

175th Anniversary Reflections

April 26th is our birthday. This year, it's a big one.

Some 175 years ago, on April 26, 1847, representatives of a few congregations signed the constitution of a new church body, the German Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Missouri, Ohio, and Other States, since re-named "The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod." The April, 2022 *Lutheran Witness* carries an article on these founding churches.

Why did they form a Synod?

The answer to this question does not amount simply to a piece of historical trivia. The reasons why they formed the Missouri Synod remain the best reasons for us to have the Synod still today.

These people knew that a synodical organization was not commanded by God. They did not have to create one, yet they did.

For they also knew that particular congregations need to concern themselves with Christ's church as a whole. Congregations agreed in doctrine and practice are to recognize that they are in church fellowship one with another, and endeavor to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Ephesians 4:3-6; 1 Corinthians 1:10). They should extend their help and support to one another in as many ways as they can.

C. F. W. Walther and others concluded that in practice they had little choice but to form a synod. Looking around at the American religious landscape, they seriously wondered whether unity in the faith could be maintained among them if they failed to organize. Walther wrote that "a preacher who, insisting on his freedom, wanted to remain independent with his congregation, although he was offered the opportunity to join an orthodox *synod*, would thereby be acting against the purpose of his office, against the well-being of his congregation, and against his duty toward the church as a whole and would show himself to be a separatist" (emphasis original).

While Walther served as pastor at Trinity Lutheran Church, St. Louis, he became the Missouri Synod's first president. In the latter capacity, he was to visit every congregation of the Synod. Supervision of doctrine stood out as vital in an organization that had been formed for the conservation and promotion of the unity of the true faith.

Relatedly, the Synod was also formed so together its members could do things that they could not do so well separately. During the last 175 years, these things have fallen into a couple of broad categories:

1. *What the Synod does **on behalf of** its member congregations.* From its inception, the Synod had two seminaries to teach future pastors. In time, there were other institutions of higher education that prepared young men for seminary entrance and trained other professional church workers, starting with Lutheran school teachers. The Synod has also operated far-flung mission programs, both in the United States and in other countries around the world. It would be difficult, if not impossible, for congregations to do such things singly.

Over time, other activities on behalf of congregations developed. For instance:

- Since 1869, Concordia Publishing House has been publishing not only Bibles but also doctrinally sound hymnals, catechisms, devotional materials, theological textbooks, etc.
- Concordia Plans sees to benefits for full-time church workers such as health insurance and pensions.

- Concordia Historical Institute is the Synod's long-standing department of archives. It not only keeps records but also encourages interest in and study of the entire history of Lutheranism in America.

This list could go on and on, including events like national youth gatherings and District youth lock-ins. In the Central Illinois District, mission efforts include specialized forms of outreach such as ministry in Spanish, campus ministry, deaf ministry, and prison ministry. The District is the Synod in this place. Therefore these too are examples of the Synod doing what none of its members could do so well alone, as it acts on behalf of its members.

2. *What the Synod does in support of its member congregations.* In its earlier days, the Synod gave support to congregations mostly through prayer, offering advice, and the mutual conversation and consolation that occurred at pastors' and teachers' conferences. Other undertakings in this category have come about more recently. Simply put, the Synod endeavors to provide assistance in various ways to congregations and their pastors and other church workers as all of them go about serving the Lord's mission in their respective capacities.

For example, the Synod maintains staff, at both national and District levels, who consult with congregations or groups of congregations and help them as they operate Lutheran preschools, elementary schools, and high schools. These schools, their teachers and governing bodies draw freely on this expertise.

Also, various staff members and volunteers offer assistance to congregations, in the name of the Synod, for areas of church life such as worship, evangelism, stewardship, parish education, youth work, and others. The assistance has taken several forms. These days the national Synod is producing a growing array of resources to help pastors with preaching, laypeople with witnessing, church treasurers with the several aspects of their duties, and more . . . to say nothing of what is being done at the District level.

Times have changed since 1847. Yet the basic reasons for the Missouri Synod to continue existing today remain the same reasons why it was first brought into existence 175 years ago. The Synod exists so individual churches in Holy Spirit-created fellowship with one another can encourage and even correct each other as together we hold fast to the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions and hold out their Gospel-centered message before others. Through the Synod, congregations collectively do a variety of things that they could not do so well by themselves.

The Synod's goal must never be to exist for the sake of existing. Our founders insisted that this organization should not become an end in itself. In a famous convention essay for the Iowa District, Walther warned about doing anything that might enlarge the Synod or District, yet at the same time fail to promote the kingdom of God. In fact, he wanted the Missouri Synod to bear in mind that it should wish to go out of existence rather than see the Lord's church come to harm by its continuance. What the Synod as a living member of Christ's body needs to do, Walther went on, is to reach poor lost sinners with the saving Gospel of Jesus Christ.

More than a hundred years later, Synod President A. L. Barry said much the same thing in the 1990s. Repeatedly he urged, "Keep the message straight, Missouri. Get the message out, Missouri."

Now, there's a way to celebrate the Synod's birthday! It is something for every day.

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