



# *Christ Through Us Companion Study*

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## **Leader's Guide**

|  |    |
|--|----|
| <b>Lesson 1.</b> Immigrants Bring Their Faith in Christ. ....          | 3  |
| (1830–1860)  |    |
| <b>Lesson 2.</b> The Young Synod Embraces Confessionalism. ....        | 7  |
| (1860–1890)  |    |
| <b>Lesson 3.</b> The Wisconsin Synod Remains Committed to Christ. .... | 9  |
| (1890–1914)  |    |
| <b>Lesson 4.</b> Perseverance in the Face of Challenges. ....          | 11 |
| (1914–1933)  |    |
| <b>Lesson 5.</b> Opportunities in a Changing World .....               | 13 |
| (1933–1963)  |    |
| <b>Lesson 6.</b> The Wisconsin Synod Comes Into Its Own .....          | 15 |
| (1963–1993)  |    |
| <b>Lesson 7.</b> A New Millennium: Still Christ Through Us. ....       | 16 |
| (1993–2025)  |    |

# How to Use This Study

## About

This study is designed to present 175 years of Wisconsin Synod history to adult students. It closely corresponds with the pictorial history book, *Christ Through Us* (Northwestern Publishing House, 2025).

This study is primarily a lecture-style study because the main goal is to present information likely unknown to your audience. Therefore, during the presentation, the appropriate questions are mostly “Type 1” questions that ensure the learners have taken in the key pieces of information they should remember and use later. At the end of each lesson, there are deeper questions that analyze the material and the historical or spiritual significance of the information learned in the lesson.

You, the instructor, are encouraged to adapt questions into learning activities as much as possible. (For example, take a regular question and add the direction “Take two minutes to discuss with the person next to you and be ready to share one thing with the group.”)

The lessons are designed to take 45-60 minutes to complete. The first 45 minutes are prepared for you here and cover a historic phase or “generation” in the synod’s history.

You are highly encouraged to fill the last 15 minutes by preparing your own research on the history of your congregation, its leaders, and its ministry that corresponds

to the time frame covered in the lesson. (See separate handouts for help on how to prepare a congregation’s history.)

If your congregation did not exist during the time frames of one or more chapters, consider adding other material from *Christ Through Us* since not everything could fit into each lesson. Alternatively, the study leader could incorporate the history of Lutheranism in the immediate area of the congregation to give context.

It is not recommended to attempt to add Bible readings and questions to the study unless you feel that your members need strengthening in basic areas of knowledge, such as on the biblical/Lutheran view of the sacraments, fellowship, etc.

## Preparation

Read the corresponding chapter to each lesson at least once (more is better). Each lesson goes with a specific chapter in chronological order.

Go through the slides several times and read any notes under the slides. It is not necessary (or possible) to read all of this information out loud during the presentation. Page numbers that correspond to the book are included. Print the slides as “note slides” for your leader guide for each lesson, or use the “presenter view” screen for reference.

*May God bless your efforts to tell some stories about his grace upon more than seven generations of the Wisconsin Synod!*



## Lesson 1.

# Immigrants Bring Their Faith in Christ (1830–1860)

### During the Lesson

1. What were the three kinds of Lutheranism?

Old

Mild

New

2. Which description best fits the Wisconsin Synod in its first years?

The Wisconsin Synod started off as a textbook case of Mild Lutheranism, with some of its founding fathers, such as Muehlhaeuser. But it definitely picked up more Old Lutheran convictions as time went on, especially concerning the importance of the Lutheran Confessions. This is a major theme of the first two lessons.

You may see that most of the things the Old Lutherans believed and practiced were correct. However, they had issues with application. For example, they could get legalistic in terms of adiaphora in worship practices, etc. You may also find that WELS has sought to maintain some sort of balance with evangelism and its application without compromising faithfulness to God's Word. A desire to "be all things to all people" is good, but has also had historic issues. This question could make for a good discussion about the need to balance faithfulness to God, his Word, and pure doctrine while speaking the truth in love to one another and the world.

3. What are the Lutheran Confessions?

A collection of doctrinal statements articulating the Lutheran church's beliefs and teachings.

These confessions are contained in the *Book of Concord* of 1580, which serves as the definitive standard of faith for Lutherans who subscribe to it.

4. What were the main reasons Germans emigrated to the United States during the 19th century?

Economic opportunities

To flee oppressive governments and military conscription

Freedom of religion



5. Why did Muehlhaeuser found another Lutheran synod in Wisconsin?

Koehler noted that Muehlhaeuser viewed the unfamiliar Old Lutheran “demand of adherence to all the Lutheran symbols” as “unevangelical and legalistic.” To some degree, Koehler agreed, stating that in the mid-19th century, “The [Old Lutherans’] introduction of the so-called Lutheran [worship] forms often was prompted by a false externalism that did not have a Gospel effect on the people.” Koehler contrasted the unionist attitude of devotion to “service of love for the sake of Master” with the confessionalists’ energy being totally devoted “to the establishment of sound doctrine and its own organization.” He added, “Outsiders were easily led to the assumption that the confessionalists were ruled by selfishness, and so charged them” (*The History of the Wisconsin Synod*, Koehler).

Old Lutherans seemed to prioritize organization and proper, orderly application of pure doctrine at the expense of the church’s other work.

6. The Wisconsin Synod was primarily founded by:

- a. Lutheran pioneers who migrated west from the original 13 colonies.
- b. Old Lutherans who immigrated from German lands to preserve their Lutheran faith and to flee persecution.
- c. German immigrants and pastors from mission societies.

(C is the correct answer.)

7. How did theological compromises arise in mixed Lutheran and Reformed congregations on the frontier?

Mixed congregations were formed out of convenience and indifference.

8. What were some of the problems that resulted?

Pure teaching and practice were set aside, and internal divisions and strife disrupted the means of grace ministries in the local congregation.

9. What were some of the major frontier challenges listed by Fachtmann?

(You can see if people remember some of the reasons, or simply give the answers here.)

Many large German settlements (without enough pastors to serve them).

“Sheep-stealing” Methodist circuit riders persistently tried to pull unshepherded Lutherans into their church.

Reluctance of Germans to give offerings to support a church and pastor. (Concerning money: Germans were used to having their church and pastor paid for by the state. The idea of paying to hear the gospel rubbed some the wrong way. Some were poor because they had spent all their wealth to immigrate and buy a plot of wilderness or to set up a business. It would take them years to clear the land and have any form of wealth. Others were simply cheap and stubborn.)

Lack of religious instruction for the youth—many were left unbaptized and unconfirmed for many years.

Note: All of these issues were common in the mid-19th century for Lutherans across the Midwest and beyond.

## Following the Lesson

1. List the major challenges facing the Wisconsin Synod in its first decade.

(You can't predict what order people will answer the questions in, so wait until most people are done answering, and then show the answers to check.)

Finding able and faithful pastors.

Doctrinal laxness and compromise.

Limited resources for a giant mission field.

2. Which one stands out to you as especially important to have addressed?

Answers vary. This question is subjective and meant to spark discussion.

3. How did the Wisconsin Synod endeavor to meet these challenges?

It relied on mission societies for pastors and candidates. (Note: The Wisconsin Synod did not have a seminary at this time.)

Young pastors pushed the synod to care more about correct doctrine and the Lutheran Confessions. (Note: Even Lutheran laypeople realized that doctrinal compromise was a false short-term win with a long-term loss.)

The synod called upon zealous individuals to serve as *Reiseprediger* (traveling/exploratory missionaries) until pastors could be found for the new congregations.

4. Describe how laypeople and called workers worked together to spread the gospel in the Wisconsin Synod in its infant years.

The laypeople worked together to organize congregations locally, support pastors and missions with offerings, and bring musical gifts to the church. The called workers preached the gospel, organized a synod to work together, and traveled long distances to seek the lost. Both sacrificed to make things work.

5. How can today's WELS members embody the missionary zeal of figures like Muehlhaeuser or Fachtmann in their own lives, workplaces, and communities?

Answers vary. We strive to have a zeal to spread the good news about Jesus despite great cost and effort. We do this out of love for our neighbor.

6. How might the early struggles of the Wisconsin Synod encourage modern WELS Lutherans to strengthen their commitment to pastoral training and supporting missions, both locally and abroad?

There is always a need, but God is always with us. It cost great risk and sacrifice in the past. We shouldn't fear the same price today. The universal priesthood and the holy Christian church are always there, but there is also a deep need for trained public ministers of the gospel to preach, teach, and properly administer the sacraments.

## Three Kinds of Lutherans

### Old Lutherans

**Traditionalist:**

Emphasized strict adherence to the original teachings of Martin Luther and the historic Lutheran Confessions (e.g., the Augsburg Confession, the Formula of Concord).

**Liturgical Conservatism:**

Held to traditional forms of worship, rejecting innovations or changes influenced by modernity.

**Opposed to Unionism:**

Strongly resisted attempts to merge or unify with other Protestant traditions (e.g., the Prussian Union of Churches).

**Orthodox Doctrine:**

Stressed pure Lutheran doctrine, focusing heavily on justification by faith and the real presence in Communion.

### Mild Lutherans

**Moderate Approach:**

Represented a middle ground between strict application of doctrine and lax liberal theology.

**Pragmatic in Doctrine:**

While affirming Lutheran principles, they showed more openness to dialogue and collaboration with other Protestant groups.

**Flexible Worship**

**Practices:** Less rigid in liturgical traditions, allowing for some adaptations or simplifications in church practices.

**Balance:** Sought a balance between faithfulness to Lutheran heritage and responsiveness to contemporary needs and evangelism.

### New Lutherans

**Progressive Theology:**

Advocated for a more modern interpretation of Lutheran doctrine, often influenced by rationalism and Enlightenment ideas or broader Protestantism (e.g., the Second Great Awakening).

**Innovative Worship:**

Open to significant changes in liturgical practices, sometimes moving away from traditional forms altogether (e.g., New Measures).

**Ecumenical Spirit:**

Strongly favored ecumenism and union with other Protestant denominations, often at the expense of distinctively Lutheran teachings.

**Doctrinal Liberalism:**

Downplayed or reinterpreted some historic Lutheran doctrines to align with broader Protestant or modern theological trends (e.g., the sacraments, Sabbath, conversion, etc.)



## Lesson 2

# The Young Synod Embraces Confessionalism (1860–1890)

### During the Lesson

1. What concerned Bading about the assassination of Abraham Lincoln?

It deprived the nation of its leader.

He deemed Lincoln's attendance at a comedy play on Good Friday both inappropriate and a poor place for his thoughts on the Day of Atonement (Good Friday), but he placed his hope for Lincoln in the mercy of God, who died for the sins of the whole world.

Note: Traditionally, Lutherans have set aside Good Friday and abstained from lighthearted activities to contemplate our Savior's suffering and death to pay for our sins.

Lincoln's sudden death was also a reminder for people to be prepared for their own unexpected deaths.

2. Why did the small Wisconsin Synod decide it needed its own seminary institution?

There continued to be a high demand for more pastors every year.

Other sources were unreliable or inadequate.

3. How did the Wisconsin Synod come to a stronger public confession of the Word?

It stopped giving only lip service to being a confessional Lutheran body.

It broke formal ties to other groups that lacked the same strong commitment to God's Word and Lutheran doctrine.

It prioritized the allocation of resources for quality training of pastors at Northwestern University and Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary.

4. What does it mean for church bodies to be in fellowship with one another?

It means that independent organizations of the visible church recognize that there are no divisions between synods on what is publicly confessed and taught as God's truth.

Synods in fellowship cooperate in ministry efforts such as mission work, publications, and ministerial education.

Pastors and teachers from synods in fellowship with one another are welcome to preach and teach in the others' congregations.



5. How did the maturing Wisconsin Synod show the importance of education during this period?

Early on, the synod strongly recommended school programs for children to learn God's Word.

The synod established a preparatory high school and college to train called workers.

The synod prioritized quality education in its seminary to provide well-equipped pastors to spread the gospel.

6. What were the fears about the language used to describe God's election unto grace?

"God chose to give some the gift of faith."

This sounded to some as if God must also be responsible for those who don't believe and are damned.

"God chose those he saw would someday have faith."

This gives some credit for salvation to the person who believes, not to God alone.

Wisconsin went with Walther and Missouri, while the Ohio and Norwegian Synods left the Synodical Conference.

## Following the Lesson

1. How can modern WELS congregations address challenges of growth and outreach today, while maintaining a strong focus on doctrine, as the synod did in its formative years?

Answers will vary.

2. How can WELS members today remain vigilant in preserving theological clarity in a world where many religious movements emphasize inclusivity over doctrine?

Answers will vary.





## Lesson 3

# The Wisconsin Synod Remains Committed to Christ (1890–1914)

## During the Lesson

1. What compelled the Wisconsin Synod (the church) to push back against the overreach of the state?

The Bennett Law would have severely hampered the ability of the German-speaking Wisconsin Synod to operate its own schools and teach the Word of God to its children.

The spiritual realm has the duty to preserve and define its role to spread the gospel against interference by the temporal realm.

2. How can your words of encouragement to a person to enter the public ministry have a huge impact?

Words of encouragement to a person you think may have the gifts to spread the gospel can impact countless lives, possibly for many generations.

3. What was the Wauwatosa Theology?

An emphasis on continually returning to the Scriptures in their original languages to address ministry settings and situations.

It stressed the importance of historical theology while cautioning against a “copy and paste” approach to using the past.

An emphasis that guarded against legalism and formalism, balanced with tying Christian freedom to the law of love.

Rejected any approach that exalted human reason over Scripture.

## Following the Lesson

1. Review: What four synods formed the joint, or federation, synod?

Wisconsin

Minnesota

Michigan

Nebraska



2. How can WELS continue to prioritize Christian education in an age where secularism and nonreligious schooling dominate?

Answers will vary.

3. What lessons can we learn from our forefathers' willingness to stand up to state regulations that interfered with their ministry?

Answers will vary. We must focus on our God-given task to spread and share the gospel. Part of this is teaching the Word in our childcare centers and schools. While we respect God's "left hand" in the temporal realm, we dare not ignore threats from state regulations that hinder our ministry. We have the right and duty to tell governing authorities when they are out of line.

4. What legacies do the institutions established in this period have for us today?

A broader fellowship of believers outside of one region who collaborate in ministry efforts.

These same schools continue to prepare workers to share the gospel among us. (The institutions remain, even if the locations and names have changed).

A reminder to spread the gospel abroad.

A reliable resource for religious materials in NPH.



## Lesson 4

# Perseverance in the Face of Challenges (1914–1933)

### During the Lesson

1. What did many Wisconsin Synod Lutherans dislike about the US involvement in World War I?

They feared that most Americans were getting one-sided information that was propaganda against Germany.

They resisted the government's attempts to influence the message from their pulpits.

They were opposed to the draft.

2. What impact did World War I have on the Wisconsin Synod?

Many congregations began adding English-language services.

Many WELS men faithfully served their country in the war.

The synod increasingly made English-language materials.

The steady stream of German immigration was halted—outreach increasingly focused on English-language home missions.

3. What was the Protes'tant Controversy?

In the 1920s several cases about concerns over proper doctrine and practice drew passionate attention from Wisconsin Synod pastors and leaders.

Suspensions of several pastors were protested by others, leading to several dozen called workers and congregations leaving the synod.

4. What were the major challenges the Wisconsin Synod faced in the 1910s through 1930s?

World War I

The Protes'tant Controversy

The Great Depression and synod debt



5. How did the synod persevere and become strengthened by these ordeals?

The synod more firmly realized the need to work in English among its neighbors.

The synod grew in its commitment to clear expressions of doctrine while being focused on the mission of building the kingdom of God with the gospel.

The synod grew in its appreciation of what can be done when we work together to face challenges and meet opportunities.

## Following the Lesson

1. What lessons can we learn about facing challenges as Christians, like the ones in this lesson?

Answers will vary. Some challenges may have some specific scriptural applications.

World War I and language/identity change: Be all things to all people for the sake of the gospel.

Protest'ant Controversy: Speak the truth in love; "blessed are the peacemakers."

Great Depression: Godliness with contentment is great gain. Our fates are in the strength of God's hands, not ours.



## Lesson 5

# Opportunities in a Changing World (1933–1963)

### During the Lesson

1. In what ways did World War II affect the Wisconsin Synod?

Most tensions seen during World War I did not reappear in major ways.

WELS still kept the commitment to serve the spiritual needs of its service members outside the government's chaplain program.

Ministry activity was hampered by wartime restrictions and upheaval.

Americans adopted a more global mindset that WELS channeled into missions after the war.

2. Where did the Wisconsin Synod focus its mission efforts in the postwar era?

Home Missions

Midwest

West

Florida

World Missions

German refugees

West and Central Africa

Japan

3. What were the main tension points leading to the break with the Missouri Synod?

Disagreement on the proper applications of the doctrine of church fellowship in many areas.

Erosion of the authority of the Bible in Missouri Synod institutions.

WELS concerns not being adequately responded to over many years.

4. What were major developments in the aftermath of the break with Missouri?

WELS resolved that the decision was necessary, even if painfully difficult.

Liberal theology in the LCMS led to a "civil war" that sadly still has not been fully resolved or healed to this day.

WELS gained a number of faithful theologians and congregations from the LCMS.



## Following the Lesson

1. How can the lessons from the postwar mission expansion of WELS inspire modern efforts to reach underserved or unreached areas worldwide?

Answers will vary.

2. What lessons can WELS learn from its decision to prioritize doctrine over unity when engaging with other Christian denominations today?

Answers will vary.

3. How can WELS schools and congregations today balance their rich heritage with the need to appeal to future generations?

Answers will vary.



## Lesson 6

# The Wisconsin Synod Comes Into Its Own (1963–1993)

### During the Lesson

1. What major campaign did WELS undertake after the break with the Missouri Synod?  
“Every state by ‘78”
2. What was the response of WELS to the social issues of the 1960s and 1970s?  
To keep the church’s focus on its mission of spreading the gospel without suggesting solutions best carried out by the state.  
To encourage its own members to be active citizens to seek peace, justice, and the welfare of others.
3. What were some of the other major projects WELS undertook between 1963 and 1993?  
Expanding world missions.  
Growing fellowship with other Lutherans in the nation and the world.  
Publishing doctrinal statements, a new catechism, and a new hymnal.

### Following the Lesson

1. How can WELS congregations effectively address today’s cultural challenges while remaining faithful to Scripture?  
Answers will vary.
2. What lessons can WELS learn from its decision to prioritize doctrine over external unity when engaging with other Christian denominations today?  
Answers will vary.
3. How can WELS balance its local and global mission efforts today, ensuring that resources are effectively used to spread the gospel?  
Answers will vary.





## Lesson 7

# A New Millennium: Still Christ Through Us (1993–2025)

### During the Lesson

1. What efforts suffered when our synod lacked offerings?

Missions

Worker training

2. Where has our synod's ministry grown in the most recent generation?

Increased home missions, especially in growing urban areas.

Continued world missions, such as new fields in Vietnam.

In a growing fellowship around the world (CELC).

3. What were some of the synod's most recent projects?

Catechism

Hymnal/Psalter

Anniversary resources (Reformation 500 and WELS 175)

### Following the Lesson

1. How have you benefited from reflecting on our synod's 175-year history?

Answers will vary.

2. What about our current lives as WELS Christians do you anticipate telling the next generation?

Answers will vary.

3. How can WELS members today become more personally involved in mission efforts?

Answers will vary.

4. How can WELS members today work to ensure that the synod's legacy of "Christ through us" continues for future generations?

Answers will vary.

