

CELEBRATING THE 175TH ANNIVERSARY OF WELS



“Look and see here a multitude from six church bodies which, only a few years ago, stood opposing each other—today they praise God and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ in one spirit with a single voice.”

– C. F. W. Walther, at the constituting convention of the Evangelical Lutheran Synodical Conference of North America in 1872

FINDING FELLOWSHIP

When the Wisconsin Synod was organized in 1850, two other German Lutheran synods were already in the area. Conservative Missouri Synod leaders were not initially impressed by what they saw. They knew that many of the early Wisconsin Synod congregations were functionally “union” congregations where Lutherans and Reformed worshiped together. It was also well-known that the Wisconsin Synod relied on help from unionist mission societies in Germany. Some Wisconsin leaders, such as the first synod president, Johannes Muehlhaeuser, held a mutual disdain for the Missourians and considered them to be too strict and unevangelical.

Matters only got worse when Wisconsin Synod pastors began serving splinter groups from Missouri Synod congregations. Missouri Synod leaders, such as C. F. W. Walther, printed harsh criticisms of the Wisconsin Synod. The younger generation of Wisconsin Synod pastors, including Johannes Bading (elected synod president in 1860), saw that most of these criticisms could not be ignored or downplayed and worked to bring the synod into better alignment with God’s Word.

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The Wisconsin Synod desired the godly goal of fellowship with fellow Christians who believed and taught God's Word faithfully. At first, it was hoped that connections with mission societies in Germany and other Lutheran synods in the eastern part of the United States would work out. But it soon became clear to most that faithful teaching and practice were often compromised for external forms of unity.

A turning point came in 1868 when the Wisconsin Synod cut ties with the mission societies.

The Wisconsin Synod reached out to Missouri Synod leaders to clarify its commitment to genuine Lutheran doctrine, and fellowship was established. Both sides rejoiced in their shared public confession of all the teachings of Scripture.

In July 1872, at Bading's congregation in Milwaukee, the Evangelical Lutheran Synodical Conference of North America held its constituting convention—a federation of six synods joining together: Missouri, Ohio, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Illinois, and Norwegian. It was the largest association of Lutherans in North America and provided many areas of cooperation to build God's kingdom for almost one hundred years.

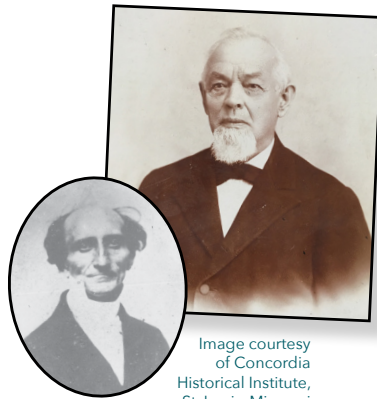


Image courtesy of Concordia Historical Institute, St. Louis, Missouri

Johannes Bading (top), president of the Wisconsin Synod, and C. F. W. Walther (bottom left), president of the Missouri Synod, were key players in the formation of the Evangelical Lutheran Synodical Conference of North America.

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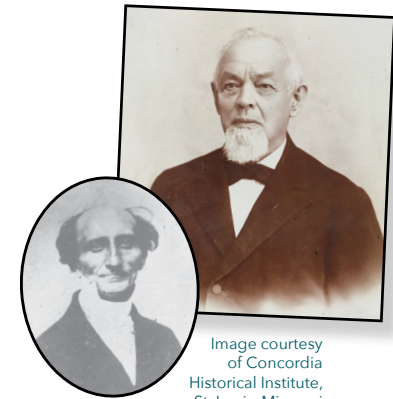


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