The doctrine of the Church is that which is revealed through God’s holy Word in our baptismal covenant and also in the canonical books of the Old and New Testaments, interpreted in agreement with the Symbolical Writings of the Church of Norway, which are: (1) The Apostolic Creed, (2) The Nicene Creed, (3) The Athanasian Creed (4) The Unaltered Articles of the Augsburg Confession which was delivered to Emperor Charles V at Augsburg in 1530, (5) Luther’s Small Catechism [emphasis added].

The next regular meeting was held in February 1852 at Muskego. Here the Gruntvagian error in the constitution was duly noted. The offending doctrinal statement was found in an unalterable paragraph and could not be changed. The matter of doctrinal correctness was regarded so highly that, at this meeting, a resolution was passed to regard the resolutions of the previous year as being “preliminary motions.” This had the effect of dissolving the organization which had been formed. The next meeting was held in February 1853 at East Koshkonong when the group consisted of seven pastors and thirty-eight congregations consisting of three congregations in Illinois, four in Iowa, and thirty-one in Wisconsin. A new constitution, without the doctrinal error, was adopted. As the delegates were not authorized by their congregations to accept the constitution, it was submitted to the congregations for approval. Soon the announcement was made:

Representatives of the congregations which before that time have accepted the constitution prepared for the Norwegian Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, and the other special regulations, are invited to meet in the Luther Valley Church Monday, the 3<sup>rd</sup> of October.<sup>4</sup>

The first regular convention of the Norwegian Synod thus was held October 3-7, 1853, at Luther Valley when the constitution was ratified and the Synod began to function as a fully organized body. Six pastors were in attendance and seventeen congregations had, by this time, accepted the constitution and sent representatives. The pastors were:

- Rev. A.C. Preus: Koshkonong, Wisconsin
- Rev. Nils Brandt: Watertown, Wisconsin (Rock River)
- Rev. G.F. Dietrichson: Orfordville, Wisconsin (Luther Valley)
- Rev. J.A. Ottesen: Manitowoc, Wisconsin

Rev. H.A. Preus: Keyser, Wisconsin (Spring Prairie)

Rev. H.A. Stub: Muskego, Wisconsin

In addition, the Rev. C.L. Clausen (St. Ansgar, Iowa) also was regarded as a member of the Synod but was not serving a congregation at this time and was unable to attend the meeting.

The date of October 5, 1853, has been regarded, by common consensus, as the date of the organization of The Norwegian Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. The name was changed in 1869 to the Synod for the Norwegian Evangelical Lutheran Church in America; however, the body was commonly known as the “Norwegian Synod” or simply as “the Synod.” The Rev. A.C. Preus was elected as the first president. It is the anniversary date of that organization which we now remember.

A concern for correct doctrinal teaching characterized the organization of the Norwegian Synod. However, the clash with Gruntvigianism did not come to an end with the organization of the Synod. An example of this is to be seen with the publication of the Norwegian Synod’s first hymnbook. The congregations had used the hymnbooks which the immigrants had brought with them from Norway; principally the Guldberg *Psalmebog* which was published in 1778 and which had been reprinted in America in 1854. The hymns of Thomas Kingo and Petter Dass, along with those of Hans Brorson sustained the Christian faith during the days of Rationalism. The hymns of Paul Gerhard and other German hymn writers were not widely known in Norway until the nineteenth century. Gruntvig also was a prolific hymnist and many of his hymns were becoming popular in Norway. His hymns often centered on the importance of the Means of Grace. The debate, in the Norwegian Synod, centered on whether to include any hymns written by Gruntvig in the new hymnbook. Some of the pastors, including Pastor U.V. Koren, argued that at least one of his hymns should be included. Opposition came from others, such as Pastor H.A. Preus: “Should we now confuse people, he thundered, by including the hymns of one of Lutheranism’s destroyers?”<sup>5</sup> At the 1868 pastors’ conference a vote was taken with nineteen in favor and eight in opposition (with three abstentions) that none of Gruntvig’s hymns be included in the new hymnbook. One hymn, however, ultimately was included: “God’s Word is our Great Heritage” [*Guds ord det er vort arvigods*]. When the first English hymnbook appeared for Norwegians in America, in 1913, it yet contained only five hymns by Gruntvig.

The *Synodens Salmebog* was the first hymnbook prepared and published by Scandinavian immigrants in this country. Among its hymns were twenty-seven original hymns written by U.V. Koren and twenty-one translations prepared by Koren who is remembered as a gifted singer. Among the hymns was one which Koren most likely wrote for the October 14, 1865, dedication of the main building at Luther College: “Ye Lands, to the Lord, Make a Jubilant Noise.” This date became known as “Founders’ Day” and many subsequent dedication services throughout the Synod were held near this anniversary date. The hymn also became very dear to the members of the Synod as it was used as the opening hymn for most installation, ordination and dedication services throughout the history of the Synod.

### **Authority of Scripture**

The *Salmebog* is but one example of the concern to maintain a correct teaching of the Scripture both in doctrine and practice. The Synod earnestly sought to hold to the two great principles of the Reformation: the authority of the Holy Scripture as the source and norm of all doctrine, which is known as the Formal Principle; and the teaching of justification by faith alone,

which is known as the Material Principle. Such a commitment can be seen in the discussions and controversies which arose in the Synod.

One of the first controversies to face the Synod centered on the matter of slavery. The first shots of the Civil War occurred within seven years of the Synod's organization. The Synod's leaders were placed in a difficult situation. All the congregations of the Synod were located in Union territory. The pastors opposed the practice of slavery in America. Members of the congregations fought in the Union army and Pastor Clausen served as a chaplain with the Fifteenth Wisconsin Regiment under Col. Heg. Yet, while the Synod was opposed to the abuses of slavery in America, it felt compelled to take the unpopular stance of defending the right of slavery precisely because the Scriptures did not prohibit the practice. St. James exhorts the faithful: "Don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God" (James 4:4). This early controversy caused several congregations either to be divided or to withdraw their synodical membership. Following the controversy, at the 1869 synod convention, a statement was recorded as coming from the Silver Lake, Shell Rock, and Lime Creek congregations in Iowa. All three congregations had experienced a division within the previous year. The congregations said: "May it on this occasion be permitted us to assure the Synod of our heartfelt thanks for the truth of our Lutheran Zion, for the courage it has manifested in the question of slavery by taking up the bludgeon in the defense of the perspicuity, authority, and superiority of Scripture ..."<sup>6</sup>

The most adamant defender of the authority and inspiration of the Scriptures was the Rev. U.V.Koren who arrived in America in 1853 only two months after the organization of the Synod. He resided near Decorah, Iowa, and served as the president of the Norwegian Synod from 1894 until his death in 1910. He wrote:

He who believes that the Bible is God's word, also believes that the Holy Scripture, and that alone, shall be the judge of all doctrine and in all doctrinal controversies. He is not affected by the objection which is so often raised: How can you know that just your interpretation of Scripture is the correct one? Do you claim to be infallible, and that your interpretation is infallible?"<sup>7</sup>

Again he wrote:

We do not want to be "puffed up" because we have the pure doctrine.... Therefore we wish very much to impress upon our hearers and ourselves both the great joy and the grave responsibility which are ours through having the solid and unfailing truth clearly revealed to us in Holy Scripture, so that when we adhere to it, we can be certain that we will not go astray.<sup>8</sup>

In his 1893 report to the Synod, President H.A.Preus said:

At this moment an exceeding[ly] dangerous tendency pervades nearly all Christian denominations in the world. It may not be the aim of the leaders and their followers, but it is the aim of the originator of this tendency, Satan, the Deceiver, to get rid of any absolute divine authority, by rejecting the biblical doctrine of the Inspiration of Scriptures.... The foundation of Christianity and of Holy Writ, which is the Prophets and the Apostles, with Christ as the chief Corner-stone, is thus undermined; justification by faith alone becomes a problem,—divine certainly of faith yields to uncertainty and doubt, and the sinner is deprived of his consolation and peace.<sup>9</sup>

The dedication to the Formal Principle of Lutheranism was reflected in the Greek motto of the Synod which was *gegraptai* ("It is Written") and continues today on the masthead of the

*Lutheran Sentinel*. It also was reflected by the pastors who, Sunday-after-Sunday in the pulpit, introduced the reading of the sermon text with the words: “God the Holy Ghost has caused our text to be recorded...” and concluding the reading of the text with the petition of Jesus’ high-priestly prayer: “Holy Father, sanctify us through Thy truth; Thy word is truth!” (John 17:17).

### **Justification by Faith Alone**

The young pastor Laur. Larsen records the impression of his first meeting with the Synod’s pastors after arriving in America in 1857:

...I speak for myself, that I learned to understand how the doctrine of justification by faith was not only to be the sun in a Christian’s life, but was also the kernel and center of all a pastor’s preaching.... I can remember how Ottesen in agreeing with what I had said, liked to add: “Through the Word, through the Word.” To that I had no objection, but it was likewise his reminder which first brought the acknowledgement, truly living and deep within me, that the faith wherewith we are justified before God is worked by God through His word and isn’t anything we can gain ourselves by our own strength or reason. In other words, while I knew that I had learned the Second Article fairly well, Ottesen helped me likewise to a sincere confession of the Third Article, and for that I have always thanked him and thank him even now in his grave.<sup>10</sup>

This speaks of the other great principle defended by the Norwegian Synod which was the Material Principle of justification by faith alone. This is the core teaching by which the Lutheran Church differs from all other religions of the world. All of Scripture is written to direct the sinner to the salvation which is given through Christ. The penalty of sin cannot be ignored by a righteous God. The payment for sin must be made by someone. The sinner, being dead in transgressions and sins, is unable in any degree to contribute toward salvation. Something or someone must come to our rescue. Once again, it is the Holy Scriptures which settle the matter: “This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished—he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus. Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded. On what principle? On that of observing the law? No, but on that of faith. For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law” (Romans 3:22-28). Martin Luther stated this truth in great simplicity when he wrote in the *Small Catechism*: “I believe that Jesus Christ is true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the virgin Mary, and that He is my Lord, who has redeemed me, a lost and condemned creature, purchased and won me from all sins, from death and from the power of the devil; not with gold or silver, but with His holy, precious blood, and with His innocent suffering and death.”

Numerous controversies in the old Synod arose in defense of this central Material Principle. The early leaders of the Norwegian Synod realized that the question about the activity of lay preachers actually centered on the surety of justification. A lay movement in Norway had been led by Hans Nielsen Hauge and was brought to America in the person of Elling Eielsen who was a vocal opponent of the ordained clergy. H.A.Preus in his *Seven Lectures* which were delivered and published in Norway wrote: “In those first days, of course, [Eielsen’s] work might

in its place have been in order had he taught the pure, true Lutheran doctrine. That he never did this, but rather instead opposed and persecuted orthodox teachers and congregations, that was his greatest sin.”<sup>11</sup> Many such lay preachers lacked a clear distinction between law and gospel. A lack of preaching the law confirms the sinner in his sin while a lack of preaching the gospel leaves one uncertain about his justification. In 1862 the Synod adopted theses which reaffirmed the teaching of the Augsburg Confession: “Of ecclesiastical order we teach that no one should publicly teach in the Church or administer the sacraments unless he is rightfully called” (Article XIV).

Another early question which arose was the significance of the Third Commandment and the Sabbath Day. The doctrine of justification was at stake. The pastors of the Synod could not allow its members again to be placed under the law. Supported by a statement from the theological professors in Norway, the issue was settled at the 1863 convention of the Synod although it continued to trouble other Norwegian Lutheran church bodies.

It was the doctrine of justification which the Norwegian Synod also defended in discussions held with other Norwegian Lutheran church bodies. In contrast to them, the Norwegian Synod held to a firm proclamation of God’s absolution for the penitent sinner. This caused considerable debate between the Synod and other bodies. Even years later the United Norwegian Lutheran Church did not include an absolution in its published agenda but would proclaim what appeared to be only a conditional absolution: “Be it known unto you therefore, men and brethren, that through this man is preached unto you the forgiveness of sins: And by him all that believe are justified from all things, from which ye could not be justified by the law of Moses.”<sup>12</sup> The Norwegian Synod pastors, however, would declare with firmness from the altar: “Lift up your hearts unto God! Almighty God ... hath given His Only Son to die for us, and for His sake forgiveth us all our sins...” In retrospect, the Rev. U.V.Koren wrote about this controversy: “Here we got right into the middle of the chief questions by which the doctrine of justification stands or falls. It became apparent here that our opponents did not want to admit that the contents of the Gospel and the essence of absolution are always the same.”<sup>13</sup> That firm emphasis upon universal justification continued in the 1870s as the Synod defended the “justification of the world” against the error of pietism which made the gospel conditional upon the faith of the individual, as if justification existed only for those who accept it through faith. The question of absolution was a question about the certainty that “God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men’s sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation” (2 Corinthians 5:19).

Within the Synod itself, the doctrine of justification was most severely attacked during the predestination or election controversy of the 1880s. The question arose whether there is any human responsibility toward the acceptance of God’s grace. This question of justification was answered by affirming that salvation and faith are completely dependent upon God’s grace in Christ without any dependency upon human cooperation. U.V.Koren, the chief theologian of the Synod, wrote about the controversy saying: “Now if God’s grace is made dependent on something which we ourselves provide, then justification by faith is destroyed and all true comfort gone.”<sup>14</sup> It also was U.V.Koren who authored the lengthy document of sixty-three theses entitled *An Accounting to the Congregations of the Norwegian Synod* which gave “an accounting” for that which was taught by the pastors of the Synod. It was signed by 107 pastors in 1884 and said in part: “The doctrine of election stands in close connection with the

fundamental chief articles of the Christian faith, such as: That fallen man is completely corrupted and dead in sin; that God desires the salvation of all men; that salvation is by the grace of God alone; and that it therefore is gained through faith alone without the works of the law.”<sup>15</sup>

Such a defense of the gospel was costly. By the time the Election Controversy had ended, most congregations of the Synod had been divided, pastors deposed from their calls, and rival congregations established. One-third of the pastors and congregations had withdrawn their membership. Whereas in 1886, the Synod consisted of 193 pastors, 723 congregations, and 143,885 souls; three years later it numbered 138 pastors, 512 congregations, and 93,891 souls.

### **Doctrinal Divergence**

It was this same concern for the doctrine of justification which motivated a small minority of pastors and members of the Synod to oppose synodical union in 1917 with those individuals who had opposed biblical teaching only three decades earlier. That defense of justification also was costly. When the battle had been waged and the small minority of pastors and members gathered at Lime Creek, Iowa, in June 1918, the Rev. Bjug Harstad said in the opening sermon: “We are, as it were clustered around the old building-site which is storm swept and waste. A destructive hurricane has swept away the dear old mansion, even taking with it most of them that dwelt there. Discouraged, looking around, we discover only the bare ground with wreckage and dangerous crossroads.”<sup>16</sup> Gone were the seminary and the two colleges. Gone were the four mission fields and sixteen academies. Gone were three “children’s homes” and one “old people’s” home. Gone were the publishing house and three hospitals. Just before the merger the Synod numbered over 150,000 souls, but the following year it was re-organized by thirteen pastors, a few congregations, and a handful of members. Many individuals were left without congregations or church buildings. They were no longer called “the Synod,” but had become “the little synod.” These faithful few realized their legacy was not one of boards and bricks and mortar but rather one of doctrine. Yet, as the Rev. J.A.Moldstad said about those years: “We were free, were unafraid, and we were happy. We felt that the Lord was with us and that His grace was abundant.”<sup>17</sup> It is such a legacy for doctrinal purity which we have inherited from the Norwegian Synod. In 1917, when the majority of the pastors and the congregations of the Synod sought to enter into a church merger which compromised God’s Word, it was those few pastors and congregations who eventually re-organized the Synod who continued to stand steadfast upon the legacy of God’s pure Word and teaching.

Such a divergent path of doctrine continued to grow wider through the following years. In a sermon preached at Luther College by religion department member Karla Suomala during Advent 2001, the current theology of the merger church body becomes apparent. The text was Job 19:23-27 and the preacher said:

Sometimes during Advent, I feel like *The Grinch Who Stole Christmas*. My training has really spoiled my ability to enjoy good prophetic advent sermons.... As a Hebrew Bible person, I cringe when I hear the “Servant Songs” from Isaiah used as prophetic texts predicting the coming of Jesus. And as much as I like to hear Sunday School kids read Isaiah 7:14—“Look, the virgin is with child and shall *bear a son*,”—I struggle because the text does not read “virgin” ... and that is probably not referring to Mary....

She concluded by saying:

My Biblical Cynicism—I mean Criticism—cannot entirely steal Advent from me. After all, the people of Whoville [sic] managed to celebrate Christmas in a new way—without their presents, trimmings, or decorations. If the Grinch’s heart grew three sizes that day, imagine what might happen to us if we are willing to let go of our preconceived, tried-and-true notions of Advent.

Every Who down in Who-ville, the tall and the small, was singing! Without any presents at all! (The Grinch) hadn’t stopped Christmas from coming! It CAME! Somehow or other, it came just the same!<sup>18</sup>

In contrast, the legacy which we have received from the Norwegian Synod is one of the importance of doctrine. In a sermon, speaking upon Joshua 4:20-22, preached upon the occasion of the Installation of Dr. Dan Bruss as president of Bethany Lutheran College in January 2003, Prof. Adolph Harstad said:

What do these stones on McMahan Hill mean? Are they simply memorials to achievements of the ELS? Do they just sing the praises of past presidents, instructors, and financial supporters? No, they are memorial stones calling attention to our God of grace. They shout of what he does in hearts through "the one thing needful." The cross of Christ on the steeple of this Trinity Chapel towers high over the whole campus. It reminds us that all these buildings are to be memorials to "blessed Jesus King of grace." These stones mean that we owe all to "Jesus, crucified for me" and that we want all who enter this institution to be able to say about him, "(He) is my life, my hope's foundation...."

I asked a number of people associated with Bethany and our synod this basic question. "What do you think is the biggest challenge that the new president of Bethany faces?" Their answers were just about identical. They all spoke words like these: "Maintaining Bethany's distinctive Christian mission as the school continues to expand."

But tonight we Bethany people say to you, "Mr. President, build up these stones." Joshua assured that the stones at Gilgal had rich meaning as memorials to God's grace and power. Now may God use you to build up the stones of Bethany so that they ring out like a clear trumpet blast, "One thing is needful. Jesus is our glory and salvation."<sup>19</sup>

The Lord has prepared a Table in the Wilderness. On the table of His grace, He sets before us the body and the blood which He shed for the complete forgiveness of all sins. Through Word and Sacrament He protects us from all ungodliness and preserves us in the one true faith unto eternal life in heaven. St. Paul gives all glory to God as he writes: "He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus" (Philippians 1:6). We, too, share that confidence as we continue to sing the hymn which has concluded many Lenten Services in the congregations of our "little synod":

*Skriv dig, Jesus, paa mit hjerte,  
O min konge og min Gud!  
At ei vellyst eller smerte  
Dig formaar at slette ud:  
Denne indskrift paa mig set:  
Jesus udaf Nasaret,  
Den korsfestede, min ære,  
Og min salighed skal være!*

Thomas Kingo (1634-1703)

On my heart imprint Thine image,  
Blessed Jesus, King of grace,  
That life's riches, cares, and pleasures,  
Have no pow'r Thee to efface.  
This the superscription be:  
Jesus, crucified for me,  
Is my life, my hope's foundation,  
And my glory and salvation.

*Evangelical Lutheran Hymnary #593*

## **PART II FOREIGN MISSIONS**

It is not coincidental that a major anniversary of foreign mission work occurs at this convention. An active foreign mission program is a part of the legacy which we have received as the spiritual successors of the Norwegian Synod.

The early years of the re-organized synod, after 1918, were dominated by a need to serve those individuals who had been left without a church-home following the events of the previous year. There was, however, a strong desire to pursue the work of foreign missions. This is evidenced by the formation of a Committee on Missions in 1919 when the re-organization of synod was complete. At that second annual convention of the synod, in 1919, vice-president John Moldstad preached a sermon in which he said:

...when you know Christ, then you will also witness about Him. You will not retain your knowledge for yourself, you will share it with others, you will reveal it to your fellowmen. As a Christian you are called to preserve and defend the Word and the Sacraments so that they may remain pure and clean. You are to use them diligently for your own edification and in that way constantly witness for yourself. You are to bring these, God's treasures, to others, so that they too may become partakers of them, so that the kingdom of God will come to them....

Think how great an honor it is that God would use us as His messengers to poor sinners, that He who does not need our help yet does us the great honor that He permits us to be along in building God's Church on earth. O let us, therefore, in thankfulness and love work while it is day: let us with courage and reckless abandon, in faithful allegiance battle for the sake of God's truth, for His glory and people's salvation, always being aware of this that even if we fall in the battle, the victory is sure.<sup>20</sup>

Such is the legacy inherited from the Norwegian Synod. Although the re-organized synod pursued the work of home missions, it is in the field of foreign missions [*hedningemissionen*] where our legacy is found. The Norwegian Synod had a foreign mission program which was more aggressive than that of her sister bodies in the Synodical Conference. The Missouri Synod entered its first foreign mission field in India in 1895. The Wisconsin Synod, although she did extensive work among American Indians, did not embark on foreign mission work beyond the American shores until 1924.

### **Early Mission Work**

Like her sister bodies, the earliest mission work of the Norwegian Synod was to reach-out to her fellow countrymen. In the early years the pioneer pastors, by necessity, also became missionary pastors covering large areas which included numerous congregations. Already in 1855, at the first meeting after its organization, the chief topic of discussion was home mission

work. Early missionary pastors included: N.O.Brandt (who traveled into north-east Iowa), C.L.Clausen (who lived at St. Ansgar, Iowa), Laur. Larsen (who traveled into Minnesota), B.J.Muus (who lived at Goodhue County, Minnesota), Thomas Johnsen (who lived at Norseland, Minnesota), T.A.Torgerson (who lived at Lake Mills, Iowa), O.A.Normann (who traveled into northern Minnesota), N.T.Ylvisaker (who traveled in the Red River Valley), and Bjug Harstad (who lived at Mayville, North Dakota). In 1870, President H.A.Preus reported to the Synod:

We have endeavored, so far as possible, to relieve the great spiritual need of our countrymen, especially in the new settlements by increased missionary activity.... The importance of such missionary activity is obvious when we consider how rapidly new settlements are being formed in the western districts. If we do not come to their aid, they will become a prey to all sorts of sects who swarm about them like hungry wolves. The congregations ought, therefore, to increase their contributions for the support of this missionary activity, that it may be expanded so as to meet the present need.<sup>21</sup>

In that same year C.M.Hvistendahl became the first official home-missionary of the Synod as he was sent to the west coast. When the revised constitution of the Synod was adopted in 1869 the phrase “home and foreign mission work” was added as one of the purposes of the body. In 1876 the Synod was divided into districts with the Eastern District being those areas east of the Mississippi River, the Iowa District consisting of congregations in the southern tier of counties in Minnesota and southward, and the Minnesota District consisting of congregations in Minnesota and westward. At that time, the work of home missions was delegated to each of the individual districts.

This does not mean, however, that foreign mission work was disregarded. In 1859 the subject of “Missions Among the Unevangelized” was placed on the convention agenda and a resolution was passed stating that “The Church calls upon all its pastors and congregations to work for missions among the unevangelized...” This was the first recorded synodical resolution urging the support of foreign mission work.<sup>22</sup> Five years later, another important resolution was passed saying: “The Synod must acknowledge that work for Missions both among the heathen and among our countrymen is a task which has been greatly neglected by us, wherefore we urge the congregations and pastors to work also for this cause. To its advance the Synod elects a committee of missions consisting of three members.”<sup>23</sup> This first mission committee of the Synod consisted of pastors J.A.Ottesen, P.A.Rasmussen, and B.J.Muus.

### **Norwegian Missionary Society**

In those early years, mission work was influenced by the mission societies in Norway. Mission work in Norway had been conducted by a variety of independent mission societies the earliest of which dates to 1826. In 1842, sixty of these societies met in Stavanger and established a common organization known as The Norwegian Foreign Missionary Society [*Det norske Misjonsselskap*] (N.M.S.) which was to become a major factor in Norwegian mission work and even established its own school in Stavanger for the education and training of missionaries. One of the representatives to this first meeting of the N.M.S was Hans Schreuder who was a graduate of the theological department of the University in Christiania and represented the Christiania Mission Society. At this meeting Schreuder was chosen as the first foreign missionary of the society. His mission field was to become Natal and Zululand on the south-east coast of Africa. Schreuder considered it was his duty to transplant the Church of Norway into Africa much as the

pastors of the Norwegian Synod felt it was their duty to transplant the church into America. The first baptism amongst the Zulus occurred in 1858 when the Norwegian Synod was only five-years-old; it was met with great joy in Norway where M.B.Landstad expressed the joy of the people in the missionary hymn “*Opløft dit syn, o Kristen sjael*”:

O Christian soul, lift up thine eyes, / The dew falls gently from the skies, /  
The spring of souls is nearing. / The precious seed, the word of truth, /  
In heathen ground has taken root, / Good news our heart is cheering.<sup>24</sup>

The Norwegian Missionary Society and Schreuder’s mission activity had a great impact on other young men. Among these was Claus Clausen who had come to Norway from Denmark and had a desire to serve as a missionary with Schreuder in Africa. Because he had not been ordained, he was unable to enter into this work. Rather, he was urged to go to America where he could be a teacher to the children.

Another young man who attended the first general meeting of the N.M.S. was J.W.C.Dietrichson who, two years later, was to conduct the Communion Service under the oak trees at Koshkonong. Dietrichson also indicated a desire to accompany Schreuder to Africa but he too was persuaded to go to America where life, to the average Norwegian citizen, was portrayed as being as wild and uncivilized as that of heathen Africa.

Still another young student of theology who expressed interest in Schreuder’s missionary activity and was preparing to go to that field was H.A.Stub; however, in 1847 a Letter of Call was sent from America to the N.M.S. requesting a graduate. The school in Stavanger had no one to send and forwarded the Call to the University in Christiania. It was assigned to H.A.Stub who then was ordained. Thus there already were attachments between the N.M.S. and the founding pastors of the Norwegian Synod.

The Norwegian Synod had a working relationship with the N.M.S. having been invited in 1869 to cooperate in the work of the society. The following year, Pastor U.V.Koren represented the Synod at the General Assembly of the N.M.S. in Tromsø, Norway, where he preached and brought greetings from the American church. In similar fashion, the Norwegian Synod was represented at the 1873 meeting of the N.M.S. in Drammen, Norway, by Prof. F.A.Schmidt and the Rev. P.A.Rasmussen; and at the 1876 meeting in Stavanger by the Rev. J.B.Frich and the Rev. N.T.Ylvisaker. In 1892 Missionary & Mrs. Hans Astrup visited congregations in the United States seeking support for the work in Zululand. The Norwegian Synod gave wholehearted support to this work. Already in 1859 *Kirkelig Maadnedstidende*, the Synod’s official periodical, began to report about the progress of this mission. The periodical *Missionsblad* also was published in support of this mission field. The support of this field was so strong that regular reports were made to the conventions. Financial support was given through contributions forwarded through the Synod’s treasurer.

This working relationship became strained in 1873 when the N.M.S. also invited the Norwegian-Danish Conference to cooperate in the work. Finally, at the 1881 convention of the Synod, it was decided to leave the matter of the support of the N.M.S. to be determined by the individual congregations of the Synod. At about the same time, Missionary Schreuder withdrew from the N.M.S. and began independent mission work among the Zulus. He was supported by a “Committee for the Church of Norway Mission established by Schreuder” with its headquarters in Christiania. A number of pastors, who became members of the Norwegian Synod, served in

this mission field; among them were Hans Astrup, Nils Astrup, Johannes Astrup, Benjamin Raffteseth, and Christopher Faye.

### **Other Mission Fields**

The Norwegian Synod, already in 1858, pursued mission work among the American Indians (which was considered a foreign field); first through the Missouri Synod and, after that field was closed, by establishing its own mission at Wittenberg, Wisconsin, in 1883. Other American “mission fields” pursued by the Synod consisted of Seamen’s Missions in New York and San Francisco; an Immigrant Mission in New York; and City Missions in Chicago, New York, Minneapolis, Seattle, and San Francisco. The Utah Mission, among the Mormons, began in 1891 and eventually the Rev. A.G.H. Overn would serve as missionary. Mission work was undertaken among the Eskimos in the territory of Alaska in 1894, where the Rev. H.M. Tjernagel eventually would serve. In 1877 Norwegian Synod President H.A. Preus proposed that work be started among the “Freedmen of the South” and such a field [*Negermissionen*] was established by the Synodical Conference. The Rev. Nils Bakke, of the Norwegian Synod, served as the first missionary in this field.

Foreign mission fields were undertaken in Australia, where the Synod sent a pastor in 1879 to minister to the Norwegian settlers in that country. A missionary was sent to Japan in 1899; unfortunately this work came to an end three years later when the missionary returned to the United States for health reasons. The most ambitious undertaking was started in China where, in 1912, the Synod resolved to establish a mission field and called Candidate George O. Lillegard, who later would become a charter pastor of the re-organized Norwegian Synod, to serve as the first missionary. He began work in the Honan province with Kwangchow as headquarters. Two years later he was joined by four additional missionaries. In that same year he reported about “the worst thing that has befallen Kwangchow and this part of Honan for three centuries.” He writes about robbers who had infested the area but ultimately says: “Some day, perhaps, it may turn out so that Jesus Christ, who was crucified between two robbers and who promised one that he should that day be with him in Paradise, will be washing clean the hearts of more than one of these ignorant, misled robbers here in heathen China.”<sup>25</sup> By the time of the merger in 1917, this mission field had grown to a size consisting of six missionaries serving three congregations with seventy-two members and 171 individuals receiving instruction; there also were five schools consisting of 119 pupils.

Such mission work is not the exclusive legacy of the ELS. The China and Eskimo missions became a part of the merger body. The independent Schreuder mission also was transferred to that body in 1927. Yet the desire for foreign mission work also is a part of the legacy which we have received from the Norwegian Synod. This is as it should be because the Lord Jesus has said: “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). Norwegian church buildings remained dark on Christmas Eve, but on Christmas morning when the pastor entered the pulpit he would first preach the exordium [festival introduction] which was followed by the appropriate hymn verse; then he would announce with the angel: “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people” (Luke 2:10). The gospel of salvation through faith in Christ is not our exclusive possession.

## The Legacy

The Lord continued to open doors for the work of His kingdom. Three years after the reorganization of the synod, an arrangement was made to place a representative of our synod on the Board for Foreign Missions of the Missouri Synod. Through this arrangement our synod was able to pursue its beloved work of foreign missions.

In that same year, George Lillegard returned to China to serve in a Missouri Synod field all-the-while remaining a member of the “little synod.” He returned to the United States in 1927 when the report was made to the ELS: “It is very likely known to all that civil war in China has practically put a stop to our missionary activities in that country, and that at a time when the preparatory work that had been done hitherto was beginning to show marked results. Most of the missionaries in China have been brought back to this country together with their families, while a few still remain in Shanghai awaiting developments. God alone knows how soon their activities may be resumed.”<sup>26</sup>

Another foreign missionary was Miss Anena Christensen who had served at both the Schreuder mission in Zululand and the N.M.S. field in Madagascar. She resigned her work for reasons of conscience and in 1926 was commissioned at a service held at Fairview Lutheran Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota. She served as principal of the Missouri Synod’s Girls’ Boarding School in Ambur, India, for fourteen years. Many prayers and contributions were made throughout the synod for the support of her work.

The congregations of the Synodical Conference began mission work in Nigeria, Africa, in 1935 with whole-hearted support being given by the ELS. Our synod was directly represented on the field by Missionary & Mrs. Paul Anderson (1945-52) and Missionary & Mrs. Gerhardt Becker (1953-57). Missionary Anderson recalls: “In January of 1948 there were ten churches with ten teachers and six schools.... I have a picture of the Okon church on the day of the adult Baptism service. On the back was written that I baptized 57 people on that day in October 1948.”<sup>27</sup>

The Lord opened another door when Pastor Joseph Petersen was sent as a missionary to Cornwall, England, in 1951. This was the first independent foreign mission work conducted by the reorganized synod. Even when the Lord closed this door to us in 1957, the Rev. M.H.Otto was able to report: “May the Lord of the Church enable us who have His pure Gospel to do our utmost to share it with such as yet do not know of His saving grace and, then, graciously to bless our labors in that endeavor.”<sup>28</sup>

The Lord appeared to be opening still another mission door in 1962 when Peter Chang, a graduate from our seminary, returned to Hong Kong where he had established a congregation. The task of establishing a mission field in Hong Kong did not seem feasible to our small synod and the potential for work in this field was transferred to the Wisconsin Synod where a thriving mission yet continues to this day.

It was upon the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the reorganization of the Norwegian Synod, thirty-five years ago, that the ELS embarked upon its mission field in Peru. Possible fields had been considered in East Nigeria, Taiwan, Brazil, Peru, and Puerto Rico. An exploratory tour was taken to South America to find the most fitting location for this mission. It was reported to the synod convention that the committee had “...toured Peru and Bolivia, South America, in January and February, 1968, in the interest of exploring the missionary needs in these countries, [and has] reported that between 800,000 to a million people live in the approximately 120 different

‘barriadas’ of Lima, Peru” and that very little Christian missionary work is being done among the thousands of people in these barriadas.<sup>29</sup> In July 1968 our first missionaries arrived in this field. They were Pastor & Mrs. Ted Kuster, Mr & Mrs. Orlin Myrllie, and Miss Gloria Bublitz.

Although some within our synod may have questioned the ability of our little synod to undertake such a large task and may have felt that, with our limited size and resources, we could best fulfill our Lord’s Great Commission by other means, the Lord has blessed the labor in His name. Thirty-five years later, the mission field in Peru has organized herself as a daughter-synod known as the Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Peru. It numbers 1,065 baptized members in thirty-three congregations. Two Christian day schools have been established in the Lima area: at Año Nuevo and Reynoso. Work also continues to expand in both the Andes Mountains and in the Upper Amazon Basin. A Christian day school has been established in the Amazon village of Nueva Barranquita There are twenty students who attend the seminary in Lima. In addition there are six national pastors with the anticipation of five additional pastors being ordained in the coming year.

In addition, the synod had undertaken mission work in Nicaragua beginning in 1973. The political situation forced the missionaries to move into Costa Rica until finally the door was closed in 1979. But the Lord opened a replacement door in Chile in 1992. Today the field in Chile numbers 164 baptized members in four congregations. In addition, through the church-related organization Thoughts of Faith, work is being conducted in the Czech Republic, Ukraine, Latvia, and Moldavia.

The Lord has placed before us a “Table in the Wilderness.” He invites us to partake of His blessings of salvation. There still is room at the table for many more people and the Savior instructs His servants; “Go out to the roads and country lanes and make them come in, so that my house will be full” (Luke 14:23).

We also look forward to that day when the earthly banquet gives way to the eternal feast of salvation. We have the Lord’s sure promise: “I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 8:11). On that great day the Table in the Wilderness will give way to the banquet of salvation when the Lord fulfills His heavenly promise: “On this mountain the LORD Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine—the best of meats and the finest of wines. On this mountain he will destroy the shroud that enfolds all peoples, the sheet that covers all nations; he will swallow up death forever. The Sovereign LORD will wipe away the tears from all faces; he will remove the disgrace of his people from all the earth. The LORD has spoken” (Isaiah 25:6-8). On that day we will sit at the heavenly banquet table with those individuals, whom we have not met in person, but with whom we have shared a common faith in Jesus the crucified and risen One. Missionary Terry Schultz has told the often repeated story about the ten Peruvians who began the long journey back to their homes; one of them said to Missionary Schultz: “Can we all ride in one big car instead of two cars? That way, if the car falls off the side of the mountain and we die, we will all go to heaven at the same time. Then when you die, Terry, just ask God, ‘where are the people from Viejo Limon Cocha?’ He will tell you we are here. We’ll be waiting for you!”

With them we have been made brothers and sisters through Christ. Someday we shall join with them in the eternal song of praise.

*Der mange skal komme fra øst og fra vest,  
Og sidde til bords i Guds rige  
Med Abraham, Isak or Jakob til gjest  
Hos ham, som bød ind os at stige.  
Miskunde dig over os, Jesus!*

*Gid jeg maatte være, og alle med mig  
Blandt Guds den beseglede skare!  
Gud tage os naadig i himlen til sig,  
Og frels os fra helvedes fare!  
Miskunde dig over os, Jesus!*

*Gud giv mig at være den salige gjest,  
Som sidder hos kongen for borde,  
At holde hos hannem den evige fest,  
Naar her de mig gjemmer og jorde!  
Miskunde dig over os, Jesus!*

M.B.Landstad (1802-1880)

There many shall come from the east and the west  
And sit at the feast of salvation  
With Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the blest,  
Obeying the Lord's invitation.  
Have mercy upon us, O Jesus!

O that we the throng of the ransomed may swell,  
To whom He hath granted remission.  
God graciously make us in heaven to dwell  
And save us from endless perdition.  
Have mercy upon us, O Jesus!

God grant that I may of His infinite love  
Remain in His merciful keeping;  
And sit with the King at His table above,  
When here in the grave I am sleeping.  
Have mercy upon us, O Jesus!

*Evangelical Lutheran Hymnary #200*

### **PART III FELLOWSHIP**

The individuals who founded the Norwegian Synod one hundred-fifty years ago came to walk together as a synod because they wished to recognize one another as brothers in the faith who believe and teach the same. Nine years earlier, as the earliest settlers gathered beneath the oak trees at Koshkonong, they were given the assurance that they were not alone but the Almighty God of their fathers was with them and prepared a Table in the Wilderness in their midst. They longed for Christian teaching and Christian fellowship and found it in the organization of the Norwegian Synod in 1853. In His holy Word, the Lord says "How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity!" (Psalm 133:1). Christians seek to express their unity through worship, prayer, and work.

## Seeking Unity

The Norwegian Synod did not seek unity just for the sake of unity. It would have been a relatively simple matter for these founding fathers to establish external unity with their fellow Norwegians coming from the Lutheran State Church of Norway. These were the Christians with whom they shared a common heritage and a common language.

In 1853 there were two other small groupings of Norwegian Lutherans in America. There were those who had been influenced by the teaching of Hans Nielsen Hauge (1771-1824). Hauge was a lay preacher in Norway who, in his reaction against Rationalism, stressed a “living Christianity” which placed emphasis upon conversion and sanctification. In America, a more radical form of Hauge’s teaching was promoted by Elling Eielsen. His followers laid great stress upon proof of conversion and emphasized the priesthood of all believers to the degradation of the ordained clergy. They had formed a synod in 1846 which in 1876 was divided into the Eielsen Synod and the Hauge Synod. There also were other Norwegian immigrants, especially in the Chicago area, who had become members of the Northern Illinois Synod and in 1870 had organized the “Conference for the Norwegian-Danish Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.” Yet those individuals who formed the Norwegian Synod did not find a kindred-spirit among the *Ellingianerne*, the *Haugianer* or the *Konference*. H.A.Preus, in his *Seven Lectures*, wrote:

One matter always a source of worry and pain to our synod has been the ecclesiastical division of our countrymen. Our synod’s efforts have constantly been directed toward smoothing this out and uniting the factions. We have shown ourselves forthcoming in this not only where we detected an inclination to effect a union but also where over many years our efforts to end the strife and seek unanimity have been met with ill will and coldness.... we have not grown weary, but despite repeated rebuffs have continued our efforts to the present day, because we understand the sin that is perpetrated and the dangers to which souls are exposed by departing from the truth and following errors. On the other hand, we also see well how strife, sin, and harm come to both sides when such division among countrymen is continued over the course of years. In heartfelt earnest we seek to prevent this party division, sinful and displeasing to God, from continuing, and our synod’s history will testify that we earnestly wish not to bear responsibility for it. But a union without unity of faith, a union in the Prussian mold in which God’s Word and human propositions are tolerated side by side and have validity, this kind of union we will not promote. This is an abomination to God and more dangerous to souls than open disunity and faction. We have not wished to work for such a union to take place. Where we have seen error among our opponents we have not tried to cover its shame with the veil of false charity, but have openly and honorably drawn their attention to it, running the danger of seeming uncharitable. And if our opponents were to show us errors in our doctrine or practice, we would thank them for it and consider it a demonstration of Christian love on their part rather than of hatred and lack of love.<sup>30</sup>

One of the first concerns of the newly organized Norwegian Synod was to locate a school at which they could establish a professorship and train their future pastors. At the 1855 convention, Pastors Nils Brandt and J.A.Ottesen were instructed to visit the seminaries at St. Louis, Missouri (Missouri Synod); Columbus, Ohio (Ohio Synod); and Buffalo, New York (Buffalo Synod). They also visited the practical seminary at Fort Wayne, Indiana (Missouri Synod). They reported to the Synod two years later with the recommendation that a professorship be established at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis, Missouri. Their report stated that among the brethren at St. Louis they found “... a heartfelt love of the Symbols (the confessional writings) as well as the teachings of the fathers, a heartfelt trust in God that His holy

Word is correctly set forth therein, and that therefore a devoted love, yes, a burning zeal in teaching and practice was found for carrying out these old-Lutheran principles.”<sup>31</sup>

The Norwegian Synod looked for fellowship among those who identified themselves as Lutherans. Representatives from the Synod attended the 1866 meeting in Reading, Pennsylvania, which led to the organization of the General Council the following year. But they did not become a member of the General Council because they did not find a God-pleasing unity. By God’s grace, the Norwegian Synod found true unity of spirit with the synods which formed the Evangelical Lutheran Synodical Conference of North America. This body was organized in 1872 and became the largest association of Lutherans in North America. The six organizing synods were Missouri Synod, Wisconsin Synod, Ohio Synod, Minnesota Synod, Illinois Synod, and Norwegian Synod. From the Norwegian Synod, the Rev. H.A.Preus served as president 1876-77 and Prof. Laur. Larsen served as president 1880-82.

The accusation has been made that the Norwegian Synod learned her doctrine from the Missouri Synod and hence followed her sister-synod in both doctrine and practice. But the founding fathers stress that such was not the case. The pastors of the Norwegian Synod were young men when they came to America. H.A.Preus was twenty-six years of age, J.A.Ottesen and U.V.Koren were twenty-seven years of age, and Laur. Larsen was only twenty-four years of age. These men just had graduated from the theological department of Royal Frederick’s University which had been established in 1811 in Christiania, Norway. Professors Gisle Johnson and Paul Caspari began teaching in 1847. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit these two men largely were responsible for bringing about a confessional revival in Norway. The young graduates from the university brought this confessionalism with them to America. U.V.Koren writes:

It is for these fundamental truths reviewed above that the Norwegian Synod has contended throughout its history. By these truths, eagerness and zeal was called forth among us in the past, which manifested itself in joyful self-sacrifice in the service of the Church of God. We brought this unadulterated Gospel with us from our mother church in Norway, but we had not acquired a truly clear insight into its glory, in opposition to all errors, until we came here, where both the free-church conditions and the controversies which we have had to carry on have, under divine guidance, confirmed us in the old truths.<sup>32</sup>

J.A.Ottesen writes:

Since the talk is about Walther and the Missourians, I will, by no means, let myself be frightened by ... weak mockery and ridicule from confessing openly with thanks to God and these orthodox teachers, that I have received much “sound” instruction from them, not in a new “direction,” but exactly in the old truth, the same as that which I learned from the first guides into the truth of God’s Word that I had in my childhood; and guides who later helped me remember and keep the same,... then I bless and honor also these experienced teachers of the Missouri Synod who in God’s hand were instruments in strengthening me in the same truth here in this strange land....

But neither I nor any of us idolize Walther or slave under his authority. We never mention Walther’s name alone, or how Walther “takes a stand” in any matter, but we follow Walther’s reason and proof from God’s Word which speaks for itself and would be just as valid if a child had said something just as excellent.<sup>33</sup>

Unfortunately, the Norwegian Synod did not continue on this path of Biblical fellowship. She remained a member of the Synodical Conference until 1883 when she withdrew her

membership because of the internal difficulties associated with the Election Controversy. Even though she retained a fraternal spirit of fellowship, she never rejoined the Synodical Conference. She rather began to seek unity with others of Norwegian heritage. In 1890, only three years after her own unity was violently rent asunder, the Norwegian Synod took the initiative toward church union by arranging meetings between representatives of the various Norwegian Lutheran church bodies to discuss church union.<sup>34</sup> The Synodical Conference urged caution; but Norwegian nationalism arising both from Norway's independence in 1905 and the centennial of Norway's constitution in 1914, coupled with the observance of the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Reformation, prevailed. In 1912 the compromise document *Opgjør* was adopted and in 1917 the Synod united with those individuals and congregations against which she had taken a firm stance only thirty years earlier.

### **Divergent Paths**

This spirit of unionism continued among the majority who organized The Norwegian Evangelical Lutheran Church in 1917. Naturally, the mission fields and educational programs of the merged synods were combined and, in time, many of the congregations which had been divided in the 1880s again were united. The efforts at unionism have been evidenced through membership in the American Lutheran Conference, the National Lutheran Council, the National Council of Churches, the Lutheran Council in the USA, the Lutheran World Federation, and the World Council of Churches. This broad path of ecumenism is demonstrated in the 2003 New Year's Message issued by the Rev. Dr. Ishmael Noko, General Secretary of the Lutheran World Federation, who said: "God is just; God's grace is bestowed without prejudice; God has not designated favorites. Divine grace is not conferred according to race, gender, nationality, age or descent. Everyone who pursues justice and lives accordingly finds acceptance before God regardless of social status."<sup>35</sup>

In most recent years the successor body, which today has become a part of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), also has entered into agreements of fellowship with non-Lutheran church bodies. In August 1997 the ELCA Churchwide Assembly adopted "A Formula of Agreement" with the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the Reformed Church in America, and the United Church of Christ. Although a "Concordat of Agreement" with the Episcopal Church failed to be adopted during that same year, the ELCA voted to remain committed to the ultimate goal of full communion with the Episcopal Church and other churches. In 1999 a document entitled "Called to Common Mission" was adopted establishing such fellowship with the Episcopal Church. On Reformation Day 1999, representatives of the Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church signed a "Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification" which allows conflicting teachings of justification to stand side-by-side as valid statements of salvation. On March 24 of this year, during a brief meeting with Pope John Paul II in the Vatican, ELCA Presiding Bishop Mark Hanson called for the possibility of "limited interim Eucharistic sharing" of Lutherans at Roman Catholic altars.<sup>36</sup>

A different legacy has continued among the minority who reorganized the Norwegian Synod. Prior to 1918 those pastors who reorganized the old Norwegian Synod already sought the brotherly-counsel of the Synodical Conference. The Synodical Conference had sought to bring words of caution to the Norwegian Synod through the years 1912-17 when the merger was being considered. In 1917, Dr. Franz Pieper, representing the Synodical Conference committee,

advised the minority: “What I am especially interested in is that you *testify*. Your testimony may not bear fruit for a hundred years, but it will bear fruit” [emphasis original].<sup>37</sup> At its first convention in 1918 the reorganized synod voted to apply for membership in the Synodical Conference. The Synodical Conference welcomed the synod back into membership at its next meeting in 1920. The “little synod” especially looked with gratitude to Missouri Synod whom she considered to be her big sister.

Once again, as was the case during the early days of the old Synod, it was not the easy path of fellowship with those nearest which was sought but rather the synod sought to follow a God-pleasing unity of the spirit. In 1955 the Norwegian Synod felt compelled to suspend fellowship with Missouri Synod. In 1961, two years before withdrawing from the Synodical Conference, the synod stated “that with deep sorrow we on the basis of Romans 16:17 reaffirm our act of suspension of fellowship relations with the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, which to us, as to our brethren of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, means ‘terminate,’ and also with them entertains the hope that conditions might some day warrant the reestablishment of fellowship.”<sup>38</sup> Sadly, that day never has been realized. The synod established closer working-ties with the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod with whom she had shared fellowship since 1872. A working relationship was established through the formation of the Evangelical Lutheran Confessional Forum, for mutual strengthening and edification, in 1967.

Today, we express our fellowship with other Lutherans through the Confessional Evangelical Lutheran Conference (CELC) which was organized in 1993 by thirteen church bodies. Already in 1962 the ELS passed a resolution which said: “Whereas: In our ever-shrinking world, there is need for orthodox Lutheran churches to express their oneness of faith and confession in some tangible way; Be It Resolved: That the Evangelical Lutheran Synod favor establishing an International Conference of such orthodox Lutheran churches on the basis of those principles and practices that brought about the establishing of the Lutheran Synodical Conference in 1872.”<sup>39</sup> Before such an organization could be established, it was necessary to resolve various triangular fellowship relationships with other former “overseas brethren” of the Synodical Conference. Finally in 1986, a “Committee of Six,” from the ELS and the WELS, was appointed as a planning committee. The great historical event of the organization of the CELC met with relatively little attention in the ELS due to our own synod’s discussion of the Lord’s Supper. The Constituting Convention was held April 27-29, 1993, in Oberwesel, Germany, and has gathered three additional times in convention. Topics of presentation have centered upon: “Our Great Heritage” (1993-Germany), “Justification” (1996-Puerto Rico), the “Person and Work of the Holy Spirit” (1999-Florida), and the “Person and Work of Christ” (2002-Sweden). Today the CELC consists of nineteen church bodies throughout the world. Although our synod may appear small in the eyes of the world, she is regarded as a big sister of many of these smaller bodies.

Before our eyes the Lord has prepared a great Table in the Wilderness. His banquet table has been prepared and it is big enough for people “from every nation, tribe, people and language” (Revelation 7:9). Here the Lord extends the hand of welcome and greets those who have been made His friends through faith in His Son’s atonement. The Savior says these are those “who have not soiled their clothes. They will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy. He who overcomes will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out his name

from the book of life, but will acknowledge his name before my Father and his angels” (Revelation 3:3-4).

The semi-circular Norwegian Altar Ring which is found in many of our church buildings reminds us that the circle of fellowship is completed, on the other side of the Altar, by those who already rejoice around the throne in heaven. The great day finally will come when the earthly fellowship-table gives way to the “wedding supper of the Lamb” (Revelation 19:9). The Savior who serves us at His Altar promises “Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me” (Revelation 3:20). Norwegian hymnist H.A.Brorsen captures this when he writes “...they now enjoy their Sabbath rest / the paschal banquet of the blest / the Lamb, their Lord, at festival board / Himself is host and guest” (ELH 553:2). One-by-one, nurtured by God’s grace, we take our place on the other side of the circle.

*Saa vil vi nu sige hverandre farvel,  
Og ønske Guds fred over eder!  
Gud fred med os alle om morgen og kveld,  
Saa mange som hjertelig beder,  
At Kristus, Guds Søn,  
Maa være vor løn,  
Naar vi skal af verden udvandre!*

*O hjælp os, Gud Fader, o hjælp os, Guds Søn,  
Saa glade vort løb vi fuldende!  
Gud Helligaand, himmelske Trøster i løn,  
Lad kjærlighedsluene brænde,  
At vi kan med lyst  
Og mod i vort bryst  
Saa kjæmpe, at kronen vi vinde!*

Mrs. C. L. (Martha) Clausen  
(1815-1846)

And now we must bid one another farewell;  
The peace of our God keep you ever!  
God’s peace in our bosom and all will be well,  
Or whether we meet or we sever.  
    May Christ, our dear Lord,  
    Be our sure reward  
When we from this world pass forever!

Oh, help us dear Father, and Christ Thou the Son,  
That gladly our course we may finish!  
And Thou, Holy Spirit, Thou comforting One,  
Thy love in our hearts so replenish,  
    That we by Thy might,  
    May fight the good fight,  
Till won is the crown everlasting.

*The Lutheran Hymnary #51*

## PART IV EDUCATION

The 1910 essayist at the Iowa District convention of the Norwegian Synod stated that Christian education and the establishment of parochial schools was the “*Livssag*” [matter to which one’s life is dedicated] of the Norwegian Synod.<sup>40</sup> This was a proper response for sinners who had learned to know the grace of God and the forgiveness which comes through His Word. Such individuals know the value of Christian education which is both the life and death of the earthly church; but, more importantly, it is a matter of eternal life or death for us and our children. The Almighty God has promised that He shall show “love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments” (Exodus 20:6). The Lord has placed before us a rich banquet of grace which we are to set before our own children and before their children after them.

Such is the urgency which Moses sought to impart to the children of Israel. Following a lengthy exhortation about the mercy of God, it is recorded that “When Moses finished reciting all these words to all Israel, he said to them, ‘Take to heart all the words I have solemnly declared to you this day, so that you may command your children to obey carefully all the words of this law. They are not just idle words for you—they are your life’” (Deuteronomy 32:45-47). These are the words which contain the law which convicts the sinner of guilt (Psalm 42:1-2); and these are the words of the gospel with a taste which is sweeter than honey to the longing soul (Psalm 119:103). Throughout time, parents have instructed their children in the truth of the Lord. The faith has been passed from one generation to another upon the knees of fathers and mothers. Children have been encouraged to “continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus” (1 Timothy 3:14-15).

### **Education among the emigrants**

The Lord also had engendered such a deep interest in the spiritual training of children in the heart of the Norwegian emigrant. The concern for Christian education in America aptly was demonstrated by Elling Eielsen. He was struck by the fact that certain of the early immigrants were lacking Luther’s *Small Catechism*. The story is told how in 1842 Eielsen walked from Rock County, Wisconsin to New York City to have Pontoppidan’s *Explanation* of Luther’s Catechism printed in Norwegian. This was the first Norwegian book to be printed in America.

In Norway it had been customary for the parents to teach their children in their homes. A law which had been passed in 1736, requiring confirmation following catechization before the congregation, had the effect of establishing universal education in that country. Five years later the control of the schools became the responsibility of the church-parish. The local pastor was charged with obtaining a teacher. The Lutheran state church and the school were synonymous as can be seen from the list of required books: the Bible, a book of prayers, a book of hymns, the New Testament, copies of Norway’s constitution, and an arithmetic book. At the time when American emigration began, the most common form of the school in Norway was the *omgangskole* [rotating school]. Here a poorly-paid teacher and the students met in various homes for a period of a few days or weeks before moving to another nearby house and repeating the same process again until the three-month school term had ended.

The newly arrived immigrant from Norway expected to find nothing different in the new world. Unlike many other ethnic groups he had not come for religious reasons; rather he was seeking a better economic life for himself and his children. Even though the clergy of the Norwegian Synod urged the establishment of full-time Christian day schools, the immigrant expected the American public school to provide the same instruction which he had experienced in his home-land. He did not necessarily see the need for a dual system of competing schools. He did not have the motivation to pay a sufficient salary beyond that which the poorly-paid teachers received in Norway. He did not recognize the need for a school building. It was felt that the support of anything other than the public school was un-American.

The “school question” became a major point of discussion in the Norwegian-American community. Typical of this tension between pastors and parishioners is that recorded in the 1877 minutes of Saude Lutheran Church of Lawler, Iowa:

Pastor Moses asked the meeting to express itself regarding a matter of such great importance for the congregation. Since no one asked for the floor, Pastor Moses held forth to the meeting passages from Holy Scripture, both from the Old and New Testaments, clear and plain commands that it is the will of God that the young shall be instructed in God’s Word. He brought to their attention that it was not enough that the children learned their instruction books so that they were able readily to give answer in order to be confirmed, but that they should be so instructed in the truths of Christian doctrine that they might more and more learn to know the Lord Jesus. In this way they will be grounded and will abide in that which they have learned since it has been implanted in them from childhood on.

After this there was another one who stated that it certainly was necessary to have a religious school because he believed that the existence of the congregation to a great extent depended upon the children being instructed in God’s Word. To this the response was made that the greatest part of the congregation was agreed that the congregation have a congregational school ... there was talk back and forth about the subject from which it became clear that the need of a school was not considered so necessary by all and a lively debate especially as to the amount of time to be spent since the English school must not be neglected, which it would be if we were to have 10 months of religious school in which case much would be lost.<sup>41</sup>

Unlike the schools of German-Lutheran congregations, churches and schools were not established simultaneously in the Norwegian communities. Unlike those German brethren, the Norwegian Synod pastor did not teach in the schools that were established both because of the number of congregations which each pastor was called to serve and also because of a class distinction in Norway which would have discouraged such a practice.

By-and-large, the members of the Norwegian Synod made use of the public schools for their children. At times they sought to place Lutheran teachers in the public schools. Even when the Synod established a Normal School, a major intent was to prepare teachers for positions in the public schools rather than in parochial schools. The Synod’s congregations supplemented the public school education with “Norwegian school” which was a precursor of the modern Vacation Bible School and which ended with *Barnefest*. This was a short-term religious school which met in various locations as did the Norwegian *omgangskole*. It has been said: “When the time came for the short session of the religious ‘parochial’ school, the public school often had to close its doors for lack of pupils until the parochial-session was over.”<sup>42</sup> Various congregations also began to conduct what we today would call Sunday School. Again, the Saude congregation gave this instruction in 1886:

Resolved that the teacher conduct a reading service and catechization session every third Sunday. In the event that any adult be present the teacher shall read a sermon from an accepted book of sermons, but if only children are in attendance he shall read the gospel lesson for the day to them with a short explanation of the lesson and then continue with parts of the Catechism.<sup>43</sup>

Still, the Norwegian Synod urged the establishment of full-time Christian day schools. President H.A.Preus, in his 1893 report to the Synod said: “Strive with all your might to build up good parochial schools! Try earnestly to give your children a Christian education. The growth of the Lutheran Church, nay, its very existence, largely depends upon this; for the future belongs to the rising generation.”<sup>44</sup>

Next to the organization of the Synod itself, the greatest work of the Synod was found in the establishing of its schools. The energy of the Norwegian Synod centered in that which we would call a liberal-arts higher education. The focus was broader than that of training of pastors and teachers. Here our fore-fathers sought to provide Christian instruction beyond that which was available in the public elementary school. With such an education, people were taught to live as Christians in whatever their vocation.

The Norwegian Synod established and operated three institutions. Luther College was founded in 1861. After the initial school year in Wisconsin, it was located in Decorah, Iowa, on land which was acquired by U.V.Koren. The Rev. Laur. Larsen, who is regarded as the fourth “father” of the synod, served as its president for forty-one years. From 1865-86 the college included a department for teacher training. Lutheran Normal School was established in 1889 in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, for the instruction of teachers. Luther Seminary was organized in Madison, Wisconsin, in 1876; it was relocated to Robbinsdale, Minnesota in 1888 and following a devastating fire was rebuilt in Hamline, Minnesota. There also were sixteen academies which were established apart from the direct financial support of the Synod.

### **Christian Day Schools**

Although we no longer have the physical ownership of any these institutions, ours is the legacy of such an educational system. It often has been pointed out that of the fourteen Christian day schools which existed at the time of the Merger in 1917, the only schools which continued their existence were in the re-organized synod. In 1928, upon the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the old Synod, the *Lutheran Church Herald* of the merged synod conceded: “It may be taken for granted that we have given up the idea of establishing full-time parochial schools to take the place of the public school. While this would be an ideal condition, it would be placing a great burden upon our people which they would hardly be able to bear.”<sup>45</sup>

In contrast stands the statements of the “plucked chicken.” Already at the second convention of the reorganized Norwegian Synod, in 1919, President Bjug Harstad in his presidential address strongly urged the cause of Christian day schools and the synod responded with the establishment of a School Committee and a Christian Day School Fund. For many years thereafter, at nearly every convention, the urgency of Christian day schools was presented in one of the multiple annual essays. In 1928, at the same time that the merged synod conceded defeat to the public schools, the little synod stated:

... Mindful of the faith of our true Synod fathers, it is our solemn resolve on this our 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary rather to be here dedicated to the cause for which they gave their last full measure of

devotion. For just as certainly as we are bound in the word of God in all matters of faith and life, just as certainly *must* we remain champions of the Christian-day school [emphasis original].<sup>46</sup>

The Rev. Christian Anderson stated in the same year:

We who are heirs of the old Norwegian Synod and who have declared that we want to continue to build on the old foundation and according to the old principles, have, by the grace of God, continued to espouse the cause of the Christian day school.<sup>47</sup>

Two years later, the Rev. C.A.Moldstad said:

Today more than ever the Christian Day School is needed. The great loss of newly confirmed is a sad commentary on the lack of daily Christian training.... We have been preaching for 75 years, but few have taken God's Word to heart and done what God has commanded. Would the storm of 1917 have destroyed the old Synod house, if the Synod had practiced what it preached with regard to the Christian Day School? Let us beware lest we fall into the same lukewarm indifference and be satisfied because we have preached the necessity of the Christian Day School and then do nothing more about it. Shall we not take God at His Word? Has He not promised to provide all things necessary for the carrying out of His will and the work of His kingdom? Why not begin at the beginning in our church work and lay the foundation that God wants? I fear that we have been so busy with the stray sheep that we have neglected the lambs that God has placed within the fold.<sup>48</sup>

The Christian day school yet remains as a legacy belonging to the spiritual successors of the Norwegian Synod.

The 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the old Synod was observed with the publication of the *Jubilee Souvenir* which highlighted the schools of the synod. Likewise, the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the reorganized synod in 1988, began a thankoffering which established an endowment fund for the purpose of furthering Christian education. The *His Truth for Our Youth* Thankoffering had the stated purpose of promoting and maintaining Christian day schools, supporting youth ministry throughout our synod, and advancing the cause of parish education at all levels. Likewise, Christian day school teachers have been honored in the 1928 *Jubilee Souvenir*, in the 1968 anniversary volume *A City Set on a Hill*, and have been formally recognized at the 1988, 2002 and 2003 conventions of the synod.

Christian day schools have continued their existence under the wings of the ELS. In 1957 there were fourteen schools in operation. At that time it was pointed out that 21.5% of our congregations operated a school while at the same time 23% of Wisconsin Synod and 23.35% of Missouri Synod congregations operate schools. The difference arose in that, much like during the days of the old Synod, while the pastors preached the importance of Christian day schools, the cause was not as nobly embraced by the members and only 10% of eligible ELS students attended the schools that did exist.

Today, our synod's congregations, with ninety-five teachers, conduct fifteen Christian day schools in addition to congregations which operate preschools only. Representing 11% of our congregations and educating 1,232 students or at least 28% of our children, this is the largest number of schools and students in our existence! By contrast, Wisconsin Synod conducts 359 schools for 44% of its children and the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod conducts 1,031 schools for 27% of its children. At the same time, the congregations of the Evangelical Lutheran Church

in America operate 155 elementary schools and in those schools only 24% of the students are members of that church body.<sup>49</sup>

Christian parents will seek to make use of every means at their disposal to raise their children “in the training and instruction of the Lord” (Ephesians 6:4). They will make use of family devotions, the Sunday School, the Vacation Bible School, Lutheran Youth Association, and also when possible the Christian day school for daily instruction in God’s Word. The value of such teaching is evidenced in the faith which is strengthened within the young soul and more importantly when we recall that “...educating for eternity never ends. It continues as children grow to become young adults and until at last they leave their parental home to establish homes of their own. Then father and mother will steadfastly continue their education for eternity, until at last they leave their earthly home to join the family of saints in heaven. The process of educating for eternity never ends this side of the grave.”<sup>50</sup> The Savior has said “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these” (Matthew 19:14). The importance of this was witnessed several years ago while standing in the cemetery next to the grave-site of Ole Brandal who was one of the founding members of our sister-congregation in Avaldsnes, Norway. One of the members said, with tears in her eyes, “He taught many people about Jesus.” Nothing more needed to be said. That was the greatest legacy which he could leave and it was not forgotten.

### **Higher Education**

As has been noted, the energy of the Norwegian Synod centered on what we would call a liberal-arts higher education. It is then not surprising that the spiritual successors of the Norwegian Synod also should see a need for such an institution. It was for such a purpose that Bethany Lutheran College was purchased and the operation of the school assumed by the ELS just over 75 years ago. Its mission is stated in terms which echo the tradition of the past:

Bethany Lutheran College, owned and operated by the Evangelical Lutheran Synod, is a private, residential, liberal arts college committed to the teachings of the Bible as set forth in the Lutheran Confessions.... The college serves Lutherans and others by offering a challenging, student-centered approach to education that fosters spiritual development, intellectual and creative growth, self-understanding, and responsible citizenship. In keeping with its heritage, Bethany aspires to produce students with a clear understanding of Christian vocation, which encourages students to make the most of their God-given talents.<sup>51</sup>

The importance placed upon higher education also was reflected by the “synod people” with the presence of Bethany Lutheran High School whose doors welcomed students until 1969. Today, that same importance is evidenced by the congregations who are members, together with our sister synod, of eight area-Lutheran high school associations. Here, too, the purpose is “to assist area WELS/ELS congregations and their families in equipping their youth as disciples of Christ by developing their spiritual, intellectual, physical, social and emotional skills and values necessary in order for students to serve their Savior by serving others in their families, congregations and communities.”<sup>52</sup>

The cause of Christian education was vital to the Norwegian Synod. It yet remains vital to us who are their spiritual successors. It is through Christian education that the Lord has prepared for us sinners a rich banquet of His grace.

In speaking of the present, let it be stated at once that, in spite of what has again and again been said by our enemies concerning our right to call ourselves by the time-honored name, "The Norwegian Synod," we *are* historically justified in claiming it as our rightful heritage, and not least because of our attitude toward the Christian day-school. Also here we have sought to remain true to our sainted fathers, not because we worship mere man, but because the fathers were in turn bound in the word of God. And in this matter we have a divine injunction to remember them which have had the rule over us, who have spoken unto us the word of God: whose *faith* we should follow, considering the end of their conversation. It would ill become us to rear monuments to the memory of a Dietrichson, a Preus, an Ottesen, a Larsen with our lips while we with our feet were trampling upon the dismembered corpse of their dearest child [emphasis original].<sup>53</sup>

The Lord yet prepares a Table in the Wilderness for us and our children. When J.W.C.Dietrichson addressed the immigrants under the trees at Koshkonong, he no doubt referred to the Communion Board; but remembering the Norwegian potato famine of five years earlier, he also could have reminded them that the heavenly Father had not forgotten His children but rather had sustained and nourished them to that day. He had fed them from the bounty of the land and He also had fed them from the bounty of His grace. At the Table, the Lord served Christ to them. Their faith was nurtured in the One who said of Himself "I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty" (John 6:35). The Savior now instructs us: "Feed my lambs" (John 21:15). Such is our responsibility to our Savior. Such is our legacy as the spiritual successors of the Norwegian Synod.

*O Jesus, gid du vilde  
Mit Hjerte danne saa,  
Det baade aarle og silde  
Dit Tempel være maa!  
Du selv min hjerne vende  
Fra verdens kloge flok,  
Og lær mig dig at kjende,  
Saa har jeg visdom nok!*

Thomas H. Kingo (1634-1703)

I pray Thee, dear Lord Jesus,  
My heart to keep and train  
That I Thy holy temple  
From youth to age remain.  
Turn Thou my thoughts forever  
From worldly wisdom's lore;  
If I but learn to know Thee,  
I shall not want for more.

translated: N.A.Madson  
*Evangelical Lutheran Hymnary #178*

## CONCLUSION

As the spiritual successors of the Norwegian Synod, we continue to walk in the "old paths" which teach that a sinner is justified by grace alone through faith in Christ. We today have received a legacy which has not continued among the majority of those who constituted the old Synod. It is we, not they, who have continued in the same path of doctrine and fellowship. It is we who have received a legacy of Christian elementary education and we also continue on the path of Christian liberal-arts higher education. We have received, from our predecessor body, a

desire for the work of missions and the spreading the gospel of Jesus Christ before the night comes “when no one can work” (John 9:1). This is our legacy. It is a gift which we have received from a gracious God. Here is the working of His providential hand in our midst.

This legacy also is important as we live in a post-Christian society where truth and morality are relative items. In the melting-pot of America, cultural trends are blending so that there is less-and-less apparent difference between congregations or even denominations. A 1998 article in *The Lutheran Witness* speaks of the importance of maintaining a “folk culture” which is defined as “the traditions, customs and values of different ethnic, regional or national communities.”<sup>54</sup> It is important for the Christian to maintain these customs because often embedded in them are strong traditions of the faith. We must remember those traditions both at the synodical level and at the congregational level. We are here today because someone else stood up for the faith; because someone else gave the widow’s mite; because someone else instructed the children and carried the gospel message.

When the children of Israel were about to cross the Jordan River, the Lord commanded Joshua to have the people gather twelve stones and set them as a memorial at Gilgal. The Lord said these stones were to serve as a sign for when future generations would ask “What do these stones mean?” (Joshua 4:6). So, today, we remember the oaks of Koshkonong and ask “What do these oaks mean?”

Even though we live in a world which is more than 150 years removed from the Table in the Wilderness which was spread before the immigrants at Koshkonong Prairie, we share a common meal with them. The invitation has not changed. It is yet lost and condemned sinners who are invited to come to the Table with all their fears, concerns, doubts, and transgressions. Here the Lord feeds us of the bounty of His grace, mercy, and forgiveness. Here He strengthens us to rise and go forth to serve Him every day. We also look forward to the Table which our Savior has prepared for us which is not in the wilderness, but which already awaits in heaven. We are on our way to the King’s Banquet Table and there is a place for us there!

*Al verden nu raabe for Herren med fryd,  
Lovet være God!  
Træd frem for hans ansigt med sang og jubellyd,  
Guds menighed love nu Herren!*

*Kom, kjend Gud, din Herre, du intet selv formaar,  
Lovet være God!  
Han, han har dig gjort til sit folk og fødes faar  
Guds menighed love nu Herren!*

*Gaar ind ad hans porte me lov og takkesang,  
Lovet være God!  
Velsigner, høilover evindeligt hans navn,  
Guds menighed love nu Herren!*

*Guds godhed og miskundhed er ny i evighed  
Lovet være God!  
Fra slegt og til slegt skal hans sandhed vare ved  
Guds menighed love nu Herren!*

U. Vilhelm Koren (1826-1910)

Ye lands, to the Lord make a jubilant noise;  
Glory be to God!  
O serve Him with joy, in His presence now rejoice;  
Sing praise unto God out of Zion!

Not we, but the Lord is our Maker, our God;  
Glory be to God!  
His people we are, and the sheep led by His rod;  
Sing praise unto God out of Zion!

O enter His gates with thanksgiving and praise;  
Glory be to God!  
To bless Him and thank Him, our voices we will raise;  
Sing praise unto God out of Zion!

For good is the Lord and His mercy is sure;  
Glory be to God!  
To all generations His truth shall still endure;  
Sing praise unto God out of Zion!

*Evangelical Lutheran Hymnary #56*

SOLI DEO GLORIA

## **Endnotes**

- <sup>1</sup> Ylvisaker, S.C., ed, *Grace for Grace*, Mankato, Minnesota: Lutheran Synod Book Company, 1943, page 23.
- <sup>2</sup> Norwegian Synod of the American Evangelical Lutheran Church, *Beretning*, 1928, page 55.
- <sup>3</sup> Bredesen, Adolph in *Minde fra Jubelfesterne paa Koshkonong*, Decorah, Iowa: Den Norske Synodes Bogtrykkeri, 1894, pages 55-57.
- <sup>4</sup> *Emigranten*, August 12, 1853, quoted in *Grace for Grace*, page 44.
- <sup>5</sup> “Protokol over den Praestekonferents i Redwing, Okt. 14-21, 1868, VII, Eftermiddagsmøde i de 16de Oktober” quoted by Gracia Grindahl in *Dano-Norwegian Hymnody in America, Lutheran Quarterly* VI(Autumn 1992)3, page 266.
- <sup>6</sup> Den Norsk Evang. Luth. Kirke i Amerika, *Beretning*, 1869, quoted by Bjug Harstad in *Pioneer Days and Other Events Briefly Sketched*, Mankato, Minnesota; Bethany College, 1928, page 29.
- <sup>7</sup> Koren, U.V., quoted in Lillegard, George O., *Faith of Our Fathers*, Mankato, Minnesota: Lutheran Synod Book Company, 1953, page 57.
- <sup>8</sup> Koren, U.V., quoted in Lillegard, *Faith of Our Fathers*, page 59.
- <sup>9</sup> Unseth, J.B., in *Faith of Our Fathers*, Lillegard, George O., ed, Mankato, Minnesota: Lutheran Synod Book Company, 1953, page 13.
- <sup>10</sup> Larsen, Professor P. Lauritz, quoted in *Jacob Aal Ottesen*, George A.R. Gullixson trans., Wenatchee, WA: Webpco Inc., pages 33-34.
- <sup>11</sup> Preus, H.A. “The Ellingians,” in *Vivacious Daughter*, Todd W. Nichol, trans, Northfield, Minnesota: The Norwegian-American Historical Association, pages 119-20.
- <sup>12</sup> Anderson, Christian, *Our Liturgy*, unpublished manuscript, page 11.
- <sup>13</sup> Koren, U.V., “What the Norwegian Synod has wanted and still wants,” in *Faith of Our Fathers*, page 101.
- <sup>14</sup> Koren, U.V., quoted in *Faith of Our Fathers*, page 66.
- <sup>15</sup> Koren, U.V., “An Accounting” III.4, in *Grace for Grace*, page 181.
- <sup>16</sup> Harstad, Bjug, “Opening Sermon” in *Beretning*, Norwegian Synod of the American Evangelical Lutheran Church, 1918, page 78.
- <sup>17</sup> Moldstad, John A., *Lutheran Sentinel* 26(Tuesday, April 27, 1943)8, page 115.
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