

175 years of God's surprising grace to the Wisconsin Synod



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Introduction

Why celebrate a 175th anniversary? It doesn't have an easily remembered Latin term like "centennial" (100th anniversary), "sesquicentennial" (150th anniversary), or "bicentennial" (200th anniversary). In fact, there isn't even agreement on what Latin term to use, and some have been invented.¹ The 500th anniversary of the Reformation is still in recent memory. Why spend time focusing on an anniversary that doesn't even have one zero, much less two zeroes at the end?

This is a good question, especially since we live in a nation that doesn't always appreciate history. With the 24-hour news cycle, the availability of so much information in the palm of one's hand, and a general disdain for what the past might be able to teach us, many people in our society seem to be either ignorant of history or simply aren't interested (and this seems to be especially true of the younger generations).²

But maybe that is precisely why the 175th anniversary of the Wisconsin Synod is worth commemorating and celebrating. Congregations and church bodies typically make a bigger deal about quarter-century anniversaries for good reason. Twenty-five years is approximately a generation. This anniversary marks seven generations that the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS) has existed. In the grand scope of Christian history, that may seem insignificant—not even one-tenth of the history of the Christian church and just over one-third of the history of the Lutheran church. But in the context of Lutheranism in America, this anniversary becomes significant. It is true that the first Lutheran church body in America, the Pennsylvania Ministerium, was founded in 1748, and other Lutheran church bodies date to the decades following.³ However, with the exception of the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod (LCMS), WELS is the oldest Lutheran church body that has retained its identity to the present.⁴ All the older Lutheran church bodies have been swallowed up in various mergers that culminated in the establishment of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) in 1988. Recent decisions about human sexuality have led some ELCA congregation to leave and form new church bodies, thus moving those congregations another step farther from their origins.⁵

So, the fact that WELS is celebrating 175 years—seven generations—makes us unique. This uniqueness is worth our attention. And church history is really all about God's gracious activity in his church and in the world for his church.

It is interesting to see how various psalms employ history for different reasons. Psalm 105 recounts how God kept his covenant with Abraham and his descendants so that we might not forget that "he remembers his covenant forever, the promise he made, for a thousand generations" (Psalm 105:8 NIV). Psalm 106 uses the history of God's people to lead us to repentance. "We have sinned, even as our ancestors did; we have done wrong and acted wickedly" (Psalm 106:6). After cataloguing many of the sins of Israel, the psalmist points to God's mercy, which leads us to pray, "Save us,

¹ The Wikipedia page for "Anniversary," en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anniversary, offers eight options for the 175th anniversary. My favorite is "septuinquaquecentennial." It just rolls off the tongue.

² Paul Koelpin recently addressed this in his excellent article, "'O God, Our Help in Ages Past, Our Hope for Years to Come': Thoughts on the Value of Studying the Church's History," *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 122, no. 1 (2025): 5-26. For a condensed version, see Paul Koelpin, "The value of history," *Forward in Christ* 112, no. 2 (2025): 20.

³ For example, the New York Ministerium was founded in 1786, the North Carolina Synod in 1803, and the Ohio Synod in 1818.

⁴ The LCMS was founded in 1847.

⁵ Lutheran Congregations in Mission for Christ (LCMC) was founded in 2001; the North American Lutheran Church was founded in 2010.

LORD our God, and gather us from the nations, that we may give thanks to your holy name and glory in your praise” (Psalm 106:47). Psalm 44 reminds us that God has won the victories, so we boast in him and not in our actions (Psalm 44:1-7). Psalm 78 urges us to see that God’s gracious work in history is not something we keep to ourselves. “My people, hear my teaching; listen to the words of my mouth. I will open my mouth with a parable; I will utter hidden things, things from of old—things we have heard and known, things our ancestors have told us. We will not hide them from their descendants; we will tell the next generation the praiseworthy deeds of the LORD, his power, and the wonders he has done” (Psalm 78:1-4). The psalmist then spends more than 60 verses citing various episodes in Israel’s history from the Exodus to David’s rule. Psalm 107 recounts the deliverance at the Red Sea and the journey to the Promised Land so that God’s people will be led to give thanks. “Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his love endures forever. Let the redeemed of the LORD tell their story—those he redeemed from the hand of the foe, those he gathered from the lands, from east and west, from north and south” (Psalm 107:1-3).

All of these can find application for us as we commemorate the 175th anniversary of WELS. This anniversary is an opportunity for us to remember God’s faithfulness to his promise that the gospel will be preached throughout the world until Jesus returns (Matthew 24:14). By his grace, our church body has had a part to play in God keeping that promise. The anniversary theme reflects that: “Christ through us.” As we review WELS history, we can note that WELS is not the church triumphant. By his grace, God has worked among us and through us, despite sins, mistakes, and wrong-headed decisions. An honest look at our history can lead us to confess our sins and shortcomings and to rely on his grace for forgiveness and strength to continue working. An anniversary like this can help us appreciate how God has worked in surprising ways through sinful and flawed men and women. By his grace, God’s Word has won victories through our synod’s efforts to carry out the church’s mission. Since this is the first anniversary in the 21st century, this anniversary is an opportunity for a new generation to learn about God’s surprising grace to and through WELS for 175 years. Finally, reflecting on our synod’s history can lead us to give thanks for God’s enduring love to us.

Maybe you are seeing a theme here. Fifty years ago, the synod’s quasiquicentennial was simply “Grace 125.” Kurt Eggert wrote his hymn, “Not unto Us,” for that anniversary. Two stanzas are worth our attention.

Amazing grace—that chose us ere the worlds were made;
 amazing grace—that sent your Son to save;
amazing grace—that robed us in your righteousness
 and taught our lips to sing glory and praise.

O faithful love—that shepherded through faithless years;
 forgiving love—that led us to your truth;
unyielding love—that would not let us turn from you
 but sent us forth to speak pardon and peace.⁶

The more I’ve studied, taught, and presented on our synod’s history, the more amazed I am at his faithful and surprising grace to WELS. There are so many places where things could have gone sideways, and WELS would be a different synod today, if it would even still exist. Instead, by his amazing grace, the message of his amazing grace in Christ has been at the heart of what WELS is all about. His faithful love has shepherded our churches, schools, called workers, and members through our times of faithlessness and various challenges in the church and the world. His forgiving

⁶ *Christian Worship* 582:2,3.

love has kept our synod faithful to his truth, even if, at various times, it has been a journey for our synod to find and hold on to the truth. His unyielding love has enabled us to stand firm on the truth of God's Word in the face of a society that increasingly turns away from it. By his grace, he has blessed our feeble efforts "to proclaim pardon and peace."

I pray that we will find it worth our time to review, reflect on, and remember some episodes of God's surprising grace to WELS during our 175 years of history. I pray that we will continue to be "taught . . . to sing glory and praise" for his grace to us.

Beginnings: A "mild" Lutheran synod

That the church body originally known as the German Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Wisconsin got off the ground and survived its early years is a miracle of God's surprising grace. On December 8, 1849, four men met at Grace Church in Milwaukee to discuss starting a new Lutheran synod in Wisconsin. All of them could trace their roots back to the Barmen Mission House and the Langenberg Mission Society in Germany. Wilhelm Wrede was serving Salem in Granville, northwest of Milwaukee. Johann Weinmann was serving St. John's in Oakwood, south of Milwaukee. Wrede and Weinmann had arrived in America together in 1846. By 1848, they had moved to Wisconsin and were joined by Johannes Muehlhaeuser, who had been serving a Lutheran congregation in Rochester, New York, since 1838. Muehlhaeuser founded Grace earlier in 1849. The fourth man, Paul Meiss, was a dropout from the Barmen Mission House. But he had managed to pay his way to America and pass himself off as a pastor. He was serving several groups in and around Schleisingerville (now Slinger).

Other Lutheran synods were operating in the Milwaukee area in the late 1840s. The Buffalo Synod's Trinity church was in Freistadt, the oldest Lutheran church in Wisconsin.⁷ The Missouri Synod's Trinity church was a neighbor to Grace in Milwaukee. But these Barmen men didn't like the strictness and exclusivity of the "Old Lutherans" of Buffalo and Missouri. While Muehlhaeuser, Wrede, and Weinmann wanted to be Lutheran and loved the Lutheran biblical message of justification by grace alone through faith alone, they also had been trained to be tolerant of the differences between Lutheran and Reformed. They didn't appreciate and maybe didn't even completely understand the differences between Lutheran and Reformed. None of them had received extensive theological education. They knew the Lutheran Confessions. However, they didn't know them well and they weren't completely committed to them. Theirs was a "Mild Lutheranism." They wanted to offer an alternative to the "Old Lutheranism."

They met again on May 26, 1850, to officially bring this new enterprise into existence. They were joined by Kaspar Pluess, a pastor who was serving in the Sheboygan area, and Jacob Conrad, a man who was distributing religious literature but desired to be a pastor. Muehlhaeuser, who had been elected president and tasked with writing the constitution, chaired the opening convention. Conrad was assigned to Wrede for further training so he could serve as a pastor. The Wisconsin Synod was born.⁸

But of those pastors at that founding convention, only Muehlhaeuser and Conrad were still in the synod at its tenth anniversary. Meiss was expelled for scandalous behavior in 1851. Pluess left in

⁷ Today, Freistadt is part of Mequon, a suburb north of Milwaukee.

⁸ Interestingly, I was also born on May 26 (but a different year).

1852 to join the Reformed Church in New York. Weinmann took a call to a church in Baltimore in 1853 and died at sea in 1858. Wrede returned to Germany in 1855 and never returned to America.

God's surprising grace kept things going, despite the vacillation of the fledgling synod's confession and the lack of pastors. Slowly, faithful pastors trickled into the synod. Carl Goldammer, who would establish congregations in the Manitowoc area, arrived in 1851. Johannes Bading, who is perhaps the most influential and important synod president in our history, entered the synod in 1853. Philipp Koehler, who became the confessional conscience of the synod, began serving in the Wisconsin Synod in 1855.

The lack of quality pastors

This fledgling synod could have gone off the rails at the very beginning. There just weren't enough pastors for the great need as German immigrants were flooding into the new state of Wisconsin and pushing into the frontier areas. Some pastors trickled over from the German mission societies. But they were very uneven in quality of character and doctrinal knowledge and integrity. For every Bading and Koehler, there was a Ludwig Nietmann, a man whose name became an adjective in Wisconsin Synod circles to describe pastoral incompetence and meddling.

Nietmann was a real piece of work. He had been convicted in Buffalo for being a *schweinedeib*, a pig thief. He moved his family to Wisconsin to stay a step ahead of the law. Later it was revealed that he had spent time in prison back in Germany. He was also charged with stealing a Christmas tree from a cemetery.

But this criminal behavior was not known about him when he became the first full-time teacher at St. John's in the town of Greenfield.⁹ When the pastor serving St. John's retired, a member approached the synod about having Nietmann ordained. Desperate times called for desperate measures. In 1859, he took a call to St. John's in Newtonburg, near Manitowoc. Then his past caught up to him. He had to write, sign, and read a letter at the synod convention resigning from his call, resigning from the synod, and promising never to pass himself off as a pastor again. He left the synod, but he managed to worm his way into serving as a pastor at independent Lutheran churches in the Oconomowoc area and later at Immanuel in Kewaunee.¹⁰ He tried to start his own synod. He preached for Masonic ceremonies, at Methodist and Baptist churches, and meddled in the affairs of neighboring Wisconsin Synod congregations. Eventually, the members at Immanuel terminated the call in which he was serving. A new graduate, August Pieper, was assigned to Immanuel in 1879 to clean up Nietmann's mess and bring the church into the Wisconsin Synod.

But God's surprising grace was at work in the Nietmann story. One of his daughters, Lydia, settled with her family in the Kewaunee area. One of her daughters, also named Lydia, married a farmer named Otto Stuebs. They had 13 children. Among them was a daughter, Edna, who married a young pastor named Rudolph Otto. A son, Arden, became a pastor. Another son, Ralph, was a carpenter who had two sons enter the pastoral ministry of WELS (Ralph and William). Several generations of WELS pastors and teachers have come from Nietmann's family tree, including Pastor Justin Dauck and pastors with the last name "Otto" and "Stuebs." Jacob Kieselhorst, who recently graduated from Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, ushers in another generation of ministers of the gospel from

⁹ This is still a WELS congregation, St. John's on South 68th St. and Forest Home Ave. in Milwaukee.

¹⁰ The Oconomowoc congregations now belong to the LCMS. Immanuel in Kewaunee eventually joined the Wisconsin Synod. Oconomowoc is about 30 miles west of Milwaukee. Kewaunee is on the shore of Lake Michigan about one hundred miles north of Milwaukee.

the Nietmann family tree. Several more are in the WELS ministerial education system.¹¹ Only by God's surprising grace could so many proclaimers of Christ come from a disgraced pastor who was a pig thief.

“A well in our country”: Ministerial education

With sagas of men like Nietmann and the ongoing shortage of pastors, it is easy to see why Bading, when he became synod president in 1860, pushed to the top of the synod agenda the establishing of a seminary. Other options had been considered. The “apprentice” program took too long and was not producing reliable results. One Wisconsin Synod student, Johann Heinrich Sieker, graduated from Gettysburg Seminary. But there did not seem to be enough emphasis on German at Gettysburg, and there was the concern that the men would not want to return to serve in Wisconsin. In the early 1860s, the Missouri Synod's seminaries in St. Louis and Fort Wayne were not palatable options for theological reasons. The “Old Lutheran” theology was still not appealing to many of the “mild Lutherans” of the Wisconsin Synod.

Bading was convinced that to provide sufficient pastoral candidates who were reliably trained the Wisconsin Synod needed to start its own seminary. “We must dig a well in our country, in our synod, that will supply the workers.”¹² Bading's determination over three synod conventions finally led the fledgling Wisconsin Synod to take the leap in the middle of the Civil War to start its own pastor training program in Watertown, Wis., in 1863. It had small beginnings with one professor, Eduard Moldehnke, and one student. Moldehnke was a university-trained pastor who had just arrived to serve as the synod's *reiseprediger*.¹³ The synod quickly realized that a feeder school was needed, so a college and prep school, Northwestern, was founded in 1865. Bading was dispatched to Germany to raise funds to pay for the new campus and building.

Again, we see God's surprising grace at work. The whole enterprise could have fallen apart numerous times. Moldehnke resigned in 1866 when the synod called a second theology professor to the new institution. He felt it was a waste of precious resources. Adolph Hoenecke, another university-trained pastor who had arrived in Wisconsin in 1863, was the new professor and became the voice of confessional Lutheran theology for the Wisconsin Synod—a true gift of God's grace. A lack of students was supplemented by Missouri Synod students in the early 1870s. The school was often strapped for cash, partly because of some ill-fated financial decisions. But local farmers often came through with necessary foodstuffs for the school.

Initially, Northwestern struggled to find its identity. The first president, Adam Martin, who had been educated at a Lutheran seminary in New York, wanted to make Northwestern into the “Harvard of the West.” But as the Wisconsin Synod gravitated to confessional Lutheranism, Martin resigned and left the synod. By God's grace, the next three presidents served for over one hundred years between

¹¹ The information for the Nietmann story comes from Pastor Justin Dauck's research and paper as part of the WLS Master of Sacred Theology (STM) degree. Dauck received his STM degree in May. His paper, “Johann Christian Carl Ludwig Nietmann: A Study of the Difficulty of Vetting Pastoral Candidates in the Early Years of the Wisconsin Synod” (2025), can be found in the WLS online essay file.

¹² *Proceedings of the 1862 Convention of the German Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Wisconsin and Other States*, as quoted in John M. Brenner and Peter M. Prange, *Jars of Clay: A History of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary (1863–2013)* (Mequon, Wisconsin: Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, 2013), 22.

¹³ Literally, “traveling preacher.” The *reiseprediger* traveled around the state serving scattered groups of German immigrants with the Word and sacraments and trying to gather them into congregations.

them: August Ernst, E. E. Kowalke, and Carleton Toppe.¹⁴ Besides giving the school direction as a “school of the prophets” and being leaders in the synod, they were theologians, especially Kowalke and Toppe. Ernst’s leadership helped the synod weather the loss of the first building when it burned down because of a lightning strike. Some worried this would be the end of the school, maybe even the end of the synod in 1894. The synod responded with the funds to replace the building within a year.¹⁵

The school in Watertown was the beginning of what grew into the ministerial education system we have today, thanks to close relationships with our neighbors in Minnesota and Michigan. The Minnesota Synod, founded in 1860, established Dr. Martin Luther College (DMLC) in New Ulm, Minn., in 1884 as its ministerial education school. The Michigan Synod, also founded in 1860, established Michigan Lutheran Seminary (MLS), first in Manchester, Mich., and then in Saginaw, as its ministerial education school in 1885. In 1892, the three synods established a federation, the Joint Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Wisconsin, Minnesota, Michigan and Other States. While each synod retained its independence, the federation enabled cooperation in certain areas like publishing, “foreign” missions,¹⁶ and ministerial education. The New Ulm school became a preparatory school and the college for training teachers. The Watertown school served as a prep school and the college for pre-seminary training. The Saginaw school became a preparatory school. The federation constructed a new seminary in Wauwatosa, Wis., in 1893.

Again, we see God’s surprising grace in action. There were initial problems in Michigan. Many of the Michigan pastors did not want to give up their seminary, and the Michigan Synod even withdrew from the federation. But by 1910, the system was functioning as originally intended. The framework established in 1892 continues to this day. As similar systems in other church bodies have disintegrated over the years, God in his surprising grace has preserved ours, even as it has gone through various changes over the years. The Wauwatosa seminary relocated to Mequon, Wis., in 1929.¹⁷ In 1928, a new preparatory school—Northwestern Lutheran Academy—was founded in Mobridge, S.D. That school was closed in 1979 when the New Ulm preparatory school was relocated to Prairie du Chien, Wis., to form Martin Luther Preparatory School (MLPS). The amalgamation of MLPS and the Watertown preparatory school to form Luther Preparatory School and the amalgamation of DMLC and Northwestern College to form Martin Luther College (MLC) occurred in 1995.

Throughout the decades faithful and gifted professors and energetic staff have labored to train workers for the harvest field. The members of the synod have supported the ministerial education system of WELS with generous gifts for countless building projects and financial assistance, with volunteering and prayer, and, most importantly, with their sons and daughters. For more than 160 years, this system has provided a consistent supply of consistently trained ministers of the gospel who have shepherded congregations, taught in classrooms, and reached out with the gospel of Jesus Christ. This system is a unique blessing not seen in other church bodies. It has been a blessing for our church body. Let us not take this blessing for granted. Our ministerial education schools, professors, staff, and students have been gifts of God’s surprising grace.

¹⁴ Ernst served as president from 1871 to 1919, Kowalke from 1919 to 1959, and Toppe from 1959 to 1987.

¹⁵ An excellent recounting of the early history of Northwestern is told by Erwin Ernst Kowalke in *Centennial Story: Northwestern College, 1865–1965* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1965).

¹⁶ In the early Wisconsin Synod, missions were considered “foreign” that were done in a different language than German or English. They were not necessarily overseas missions.

¹⁷ For an excellent history of the WELS seminary, see Brenner and Prange, *Jars of Clay*.

A “turn to the right”: Becoming a more confessional synod

In addition to manpower shortages in the early years—and often throughout our synod’s history—financial struggles were especially acute in the early decades. Support from the German mission societies helped keep the young Wisconsin Synod afloat. They especially funded the *reiseprediger* program. In addition, Bading leveraged his connections in Germany and even Russia to raise funds for the new institution in Watertown.

At the same time, Muehlhaeuser’s experience serving in New York led to close connections with the Pennsylvania Synod, the oldest and, at the time, the largest Lutheran church body in America.¹⁸ Timothy Grundmeier, a history professor at MLC, recently researched and wrote an excellent article detailing how the Pennsylvania Synod was, in a very practical way, our “mother,” and the Wisconsin Synod and Minnesota Synod were its “younger daughters.”¹⁹ Annual cash grants were sent to the presidents of the “western” synods for distribution to pastors in need. As the Wisconsin Synod struggled to stay afloat financially during the early years, God’s grace provided benefactors who took an interest in this new church body.

But with this financial support came some doctrinal entanglements. Muehlhaeuser and other early Wisconsin Synod pastors were not interested in a confessionally rigorous doctrinal position. They probably did not even know what that meant, although they had seen evidence of it in the “Old Lutherans” of the Missouri Synod. And they didn’t like what they felt were uncharitable attacks on other Christian churches, including other Lutherans. Many of the early Wisconsin Synod pastors served congregations of Reformed and Lutherans members. In addition, the German mission societies expected that the pastors they sent to Wisconsin would have a willingness to serve such “union” congregations.²⁰ The Missouri Synod regularly criticized the Wisconsin Synod for its “unionistic” practices of accepting money from the mission societies and serving congregations of both Lutheran and Reformed. These criticisms continued into early 1868 and were often expressed in harsh ways. The Wisconsin Synod was regularly accused of being “unLutheran” and having only a paper confession.

The Pennsylvania connection helped the Wisconsin Synod move in a more confessional direction in the early 1860s. The Pennsylvania Synod had broken fellowship with less confessional church bodies in the East because some of their theologians, like Samuel Simon Schmucker, were attempting to “Americanize” the Augsburg Confession by altering articles on the Lord’s Supper, baptism, original sin, end times, and confession.²¹ Some of those eastern Lutheran synods didn’t subscribe to the Lutheran Confessions; they were more Reformed than Lutheran. They were trying to fit into the revivalism that had swept the American Christian scene in the first half of the nineteenth century. The Pennsylvania Synod had even established a rival seminary to Gettysburg in Philadelphia in 1864 under the guidance of Charles Porterfield Krauth, a confessional pastor and

¹⁸ The Pennsylvania Synod numbered about 50,000 members in the 1860s.

¹⁹ Timothy D. Grundmeier, “Pennsylvania’s ‘Youthful Daughter’: Reexamining the Early History of the Wisconsin Synod,” *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 122, no. 2 (2025): 89-140.

²⁰ Since 1830, the Prussian Union, a government policy forcing the Reformed and Lutheran state churches to form one “Evangelical” church, had been taking hold in more and more German territories.

²¹ Samuel Simon Schmucker, one of the founders of the Gettysburg Seminary in 1826, and several other theologians had published and distributed the “Definite Synodical Platform” with its American “Recension” of the Augsburg Confession in the mid 1850s.

theologian.²² Krauth's influence led to the founding of a new Lutheran organization of synods in 1867 called the General Council. William Streissguth²³ and Adam Martin represented the Wisconsin Synod at the organizational meeting the previous year. The Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Michigan Synods were all charter members, and the Wisconsin Synod was the second largest synod in the General Council.

There were also internal influences that were leading the Wisconsin Synod to "turn to the right." Bading had received training at the more confessional Lutheran Hermannsburg Mission House. He was elected president in 1860 when Muehlhaeuser asked not to be reelected. Philipp Koehler arrived in America with an appreciation for the Lutheran Confessions.²⁴ Gottlieb Reim wrote the first synod convention essay in 1861 in which he emphasized that the Wisconsin Synod stood on the Lutheran Confessions.²⁵ E. E. Sauer was battling Reformed influences in Schleisingerville (Slinger). These four pastors formed the old Northwestern Conference in the last half of the 1850s and served to provide a leavening of confessional Lutheranism to the young Wisconsin Synod.²⁶ The arrival of Hoenecke in 1863, with his university training and vast knowledge of the orthodox Lutheran theologians, was the final piece of the puzzle. In his surprising grace, God provided men determined to stand on Scripture and convinced that the Lutheran Confessions were a correct exposition of the Scripture's teachings, especially its emphasis on the forgiveness of sins purchased by Christ and delivered in the Word and sacraments.

Everything came to a head at the 1868 synod convention held at First Lutheran Church in Racine, Wis. Muehlhaeuser had died the previous September. President Bading began his address to the convention by noting the passing of the synod's "father, founder, and mediator." He then proceeded to say that it was time for the synod to stop "vacillating." "On the one hand, we openly accepted all the confessional writings of the Lutheran Church, a fact which the synod pronounced virtually every year, yet on the other hand, we considered the relationship with the societies which are incorporated with the United Church and the Union to be something proper. . . . The vacillations . . . must have an end."²⁷ In an act of God's surprising grace, the synod delegates walked away from the financial support of the mission societies, including a substantial amount that Bading had raised for Northwestern during his overseas trip. But the synod proved that it didn't have merely a "paper" confession.

At the same convention, the question arose about membership in the General Council. There were high hopes for this association, especially in the cash-strapped and pastor-starved Wisconsin Synod. The Pennsylvania Synod was providing funds. Maybe students from the eastern church bodies would consider attending Northwestern. But already at the 1867 convention of the General

²² Ironically, Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia and Gettysburg Seminary merged in 2017 to form United Lutheran Seminary.

²³ Streissguth served as Wisconsin Synod president from 1865–1867.

²⁴ See Peter M. Prange, "'We Do Not Have a City Here': A Missionary's Farewell Sermon," *WELS Historical Institute Journal* 42, no. 1 (2024): 1-18, and Peter M. Prange, "Christian Philipp Koehler and Wisconsin's Ostensible 'Turn to the Right,'" *Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly* 98, no. 2 (2025): 21-46.

²⁵ Gottlieb Reim, "Confessional Position of the Ev. Lutheran Synod of Wisconsin" (presented at the Synod Convention, Watertown, Wis., 25–31 May 1961), tr. by Arnold O. Lehmann in *WELS Historical Institute Journal* 14, no. 1 (1996): 3-8. Reim served as Wisconsin Synod president from 1863 to 1865.

²⁶ Mark Braun, "Wisconsin's 'Turn to the Right,' Part Two," *Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly* 75, no. 2 (2002): 83. The old Northwestern Conference has been honored throughout the history of Wisconsin Synod with the names of institutions: Northwestern College, Northwestern Publishing House, etc.

²⁷ *Proceedings of the 18. Convention of the German Evangel.-Luther. Synod of Wisconsin and Other States*, tr. by Arnold O. Lehmann, *WELS Historical Institute Journal* 21, no. 1 (2003): 6.

Council, it was evident that there were doctrinal issues. “Questions arose over end times teaching (some were advocating for the false teaching of millennialism), the proper practice of church fellowship (some were fine with Reformed pastors preaching in Lutheran churches), and membership in lodges (some were allowing members to belong to non-Christian lodges such as the Masons).”²⁸ The synod resolved to withdraw from the General Council if adequate, biblical answers were not provided at the next General Council convention. When answers were not provided, the Wisconsin Synod withdrew in 1869 amid charges of a hasty withdrawal.

In these decisions to walk away from the money and the other potential benefits of a larger association, God’s surprising grace was at work for the Wisconsin Synod. With the exceptions of the Minnesota Synod, which withdrew from the General Council in 1871, and the Michigan Synod, which withdrew in 1888, every synod of the General Council, through a series of mergers, is today part of the ELCA, a church body that has abandoned scriptural teaching and the Lutheran Confessions. God’s grace spared us. While a few Wisconsin Synod men left because of this decision—most notably, Adam Martin—the synod’s firm stance got the attention of men like August Ernst, Reinhold Adelberg, and Friedrich Notz, who were serving in the East. They became key leaders and educators in the Wisconsin Synod in the decades that followed.²⁹ Again, surprising gifts of God’s grace.

Now, instead of looking farther afield, the synod looked closer to home. The Iowa Synod, which sent a sizable and imposing group to the Wisconsin Synod’s 1867 convention, was a possibility for fellowship.³⁰ But closer examination of Iowa’s doctrinal position revealed concerning positions on the end times and open questions. Fellowship with the Iowa Synod never materialized. There had been contacts with the Minnesota Synod as early as 1863. Minnesota was struggling with the same vacillating doctrinal position as the Wisconsin Synod until Johann Heinrich Sieker, the Wisconsin Synod man who had been trained at Gettysburg, became Minnesota Synod president.³¹ While doctrinal unity was achieved at meetings in La Crosse, Wis., in the fall of 1869, formal fellowship finally occurred in 1871 after the Minnesota Synod withdrew from the General Council.

The more astonishing move “west” involved the Missouri Synod, those “Old Lutherans” with whom our founders initially didn’t want to associate. The 1868 convention directed President Bading to pursue meeting with leaders of the Missouri Synod to determine if unity existed. C. F. W. Walther, the Missouri Synod president, was pleased when Bading brought his synod’s resolution before the Northern District of the Missouri Synod. A few months later, Bading, Hoenecke, Koehler, and two other pastors were meetings with Walther and other Missouri Synod leaders in Milwaukee. Doctrinal discussions “revealed that there was full unity of faith. President Walther, previously the stern critic, was overjoyed. He included in the November 1 *Lutheraner* the declaration: ‘All our

²⁸ John Braun and Joel Otto, *Christ Through Us: A Pictorial History of the Wisconsin Synod, 1850–2025* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 2024), 40.

²⁹ Ernst, as noted earlier, served as president of Northwestern College, 1871–1919. Adelberg served as pastor of St. Mark’s, Watertown, and St. Peter, Milwaukee, as well as an adjunct professor of English at the synod’s seminary. Notz was the longtime Hebrew professor at Northwestern (1872–1911).

³⁰ Among Iowa’s representatives were its synod president, Georg Grossmann; two key professors of its Wartburg Seminary, Sigmund and Gottfried Fritschel; and a pastor, Georg Schieferdecker, who had been ousted from the Missouri Synod for teaching millennialism. His story is told in J. F. Koesterling, *The Emigration of the Saxon Lutherans in the Year 1838 and Their Settlement in Perry County, Missouri* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2022), 125–182.

³¹ Sieker grew up at St. John’s, Newtonburg, and was the lone Wisconsin Synod student to attend Gettysburg Seminary. After serving at Salem, Milwaukee, 1861–1867, he accepted a call to Trinity, St. Paul. Eventually, he served at St. Matthew’s, New York City, one of the oldest Lutheran congregations in America, brought that congregation into the Missouri Synod, and was instrumental in starting Concordia College in Bronxville, N.Y.

reservations about . . . Wisconsin . . . have been put to shame.’ ”³² Thus began a treasured fellowship that lasted more than 90 years, a fellowship based on a true united confession of all the doctrines of Scripture.

What this also meant was that the Wisconsin Synod was one of the founding members of the Evangelical Lutheran Synodical Conference of North America in 1872. By God’s grace, we were part of the largest and most confessional Lutheran grouping in America. Preaching for the opening service of the inaugural convention at Bading’s St. John’s church in Milwaukee, Walther declared, “Oh blessed, happy day! Our children and children’s children will speak of it and rejoice.”³³ Armin Schuetze described the ultimate purpose of this new fellowship. “The orthodox Synodical Conference and its synods were above all to be a mission-minded Conference and mission-minded synods. Doctrinal integrity and mission work must go hand in hand.”³⁴ The Synodical Conference was all about “Christ for us” and “Christ through us.” Again, God’s grace blessed the Wisconsin Synod during its 90-year membership in the Synodical Conference. The Lord graciously moved the Wisconsin Synod to a doctrinal position that confessed the teachings of Scripture and aligned with the Lutheran Confessions. By God’s grace and working, the synod made a “turn to the right.”

It didn’t take long, however, for doctrinal controversy to cause a rift in the Synodical Conference. Over the doctrine of election, the Ohio Synod and the Norwegian Synod withdrew. Their false teaching on election that God chose some to be saved “in view of the faith” they would someday have led to false teachings about humans’ involvement in their salvation.³⁵ Their departure represented a significant part of the Synodical Conference. Only the Missouri, Wisconsin, and Minnesota Synods were left. By God’s surprising grace—especially providing a gifted and capable theologian in Hoenecke—the Wisconsin Synod stood with Walther and Missouri on the truth of God’s Word that our salvation from beginning to end is entirely because of God’s pure grace, even though it cost the synod nine pastors and several congregations. Eventually, most of the Ohio Synod and most of the Norwegian Synod were swallowed up in the ELCA merger.³⁶ Again, God’s grace spared the Wisconsin Synod and kept us faithful to his Word.

The mission spirit of WELS: The Apache mission

The early Wisconsin Synod pastors had a heart for missions. That’s why many of them came to Wisconsin. They wanted to serve scattered German immigrants, who were truly sheep without shepherds, and gather them into congregations. This wasn’t always easy work, since many of those immigrants had been nominal Christians back in the fatherland. And life on the American frontier didn’t always leave time for anything but work. Slowly but surely, however, congregations were

³² Edward Fredrich and John Brenner, *The Wisconsin Synod Lutherans: A History of the Single Synod, Federation, and Merger, Second Edition* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 2025), 54.

³³ C. F. W. Walther, “On Pure Doctrine for the Salvation of Souls: Opening Sermon for the Synodical Conference,” in Matthew Harrison, *At Home in the House of My Fathers: Presidential Sermons, Essays, Letter, and Addresses from the Missouri Synod’s Great Era of Unity and Growth* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2009), 195.

³⁴ Armin Schuetze, *The Synodical Conference: Ecumenical Endeavor* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 2000), 59.

³⁵ For a comprehensive look at the election controversy, see John M. Brenner, *The Election Controversy Among Lutherans in the Twentieth Century* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2017), 1-107. See also Schuetze, *The Synodical Conference*, 91-112; Fredrich and Brenner, *The Wisconsin Synod Lutherans, 2nd Edition*, 61-63; Braun and Otto, *Christ Through Us*, 52,53; Peter M. Prange, *Wielding the Sword of the Spirit, Volume Three: The Doctrine & Practice of Church Fellowship in the Synodical Conference (1877–1882)* (Wauwatosa: Joh. Ph. Koehler, 2023).

³⁶ A notable exception would be our brothers and sisters of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod (ELS).

formed and grew. By 1892, the Wisconsin Synod had grown to 145 pastors serving 239 congregations.³⁷

Many of the early Wisconsin Synod pastors studied in mission houses with the dream of going to India or Africa. The idea of bringing Christ to those who had not heard it and those who were not like them remained. Through the Synodical Conference, the synod supported mission work among the recently freed slaves in the South beginning in the late 1870s.³⁸ But there was a desire to do more direct work. Three Northwestern students volunteered to be considered for this mission work. They were not given any special training, but their school fees were paid by the synod. The goal was finally realized in 1893 when the decision was made to send two seminary graduates to the Apache reservations in Arizona, to a place and a group of people where no mission work had been done. Not a lot of thought went into this. Johannes Plocher and George Adascheck didn't have language training. In fact, they barely knew English. They didn't have training in missiology. They didn't have a home to live in, just glorified tents. They didn't know where to start or even how to start. The climate was unexpected. They were going to the Apache who were suspicious of white people. But God's surprising grace was at work again. Perseverance and patience eventually produced a small beginning.

And God's surprising grace provided the workers and the gifts for that small beginning to take off. Gustav Harders, who had served in Milwaukee but had health problems that forced him to move to Arizona, provided leadership and an ability to promote the work through novels that he wrote about life on the reservations. He arrived in 1906 and served until his death in 1917. Edgar and Minnie Guenther arrived in 1911 straight out of the seminary and right after their wedding. They also spent the rest of their lives on the reservations, as did their son, Arthur. Edgar became known as "the tall missionary." He was tireless in serving the Apache, putting together desks for the school, visiting people out in the countryside when they were sick, and helping construct a new church building for Open Bible in Whiteriver. He and Minnie were also instrumental in starting the nursery to take care of Apache babies who were orphaned. Minnie's brother and sister-in-law even moved from Wisconsin to work in the orphanage.

Speaking of family connections, here's further evidence of God's surprising grace. During the years of the Great Depression, most seminary graduates did not receive assignments right away. There were no available calls. In 1934, Rudolph Otto graduated. Minnie Guenther was his aunt, his mother's sister. Since he didn't receive an assignment, Edgar and Minnie invited him to live with them on the reservation. They promised to put him to work. Meanwhile, Edna Stuebs, the great-granddaughter of Ludwig Nietmann, grew up wanting to take care of babies who didn't look like her. She received some training as a deaconess and then volunteered to serve in the nursery at the Apache mission. Who should pick her up when she arrived in Arizona? The dashing young Rudolph Otto. The rest, as they say, is history. Again, God's surprising grace was at work.

In 1917, two seminary classmates arrived to work at the Apache mission: Alfred Uplegger and Henry Rosin. Both would serve their entire ministries at the mission. Henry married one of Alfred's sisters. Two years later, Alfred's father, Francis, accepted a call to the mission. He had been teaching at Lutheran High School in Milwaukee. He proved to be a linguistic genius. By talking to

³⁷ *Proceedings of the Forty-second Convention of the German Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Wisconsin and Other States*, tr. by James Langebartels (self-published, 2024), 320. Many thanks to Pastor Langebartels for his labor of love in translating and publishing the *Proceedings* of synod conventions. He is continuing the work of the sainted Prof. Arnold O. Lehmann whose translations were published in issues of the *WELS Historical Institute Journal*.

³⁸ See Schuetze, *The Synodical Conference*, 129-158.

and listening to Apache, he put the Apache language into written form and translated Luther's Small Catechism, the liturgy, portions of the Bible, and other religious resources into Apache. Even though his wife died in 1925, Francis kept living and serving on the San Carlos reservation until his death in 1964 at the age of 97.

For more than 50 years, the Apache mission was the primary focus of the Wisconsin Synod's "foreign" mission work. In addition to offerings and prayers, members of the synod donated blankets, children's clothes, and toys for the mission. Lay members served in the nursery. Teachers were called to the schools on the reservation. God's surprising grace has allowed Christ to be proclaimed through us to thousands of Apache since 1893. Today, nine WELS congregations and two Lutheran elementary schools serve the Native Americans of the Apache reservations.³⁹

The mission spirit of WELS: The first overseas missions

The first decades of the 20th century were trying times for the Wisconsin Synod. The involvement of the United States in World War I placed suspicion on Americans of German heritage.⁴⁰ The synod struggled to transition from German to English. I admire the many pastors in the 1910s and 1920s who were basically carrying out bilingual ministries, preaching in both German and English every Sunday. In 1917, the Wisconsin, Minnesota, Michigan, and Nebraska District Synods formally merged to become the Joint Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Wisconsin and Other States. This merger required new policies and procedures. Life in the synod didn't always run smoothly, as evidenced by the Protes'tant Controversy that broke out in 1924. This controversy over matters of church life, preaching, and personality conflicts led to the loss of more than 30 congregations and pastors as well as three professors at Northwestern and two professors at the seminary, including the venerable J. P. Koehler, the director⁴¹ of the seminary and the architectural influence of the new building in Mequon. This tore at the fabric of the synod. But God's grace preserved us once again.⁴²

Then the Great Depression hit, bringing economic hardship to the country and to the synod. Budget deficits, failures of congregations to repay building loans, and building projects in New Ulm and Mobridge led to a synod debt that exceeded \$700,000 in 1933.⁴³ This hampered mission efforts and created difficult decisions for President John W. O. Brenner and the synod treasurer. Who do you pay when the synod doesn't have enough money to pay both missionaries and professors? Usually, President Brenner would pay the missionaries. He reasoned that the professors and their families could eat in the cafeteria. World War II then brought disruptions and sacrifices to both life in America and church life. If all that weren't enough, trouble was brewing in the ranks of the Synodical Conference beginning in the late 1930s.

But as the synod bore these various crosses, its mission zeal did not diminish. In his surprising grace, the Lord raised up men who had the vision to see what was possible and the willingness to

³⁹ For more fascinating stories about the Apache mission work, see Eric Hartzell, *Inashood: The Story of the Arizona Apache Lutheran Missions and Their Pastors* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 2022).

⁴⁰ For an in-depth treatment of this issue, see Stephen Gurgel, "The War to End All Germans: Wisconsin Synod Lutherans and the First World War," *WELS Historical Institute Journal* 33, no. 1 (2015): 1-36 and no. 2 (2015): 1-63.

⁴¹ "Director" was the term used for what we would today call the "president" of seminary.

⁴² For succinct summaries of the Protes'tant Controversy, see Fredrich and Brenner, *The Wisconsin Synod Lutherans, 2nd Edition*, 159-168 and Braun and Otto, *Christ Through Us*, 106-108.

⁴³ To put this in perspective, \$700,000 in 1933 is equivalent to over \$16 million today. While the Missouri Synod had a debt of around \$1 million, the Wisconsin Synod was considerably smaller in size. The Wisconsin Synod debt amounted to \$3 per communicant member; the Missouri Synod's debt was about \$1 per member.

push the synod forward to bring Christ to people overseas. Edgar Hoenecke, a pastor in Plymouth, Mich., and a member of the Apache mission board, was such a man. At the 1935 synod convention, his “Michigan Plan” of sending “bulletins” to synod members informing them about the synod’s work and encouraging them to make offerings to pay down the synod debt became a synodwide program. He was on the cutting edge in using photos, graphs, and drawings to get his points across. It took ten years, but by 1945, there was a surplus of nearly \$350,000 in the synod coffers.

Still, there were delays and disagreements about how to proceed. Should the synod wait for a “Macedonian call” (Acts 16:6-10) or seek a place for mission work? Was this the right time for such a venture? There was a shortage of workers again. Some leaders, including President Brenner, had concerns about the synod’s ability to support such an endeavor. Who would go to find a suitable place? Finally, Hoenecke and Arthur Wacker, a pastor in Ann Arbor, Mich., agreed to make the exploratory trip. This was not an easy endeavor for either man. Both still had children at home. Both had busy congregations. But arrangements were finally made and Wacker and Hoenecke left in April 1949 for a four-month, 4,000-mile trek across southern and central Africa. The extraordinary trip was chronicled in photos and film by Hoenecke and turned into a filmstrip that was shown in congregations across the synod.⁴⁴ They finally found a field where no other churches were working in Northern Rhodesia (modern-day Zambia).⁴⁵

The 1951 synod convention approved sending one missionary to Japan and two to Africa. The initial work in Japan was lost because of the doctrinal disputes that were ratcheting up between the Wisconsin Synod and the Missouri Synod. But after restarting the work in 1957, the mission in Japan was blessed with missionaries like Richard Poetter and Kermit Habben, who worked tirelessly to bring Christ to the Japanese.⁴⁶ The initial work in Africa was, at times, slow and, at times, hampered by internal struggles among the missionaries and disagreements with the mission board. But, again, God’s grace was evident as men like Ernst H. Wendland, Theodore “Tate” Sauer, William Schweppe, John Janosek, Robert Sawall, Richard Mueller, and Raymond Cox strengthened the initial work, expanded into Malawi, and established a worker training system. Back home, Edgar Hoenecke became the first world mission executive secretary to oversee the work. By God’s surprising grace, the midwestern-based, “German” Lutheran church body was reaching out with the gospel across oceans.⁴⁷

God’s surprising grace in the break with Missouri

The suspension of the almost century-long fellowship with the Missouri Synod remains one of the most traumatic and far-reaching episodes in the history of WELS. Edward Fredrich summed it up well.

The struggle was long, stretching over a quarter century. The losses in cherished fellowships were large, touching personally most pastors, teachers, and laypeople of the synod. The results could have been tragic in the extreme, as dire prophecies of the time from without

⁴⁴ The filmstrip, “Africa Still Calls,” has been digitized and is available on YouTube at youtube.com/watch?v=gMfzTHdm1Wc.

⁴⁵ Hoenecke himself relates the fascinating account of their exploratory journey in “The WELS Forty-Niners,” *WELS Historical Institute Journal* 3, no. 1 (1985): 3-68. This issue has been reprinted by the WELS Historical Institute (WHI) for the 175th anniversary and will be given to anyone who joins the WHI during the convention.

⁴⁶ Poetter served as a WELS missionary in Japan, 1958–1991; Habben served there his entire ministry, 1967–2008.

⁴⁷ For a longer treatment of the mission spirit of WELS, see Joel Otto, “The Mission Spirit of the Wisconsin Synod,” *Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly* 98, no. 2 (2025): 47-63.

and within loudly and repeatedly proclaimed. The fact that they were not was because the Lord of the church once again did all things well.⁴⁸

The details of the history can be found elsewhere.⁴⁹ Looking back with the perspective of over two generations, one can see God's surprising grace at work. It is not often that a smaller church body stands up to a larger church body and follows through, especially when so much was at stake. Prior to the break, WELS and the LCMS worked together on numerous ministry projects, like area Lutheran high schools,⁵⁰ the campus ministry at the University of Wisconsin–Madison,⁵¹ joint Reformation services, and the mission work in Nigeria.⁵² WELS members supported Bethesda Lutheran Home in Watertown, Wis. WELS second-career men received training for the pastoral ministry at Concordia Theological Seminary in Springfield, Ill. LCMS families in Michigan sent their children to Michigan Lutheran Seminary. WELS congregations freely transferred members to LCMS congregations in places where there were no Wisconsin Synod churches within a thousand miles.

But then the tensions began. It became clearer to some WELS leaders sooner than others that the Missouri Synod had changed. The voices started as early as 1953, grew louder in 1955 and 1957, and led to the seminary president, Edmund Reim, resigning in 1957 and a new church body, the Church of the Lutheran Confession (CLC), forming in 1960. Among the early leaders of the CLC were two men who had been serving as district presidents, Paul Albrecht and M. J. Witt, and the former synod secretary, Winfred Schaller. Yet, it was clear that a majority of the synod just wasn't ready to break. *The Northwestern Lutheran* had only started publishing articles about the controversial issues in the late 1940s. Many parish pastors, teachers, and laypeople still did not understand the doctrines at the heart of the controversy. The resolution to break at the 1957 synod convention was defeated by a vote of 61 to 77. Many felt more time was needed.

By 1961, however, the scene had changed. More efforts had been made to heal the breach, including the involvement of theologians from overseas Lutheran churches. Turmoil was seizing more and more congregations, especially after the founding of the CLC in 1960. Meanwhile, two popular professors at Northwestern College, Ralph Gehrke and Richard Jungkuntz, were having an influence on men arriving at the seminary. Students began challenging seminary professors on the doctrine of Scripture, especially its divine authorship and inerrancy. Both men took calls to LCMS

⁴⁸ Fredrich and Brenner, *The Wisconsin Synod Lutherans, 2nd Edition*, 203.

⁴⁹ The most comprehensive treatment of the break with the Missouri Synod was done by Mark Braun, *A Tale of Two Synods: Events That Led to the Split between Wisconsin and Missouri* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 2003). Armin Schuetze also treats this extensively in *The Synodical Conference*, 241-395. More concise recounting of the break can be found in Fredrich and Brenner, *The Wisconsin Synod Lutherans, 2nd Edition*, 203-213, and Braun and Otto, *Christ Through Us*, 160-168.

⁵⁰ Lutheran High School in Milwaukee, the oldest area Lutheran high school in America dating to 1903, was originally a joint effort of Wisconsin and Missouri Synod congregations in the Milwaukee area. That changed in 1955 when the high school federation split. The Missouri Synod congregations built Milwaukee Lutheran High School, while the Wisconsin Synod congregations constructed Wisconsin Lutheran High School. In addition, Racine Lutheran High School was also a joint effort of LCMS and WELS congregations in the Racine/Kenosha area.

⁵¹ Most notably, Calvary Lutheran University Chapel in Madison was the only joint WELS-LCMS ministry at the synodical level that didn't involve the Synodical Conference. See Christopher Royce, "A Brief History of Calvary Lutheran University Chapel at the University of Wisconsin–Madison," *Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly* 93, no. 3 (2020), 9-30. This article is the first part of Royce's WLS senior thesis, *A "Lay Seminary" Develops, Grows, and Endures: A Century of WELS Campus Ministry at the University of Wisconsin–Madison* (2020).

⁵² See Schuetze, *The Synodical Conference*, 159-177, for a good recounting of the Nigeria mission, which began in the 1930s. See also Theodore Sauer, Harold John, and Ernst Wendland, eds. *To Every Nation, Tribe, Language, and People: A Century of WELS World Missions* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1992), 117-128.

institutions in the summer of 1961. After leaving WELS, Gehrke wrote an article in which he advocated for a historical-critical approach to the interpretation of Genesis.⁵³

The stage was set for high drama at the 1961 synod convention. Respected voices were heard on both sides of the issue. Werner Franzmann was at one microphone proclaiming that the time was now for the Wisconsin Synod to act with courage. His brother, Martin, a professor at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis, was at another microphone pleading for patience. When the question was called and the vote was taken, the margin was nearly three-quarters in favor of suspending fellowship with the LCMS.⁵⁴ The little sister had spoken decisively. Many lamented the loss of a treasured fellowship. Many feared what this might mean for WELS.

We can see God's surprising grace in the timing of the break. If WELS had broken ties in 1955 or 1957, the synod might have split, with more congregations leaving for the Missouri Synod, or, at the very least, more congregations splitting apart. More college and seminary students might have left for the Missouri Synod. If WELS had not broken in 1961, the CLC might have become a much larger church body, with more WELS congregations splitting and more called workers and students leaving. And perhaps WELS would have just kept delaying a decision until no decision would have ever been made. When one sees where the LCMS went doctrinally during the rest of the 1960s, especially at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis, which culminated in the Concordia Walkout and the establishment of Seminex in 1974, it is fair to ask, "Could that have been us, too?" The subsequent events in the LCMS after 1961 vindicated WELS' decision to suspend fellowship, although WELS looked on with dismay and sadness at what had become of its former sister in the Synodical Conference.⁵⁵ The fact that we were spared such anguish and tumult is a testament to God's surprising grace.

The golden age of WELS growth: By grace alone

In contrast to those who predicted the demise of the Wisconsin Synod, the break with Missouri proved to be the catalyst for a quarter century of phenomenal growth, a "golden age," if you will. Signs of an approaching explosion of growth were already evident in the 1950s. Besides the advent of overseas mission work, local congregations expanded ministries with new school and church construction; five new area Lutheran high schools were started in the 1950s; massive building projects were carried out on the campuses in Watertown, New Ulm, Saginaw, and Mobridge; new home missions were started in Florida and California; and the Arizona-California District was created in 1954. Northwestern Publishing House began publishing *Meditations* in 1957. In 1959, the synod convention voted to make the synod presidency a full-time position. All of this was going on while the synod's energy and attention were also on the deteriorating developments within the Synodical Conference.

Then the break happened. In 1961, WELS had 840 congregations with 233,627 communicants located in 16 states. There were 729 active pastors in the ministerium. Eight missionaries were serving in 2 countries overseas. There were 228 Lutheran elementary schools, with an enrollment of

⁵³ Ralph Gehrke, "Genesis Three in the Light of Key Hermeneutical Principles," *Concordia Theological Monthly* 36, no. 8 (1965), 534-560.

⁵⁴ Braun, *A Tale of Two Synods*, 264-270.

⁵⁵ See Mark Braun, "Seminex: Looking In from the Outside," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 88, no. 4 (2024): 291-321.

24,308 students served by 800 teachers, as well as 9 area Lutheran high schools.⁵⁶ The seminary had 7 professors and 75 students.⁵⁷ A quarter century later, WELS had 1,190 congregations with 317,322 communicants located in all 50 states. Three new districts had been formed.⁵⁸ There were 1,280 active pastors serving in the ministry. Forty-two missionaries were serving in 9 countries overseas. There were 376 Lutheran elementary schools, with an enrollment of 31,087 students served by 1,640 teachers, as well as 19 area Lutheran high schools. The seminary had 16 professors and 218 students.⁵⁹

Numbers don't tell the whole story, but they tell a story. And that story is that following the break with the LCMS, WELS embarked on a period of growth that is nothing short of amazing. We became a truly nationwide and worldwide church body. The number of called workers nearly doubled with the growth of the seminary mirroring that. The number of local-level ministries increased by more than 40 percent and was spread across the country instead of more regionally. All of this from a church body that had made the courageous decision to stand on the truths of Scripture and break fellowship with a much larger church body that we had trusted to do the heavy lifting. Now the Lord was giving WELS the opportunity, the energy, and the resources to come into its own. What could this be but God's surprising grace to WELS!

This was evident not just in the push for more home missions across the country. There was a focus on youth ministry beyond the structure of schools. Lutheran Pioneers and Lutheran Girl Pioneers were founded in the 1950s and exploded in growth during the 1960s and 1970s. With the LCMS taking over Calvary Lutheran Student Chapel in Madison, WELS established Wisconsin Lutheran Chapel in 1964. Additional campus ministry work was carried out on other campuses. The Lutheran Collegians–WELS held its first convention in 1965 to bring together WELS college students for spiritual growth and fellowship. The first WELS International Youth Rally was held in 1974 at St. Paul, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada.

Prior to the break, WELS relied on the LCMS to provide the infrastructure to serve people with special needs or people in challenging situations. But after the break, WELS had to begin focusing on these areas of specialized ministry. The synod called a full-time administrator for the Board for Special Ministries in 1973. This board coordinated ministry to military personnel scattered around the world; produced resources to serve the blind, deaf, and developmentally disabled; and assisted with ministry to those in prison or other institutions. On the local level, Wisconsin Lutheran Child and Family Service (WLCFS) was founded in the Milwaukee area in 1965 to serve families and the elderly, while Wisconsin Lutheran Institutional Ministries was established in 1968 to bring the gospel to those in Wisconsin prisons, county hospitals, and the Veterans' Administration Hospital in Milwaukee.

Lay support for the ministry of WELS grew in several ways beyond offerings directly to the synod. In 1964, the Lutheran Women's Missionary Society (LWMS) was founded with the goal of supporting WELS missions. About the same time, women's groups around the synod began supporting the work of the Central Africa Medical Mission (Camm). The 1980s saw the establishment of WELS Kingdom Workers and Builders for Christ, which emphasized lay volunteers serving WELS missions.

⁵⁶ Among the nine were East Fork Lutheran High School and the two joint LCMS-WELS high schools.

⁵⁷ *Statistical Report of the Wisconsin Ev. Lutheran Synod for 1961.*

⁵⁸ The South Atlantic District was formed in 1973. The North Atlantic and South Central Districts were added in 1983. Prior to that, most of the South Atlantic and all the North Atlantic had been part of the Michigan District. The majority of the South Central was part of the Arizona-California District.

⁵⁹ *Statistical Report of the Wisconsin Ev. Lutheran Synod for 1986.*

During the synod's 125th anniversary, Norman Berg reflected on where the synod had progressed since the early 1960s and emphasized the importance of the laity.

It perhaps also could be that the very necessary and intense concentration during the late 40's and 50's on the intersynodical doctrinal struggles with the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod engaged our primary efforts and strength. From this struggle, however, arose a very strong sense of confessional identity which is essential both to a sound, but also a vigorously lay-supported mission program.⁶⁰

Of course, called workers were needed to carry out such a vigorous program of mission and ministry. These decades saw changes and expansion in the WELS ministerial education system. During the 1960s, WELS operated a junior college for training teachers in the Milwaukee area. This essentially bought time for DMLC to carry out necessary building projects on its New Ulm campus to accommodate the necessary growing enrollment. The Northwestern campus added two dorms and a new gymnasium during the late 1960s and 1970s. Michigan Lutheran Seminary saw several building projects in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary added dorm space, the library, the cafeteria, and the auditorium-gymnasium during this era. The move of Martin Luther Academy—and the closure of Northwestern Lutheran Academy—to form Martin Luther Preparatory School in Prairie du Chien, Wis., occurred in 1979, partly to free up space on the New Ulm campus for the burgeoning college enrollment. Enrollments across the system remained at high levels throughout the 1970s and first half of the 1980s. One could argue this was a matter of demographics—the Baby Boomer generation. But one can also see God's surprising grace providing the workers at just the right time to meet the growing opportunities.

This was all happening at a time when mainline Christian churches that were abandoning and even denigrating the core tenets of the Christian faith, like the Methodists, the United Church of Christ, and many Presbyterians, were experiencing declines in membership. It was also happening at a time when other Lutheran church bodies were spiraling into a theology that was increasingly liberal, and even the LCMS was experiencing its “battle for the Bible.” It's no wonder that the synod chose the theme “Grace 125” for its anniversary celebration in 1975. President Naumann summarized the attitude of the synod well at the 1975 synod convention.

Looking back over 125 years today, we are again made aware of two great facts: one is the reality of our own weaknesses, shortcomings, transgressions, and opportunities for service lost; the other is the amazing grace and merciful kindness of the Lord, our Triune God, whose chief concern it is and always has been, that all men should be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth.⁶¹

Even as the synod was experiencing phenomenal and unprecedented growth, the leaders of the synod acknowledged that it was all by God's grace alone.

Education, leadership, stewardship: More evidence of God's surprising grace

I could continue to tell stories of God's surprising grace throughout our synod's history and up to the present. But I only have so much time and space in a synod convention essay and presentation.

⁶⁰ Norman Berg, “Home Mission Modes and Moods—125 Years in WELS,” *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 73, no. 4 (1976): 262. Berg was the Board for Home Missions administrator when he wrote the article.

⁶¹ *Proceedings of the Forty-Third Biennial Convention of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1975), 15.

I'd encourage you to read the pictorial history book, *Christ Through Us*, and the updated edition of *The Wisconsin Synod Lutherans*. I would like to briefly highlight three areas that continue to stun me about God's surprising grace to our synod.

First, the education system of WELS is astounding, especially for a synod of our size. The history of schools in our synod goes back to the very first synod convention. "It was resolved that each preacher who is a member of our organization take an interest in working especially with the youth as well as in conducting day schools, Bible study classes, mission classes, etc."⁶² In some ways, this was following the pattern of other Lutheran church bodies in America. Because of the lack of public schools, most Lutheran congregations endeavored to provide schooling of some sort. There was also a desire to educate the children in the language of the fatherland. That started to decline in many Lutheran synods as public education became more readily available. But that wasn't the case with church bodies that were intentionally confessional. I am convinced that the more confessional the Lutheran church body, the more interested it is in operating Lutheran schools. Even as the costs of education have risen and the demographics have fluctuated, the WELS school system, while it has endured some ups and downs over the years, has remained a flourishing system. We see "Christ through us" in our schools. We see God's surprising grace at work to provide us with well-trained teachers and committed families.

Second, the Lord of the church has graciously provided us with gifted leaders throughout our synod's seven generations of history. The writer to the Hebrews encourages us, "Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith" (Hebrews 13:7). In WELS, our first thoughts often gravitate to our theological leaders. The names roll off our lips: Hoenecke, Pieper, Koehler, Schaller, Meyer, Lawrenz, Schuetze, Becker, Brug, Brenner, Panning, Gawrisch, Deutschlander, Kuske, Valleskey, Koelpin, Fredrich, Wendland, Eickmann, Nass. The list could go on and on. And rightly we should remember those who taught us, our parents, our grandparents, our pastors, their pastors—the men who trained past and current generations.

But let's not forget the gift of synod leaders. James P. Schaefer noted in a brief paper he gave during the 125th anniversary of WELS, "If we are to appreciate in its fullest dimensions the history of the Wisconsin Synod, we must recognize that God has graced the Wisconsin Synod not only with His gifts in our classrooms, but also with His gifts in our administration."⁶³ Maybe other names should be in our memory as well. Muehlhaeuser and Bading immediately leap to mind.⁶⁴ But how about these names? Philipp von Rohr, the president who faithfully served for 20 years at the turn of the 20th century.⁶⁵ Gustav Bergemann, the president who served for 25 years and orchestrated the merger in 1917 and guided the synod through its transition from German to English.⁶⁶ John W. O. Brenner, the president who led the synod through the financially lean years of the Great Depression to a better financial footing and helped the synod voice its concern over the theological drift of the Missouri Synod.⁶⁷ Oscar J. Naumann, the president who led the synod through the break with

⁶² *Proceedings of the First Convention of the German Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Wisconsin*, tr. by Arnold O. Lehmann in *WELS Historical Institute Journal* 9, no. 1 and 2 (1991): 5.

⁶³ James P. Schaefer, "Some Reflections on the 125th Anniversary of the Wisconsin Ev. Lutheran Synod," (presented at the Metro-North Pastoral Conference, Milwaukee, Wis., 19 May 1975), 2.

⁶⁴ Muehlhaeuser served as president, 1850–60; Bading was president, 1860–63, 1867–89.

⁶⁵ Von Rohr served as president, 1889–1908.

⁶⁶ Bergemann served as president, 1908–33.

⁶⁷ Brenner served as president, 1933–53.

Missouri and was a big cheerleader for both ministerial education and missions.⁶⁸ Carl Mischke and Karl Gurgel, faithful presidents who had to help the synod weather changes and financial challenges.⁶⁹ Mark Schroeder, the president who led WELS to refocus its identity and restructure its finances.⁷⁰

And don't forget about leaders who weren't synod presidents. Men like Carl Gausewitz, who was president of the federation, president of the Synodical Conference, and writer of a catechism that was used in our synod for several generations. Or Edgar Hoenecke, the man of small stature who was a big voice for missions. Or Ray Wiechman, the first administrator for the Board for Home Missions and the first district president of the South Atlantic District. Or Kurt Eggert, the Hymnal Project Director for the 1993 *Christian Worship*. Or men with the gift of writing, like William Schaefer, James P. Schaefer, Werner Franzmann, John Braun, and Richard Lauersdorf, among many others. Through the labors of such gifted people, WELS has been able to produce hymnals, catechisms, devotional writings, Bible commentaries, and a whole host of other publications. Or consider the countless district presidents, circuit pastors, board chairmen, overseers of financial matters, administrators. Or all the laypeople who have served on synod boards and committees or worked in synod administration. Or the women who have led the charge in the LWMS and the support of the Central Africa Medical Mission. That our church body should have such an array of gifted servants to his church and to our synod is a testimony to God's surprising grace.

Such ministry requires financial support. Christian stewardship of giving has grown over the decades of the synod's history. It was especially a challenge in the earliest years when most Wisconsin Synod members were fresh immigrants just trying to eke out a living on the frontier of Wisconsin. In addition, the concept of freewill offerings was foreign to their way of thinking. In Germany, the church was supported by taxes. It took patient and constant instruction to train people to "excel in the grace of giving" (2 Corinthians 8:7). God's people often responded to needs. For example, when the "*Kaffeemühle*"⁷¹ burned down in July 1894, the people of the synod responded with sufficient gifts to construct a replacement building within a year. Edgar Hoenecke's "bulletins" were instrumental in helping the members of the synod understand the importance of supporting the ministry of the synod. The members of the synod continued to respond to the need for buildings on the synod campuses during the ensuing decades. In an essay presented in 1976, James P. Schaefer pointed out that in the 15 years after the break with the Missouri Synod, the amount per communicant given by members of the synod for the work of the synod almost tripled.⁷² He underscored that this allowed the synod to open 26 new missions in the last year. This compared to 32 opened by the Lutheran Church of America, which was about 6 times larger than WELS at the time.⁷³ The "Reaching Out" offering in the early 1980s had the goal of raising \$10 million for the synod's work. Over \$23 million was given. The synod debt of the 2000s and 2010s was paid off ahead of schedule. More recently, Congregation Mission Offerings have set records for several years running. Congregations and high school federations have been raising significant sums for ministry programs and building projects. God's people have included the church's work in

⁶⁸ Naumann served as president, 1953–79.

⁶⁹ Mischke served as president, 1979–93; Gurgel served as president, 1993–2007.

⁷⁰ For short biographies of each synod president, see the WELS Historical Institute website: welshistoricalinstitute.org/histories/personal/synod-presidents.

⁷¹ Literally, "coffee mill." This was the nickname for Northwestern's original building because of its resemblance to an old-fashioned coffee grinder.

⁷² James P. Schaefer, "Stewards of the Mysteries of God in Today's World" (presented at the Arizona-California District Convention, Phoenix, Ariz., 22–24 June 1976), 12.

⁷³ Schaefer, "Stewards of the Mysteries of God," 13.

their estate plans. Such stewardship of God's gifts is also evidence of God's surprising grace to WELS. His surpassing grace has continued to provide what we need so that our generosity can overflow to others (2 Corinthians 9:6-15).

God's surprising grace into the future

To describe God's grace as "surprising" is perhaps redundant. By its very nature, God's grace is surprising because everything that God does for us by his grace, his kindness, his favor, his steadfast love, is unexpected and undeserved.⁷⁴ In other words, his grace is surprising by its very nature because God always does the opposite of what our sinful human reason would expect God to do. Adam and Eve fall into sin. God should destroy them and start over. But he doesn't. He promises a Savior who will crush Satan (Genesis 3:15). We all inherit Adam and Eve's sinfulness (Romans 5:12). We're born enemies of God (Romans 8:7). We have fallen short of the perfection God demands (Romans 3:23). We are dead in sin, following the ways of the world, gratifying our sinful desires, deserving of God's wrath (Ephesians 2:1-3). But he doesn't crush us. He doesn't leave us to our own devices. "All are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus" (Romans 3:24). "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast" (Ephesians 2:8,9). This faith in Jesus is a gift of God's grace, worked by the Holy Spirit through the means of grace, the good news of God's grace in Christ given through Word and sacraments. Before we could do anything to earn anything from him, he chose us in eternity, to be his own dear children (Ephesians 1:4-6). From eternity to eternity, it is God's work, by God's grace. None of this is expected. It is always surprising.⁷⁵

And so it is with God's work in history. Think of your own history. In what ways has God worked in your personal past, or in your family's past, so that the message of Christ came through others to you? In what ways has God used you to bring the message of Christ to someone else? How has Christ come through us in our daily lives, in our families, among our friends, through the service we give in our churches and through our support of the synod's ministry? In surprising ways, God graciously has brought us to this place, at this time, so that we are his forgiven, believing people. In surprising ways, God has graciously used us and worked through us, so that the gospel of Christ has come through us to others.

Writing two generations ago, James P. Schaefer commented on the synod's handling of the gospel.

Stewards of the mysteries of God. As to our conservation of those mysteries, our record under God's grace has been remarkable—flying, in fact, in the face of history. As to our sharing of the mysteries of God, His οἰκονομία, His plan of salvation for the world through Jesus Christ, we have faltered at times. In more recent times history will record that we passed through an unparalleled period of expansion measured by any standard available to any historian. We do not know what the future holds. But we do know that God holds the future. For us that is *satis superque*!⁷⁶

⁷⁴ Or, as Jaroslav Vajda put it in his hymn, "Where Shepherds Lately Knelt," "unasked, unforced, unearned." *Christian Worship* 345:4.

⁷⁵ This is at the heart of the Lutheran Confessions. For succinct examples, see the Augsburg Confession II–V; the Smalcald Articles Part II Article 1; the Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration Article III:9–11, Article XI:15–23.

⁷⁶ Schaefer, "Stewards of the Mysteries of God," 14. Οἰκονομία literally means "administration" or "management." "*Satis superque*" has the idea of "more than enough."

May we have a similar attitude of faith as we consider the future of WELS, continuing to hold on to his Word, continuing to confess our shortcomings and failures, and continuing to trust the blessings of our gracious God.

How might God continue to carry out his gospel work through WELS in the future? Like Schaefer said 50 years ago, we have to admit that only God knows. We have a long-range strategic plan before us at this convention. The plan is centered in God's surprising grace as expressed in 2 Corinthians 5:17-21. "God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them" (v. 19). He did that for a world of people who oppose his will at every turn? How did he do that? "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (v. 21). The holy Son of God took on flesh and suffered the punishment sinful humanity deserves in our place? Why would he do that? The answer is "grace." This message of reconciliation has been proclaimed to us so that we are now his people, a new creation (v. 17). And grace upon grace, "he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us" (vv. 19,20). Who are we that God should use us to be his messengers, to have a part in his kingdom work? Yet, he does use us, purely by grace alone, his surprising grace.

The plan speaks to maintaining our identity as a confessional Lutheran church body in a world where standing for something objective and true is a rare thing. This is an identity that we can trace to the late 1860s, an identity forged through several controversies. May God graciously help us keep that identity.

The plan continues to build on the mission spirit that has permeated our church body throughout its seven generations of existence, continuing the "100 in 10" home missions program and continuing efforts to bring the gospel to more and more people throughout the world. May God graciously cultivate a mission zeal in the next generation.

The plan remains committed to sustaining the three-tiered ministerial education system that has served our synod well since its inception more than 160 years ago, while also seeking new ways to recruit and train more people for public ministry. May God graciously help us value the treasure of our seminary, college, and prep schools for future generations.

The plan recognizes the importance of strong congregations at the local level. This is where God's people are shepherded with the gospel. May God graciously lead us to recognize the critical importance of the means of grace at the local level so that the faith of God's people is nurtured and strengthened, so that God's people receive the only comfort in a trying world, so that God's people are led to fear, love, and trust in him above all things as the Word is proclaimed in its truth and purity and the sacraments are faithfully administered among us, and so that God's people are brought to see themselves—and act—as Christ's ambassadors to bring the message of reconciliation through Christ to the people around them.

Finally, the plan underscores the need for adequate financial resources to carry out the ministry of the synod. May God continue to graciously provide us with wise leaders who manage the financial gifts of God's people and encourage continued support of the synod's work.

Fifty years ago, James P. Schaefer expressed a concern about the mission and ministry of WELS.

That is what I most fear—boredom. Getting sick and tired of our bread and butter: educating pastors and teachers and sharing the Gospel with those who do not have it. It is a simple program, uncomplicated and—compared with many programs—unglamorous. It is, up to now, what we have done best. There are many other desirable things that we can do

together as a gathering of Christians. As we become bored with bread and butter, we reach for other goodies. Before you know it, all our priorities are mixed up and nobody knows where we are going.⁷⁷

Let us not lose sight of the “bread and butter” of our work together as people who are committed to the precious gospel of Christ. Let us not grow tired of it. Instead, let Paul’s words encourage us. “Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain” (1 Corinthians 15:58). The ten-year plan concludes with these fitting words: “The work of the Church is Christ’s alone, yet he deigns to work *through us*. As WELS steps into its eighth generation, may his Spirit, through the Word, empower us for his purpose, multiply our humble efforts, and gather a harvest of souls into his eternal embrace.”⁷⁸ No doubt, his grace to us will continue to surprise us in ways that we couldn’t even imagine. The prayer “For my synod” in the “Personal Prayers” of *Christian Worship* is appropriate.

Lord Jesus, your Spirit calls and gathers the whole Church on earth and empowers it for service. Guide and preserve the work we do with other congregations in our synod. Keep us loyal to your Word, and give us courage to confess your truth boldly. Bestow on our leaders pure hearts, clear vision, and patient faith. Raise up new generations of faithful witnesses who will join us to proclaim the gospel to every creature.⁷⁹

Conclusion

There has always been some confusion surrounding the founding date and place of the Wisconsin Synod. I know First Vice President Huebner likes to make the case for Dec. 8, 1849, at Grace, Milwaukee. That was the date and place of the initial meeting to discuss founding a new Lutheran synod. But the synod wasn’t really in existence yet. The little founding group had agreed to meet again at Salem in Granville (northwest of Milwaukee) on Trinity Sunday, which was May 26, 1850. The original minutes say that the founding convention kicked off on that Sunday. Besides, Muehlhaeuser reflected at the 1860 convention that it was the tenth anniversary. If anyone would have known, he would have. And all our synod’s anniversaries date to 1850 as the starting point.

I mention this because last year there was a perfect confluence of date and place. Last year, May 26 landed on a Sunday. Even better, it landed on Trinity Sunday. It was also the day that Salem on the northwest side of Milwaukee (formerly Granville) dedicated the refurbished pipe organ that the church had purchased and installed. While I was sitting in Salem a year ago, it dawned on me. I wonder if Muehlhaeuser and those other pastors could have imagined that 174 years later—to the day—Salem would be dedicating a new pipe organ to the glory of God maybe a hundred yards from where they were meeting to establish the German Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Wisconsin. I wonder if they could have imagined that their little group would have still been in existence all these years later.

At the tenth anniversary of the synod in 1860, Muehlhaeuser reviewed the synod’s history and commented, “Just as the kingdom of Heaven is like a mustard seed, so also was the very small

⁷⁷ Schaefer, “Stewards of the Mysteries of God,” 13.

⁷⁸ *Book of Reports and Memorials for the Sixty-Eighth Biennial Convention of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod* (Waukesha: Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, 2025), 68.

⁷⁹ *Christian Worship*, 255.

beginning of our Synod.”⁸⁰ That little group represented a handful of fledgling congregations in and around Milwaukee. Very small, very humble beginnings. One hundred seventy-five years later, we can look back and see the tree that God’s surprising grace has produced for us and through us. That mustard-seed-like beginning has become a nationwide and worldwide church body, entirely by God’s surprising grace.

I could go on. There are so many more examples from our synod’s history of God’s surprising grace at work, often despite our efforts, often despite our mistakes. God has certainly worked through the faithful labors of “jars of clay” (2 Corinthians 4:7). I’d encourage you to read up on our history in the books and other resources that have been assembled for this anniversary.⁸¹ The story of our synod is one worth remembering and telling, which is why we have a synod archivist and why the WELS Historical Institute exists. There are more stories from our synod’s history worth researching that give opportunity to marvel at God’s grace, and maybe even inspire our efforts in the present and future. Each of us has our own story. The fact that we’re here today testifies to the fact that our stories are somehow, in some way, connected to the story of God’s surprising grace to the Wisconsin Synod as the message of Christ for us has come to us and goes out through us. And for that we just have to give thanks to our gracious and merciful God and sing:

Not unto us but to your name be glory, Lord,
for grace so rich, so wide, so high, so free.
Abide with us till trav’ling days are over and done,
and pilgrim feet lead us home, Lord, to you.⁸²

⁸⁰ Johannes Muehlhaeuser, “The Founding and History of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Wisconsin and Neighboring States” (presented at the Eleventh Synod Convention, Fond du Lac, Wis., 31 May–7 June 1860), tr. by Arnold O. Lehmann in “The First History of the Wisconsin Synod,” *WELS Historical Institute Journal* 17, no. 1 (1999): 31.

⁸¹ Fredrich and Brenner, *The Wisconsin Synod Lutherans, 2nd Edition*; Braun and Otto, *Christ Through Us*; welshistoricalinstitute.org/175th-resources; [youtube.com/@welshistory](https://www.youtube.com/@welshistory).

⁸² *Christian Worship* 582:4.