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A Quarter-Century of Interchurch Relations: 1935-1960

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A Quarter-Century of Interchurch Relations: 1935—1960

By ALFRED O. FUERBRINGER
and MARTIN H. FRANZMANN

IN the latter part of 1960 the Synodical Committee on Doctrinal Unity observed the 25th anniversary of its appointment and organization. This would seem, therefore, to be a fitting time to survey that area of our Synod's history in which this committee's activities fall and to attempt an assessment of the committee's activities in that area during the past 25 years.

1935 (CLEVELAND)

The committee came into being in 1935, when the Cleveland convention of The Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod received overtures from both the American Lutheran Church and the United Lutheran Church expressing the desire to confer with The Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod with a view to establishing closer relationships and eventually pulpit and altar fellowship. The convention resolved "that we declare our willingness to confer with other Lutheran bodies on problems of Lutheran union with a view toward effecting true unity on the basis of the Word of God and the Lutheran Confessions"¹ and authorized the appointment of a committee of five to conduct these conferences, the committee "to be known as the Committee on Lutheran Church Union" ('35, 121). Among the reasons given for this positive response to the invitations from other Lu-

¹ *Proceedings*, 1935, p. 221. All references in text are to *Proceedings* of respective year and page.

therans were the fact that Synod "has always recognized the duty and the desirability of the 'conservation and promotion of the unity of the true faith (Eph. 4:3-6; 1 Cor. 1, 10) and a unified defense against schism and sectarianism'" (ibid.), and the conviction that "God-pleasing, Scriptural external union and co-operation is based upon internal unity, oneness of faith, confession, doctrine, and practise" (ibid.). An amendment from the floor provided "that this Committee confer with the other members of the Synodical Conference and keep them informed in this matter." (Ibid.)

1938 (ST. LOUIS)

This committee reported on its activity to the 1938 convention in St. Louis. The two meetings held with the representatives of the United Lutheran Church had disclosed agreement on the doctrine of conversion and election as contained in *A Brief Statement*; but no agreement had been reached "on the fundamental doctrine of inspiration" ('38, 233). The Synod expressed its willingness to continue the conferences with the representatives of the United Lutheran Church, with the caveat "that these negotiations must not be interpreted as implying that Synod has changed its position in any of the doctrines discussed" (ibid.). No further meetings were held. ('41, 286)

After six meetings with the committee of the American Lutheran Church the

Committee on Lutheran Church Union could report: "We feel we must thank God for what has been accomplished, and it is with heartfelt gratitude that we render this report" ('38, 227). After much discussion the Synod resolved "That Synod declare that *The Brief Statement*, together with *The Declaration* of the representatives of the American Lutheran Church and the provisions of this entire report of Committee No. 16 now being read and with Synod's action thereupon, be regarded as the doctrinal basis for *future church fellowship* between the Missouri Synod and the American Lutheran Church."² The Convention provided that the Committee on Lutheran Church Union be continued ('38, 233) and requested the committee to work for "full agreement" on the "points of non-fundamental doctrines mentioned in *The Declaration* of the American Lutheran Church (Antichrist, the conversion of the Jews, the physical resurrection of the martyrs, the fulfillment of the thousand years)" and to strive to attain "uniform and Scripturally acceptable terminology and teaching" in regard to the doctrine of the church and agreement in practice ('38, 231, 232). The convention also stipulated that "as far as the Missouri Synod is concerned, this whole matter must be submitted for approval to the other Synods of the Synodical Conference." ('38, 232)

1941 (FORT WAYNE)

By the time of the Fort Wayne convention in 1941 the picture had changed. There was considerable disappointment over the developments of the preceding three years, and the optimism of 1938 gave

² *Proceedings*, 1938, p. 231. Italics in original.

way to a more somber and realistic attitude. The Committee on Lutheran Union reported that they had intended "to engage in thorough discussion of the five points mentioned in *The Declaration* of the American Lutheran Church Commission" but had been unable to do so because "the discussion was directed into other channels by certain resolutions of the American Lutheran Church adopted . . . at its convention in Sandusky in October, 1938" ('41, 277). These Sandusky Resolutions contained items which in the opinion of the committee required discussion "more urgently than the other points mentioned," namely,

- a. The statement that it is neither possible nor necessary to agree in all nonfundamental doctrines;
- b. The declaration that the American Lutheran Church will not give up its membership in the American Lutheran Conference;
- c. The phrase "in the light of" occurring in the sentence "We believe that the *Brief Statement* viewed in the light of our *Declaration* is not in contradiction to the Minneapolis Theses." [Ibid.]

Another disturbing factor was the fact that the American Lutheran Church had in 1939 adopted a statement (known as *The Pittsburgh Agreement*) in common with the United Lutheran Church which the committee found "not adequate because it contains loopholes for a denial of verbal inspiration and inerrancy of the Scriptures" ('41, 279). The situation was further complicated by the fact the other synods of the Synodical Conference, with whose representatives the Committee on Lutheran Union of Missouri Synod had held several meetings, considered the basis for the establishment of fellowship contained in

the 1938 Resolutions to be inadequate ('41, 279). The Synodical Conference memorialized the 1941 convention of the Missouri Synod urging that fellowship with the American Lutheran Church "should not be established until all our bodies are convinced that there is real unity of faith between the American Lutheran Church and the Synodical Conference" and that "the Missouri Committee earnestly . . . consider the advisability of bringing about the framing of one document of agreement." ('41, 287)

The convention took a realistic but hopeful view of the situation. While filled with "deep regret that the Lutheran Church of our country is not united," it also resolved to "express . . . gratitude to God for whatever progress by the testimony of His truth has been accomplished in the direction of doctrinal unity" ('41, 301). It resolved to rename its committee as the Committee on Doctrinal Unity in the Lutheran Church of America; it expressed its willingness to continue "efforts toward bringing about true unity in the Lutheran Church of this country both in doctrine and practice, but . . . only on the basis of the Word of God and the Lutheran Confessions" (ibid.); it resolved to ask the other synods of the Synodical Conference to join it in seeking not organic union as the immediate objective but doctrinal unity among Lutherans in America; and it instructed its committee to prepare, together with the representatives of the American Lutheran Church, one new joint document which should take account of misgivings expressed concerning previous statements and be in harmony with *The Brief Statement* and wholly loyal to the Scriptures. ('41, 302)

1944 (SAGINAW)

To the Saginaw convention of 1944 the committee reported that, except for the Slovak Evangelical Lutheran Church (the present Synod of Evangelical Lutheran Churches), the other synods of the Synodical Conference had "declared that it was impossible for them to participate" in discussions with representatives of the American Lutheran Church and in the preparation of the desiderated single document ('44, 228). The Missouri Synod Committee had held only one meeting with the ALC representatives in the course of the triennium, 1938—41, and that a very brief one, lasting but half a day ('44, 227). The Mendota Resolutions of the American Lutheran Church (October 1942), expressing the willingness of that body to establish pulpit and altar fellowship with both the United Lutheran Church and the Missouri Synod, or either one of them, on the basis of existing documents of agreement, presented itself to the committee as a difficulty in the way of union which would have to be overcome (ibid.) and made the framing of a single document of agreement all the more necessary. At the time of the writing of the committee's report arrangements had been made for "subcommittees of the two commissions (ALC and Missouri Synod) to meet for the framing of one doctrinal agreement" ('44, 230). The committee could also report that in accordance with the wish expressed by the Fort Wayne convention a considerable number of local conferences between the clergy of the American Lutheran Church and the Missouri Synod had been held for the discussion of doctrinal issues. The committee was of the opinion that "much good

was accomplished at these conferences" and was hopeful that many more such meetings would take place. (Ibid.)

The convention expressed hope for an early completion of the one document and recommended the continuation of inter-synodical conferences. The membership of the Committee on Doctrinal Unity was increased to eight (to consist of three theological professors, three pastors, and two laymen) (ibid.). The convention responded to the overture of the Wisconsin Synod and the Norwegian Synod ('44, 250, 251) as follows:

With regard to the overture concerning the objections raised by our brethren in the Norwegian and the Wisconsin Synod, we *recommend* that Synod respectfully call the attention of our brethren to the *Proceedings* of the Fort Wayne Convention, where the request of the brethren was fully respected, page 303, paragraph 9: "That, after favorable action has been taken by our Synod and the American Lutheran Church in reference to the one doctrinal agreement prepared, our Synod take no further action with the American Lutheran Church until our Synod has submitted the entire matter to our sister synods in the Synodical Conference and the American Lutheran Church has submitted the entire matter to its sister synods in the American Lutheran Conference, and all this has resulted in favorable action. ['44, 252]

At this convention the question of participation in the National Lutheran Council was raised. The convention declined to participate on the ground that "membership . . . would apparently involve our Synod in unionistic principles and endeavors beyond a mere co-operation in externals and thus violate Scriptural principles which we are bound to observe" ('44, 252) but envisioned co-operation with the National Lutheran Council "in

such matters as involve no violation of conscience and no denial of the truth." (Ibid.)

1947 (CHICAGO)

The document known as *The Doctrinal Affirmation* was an attempt to combine the content of *A Brief Statement* and *The Declaration*; it was prepared by the Committee on Doctrinal Unity with representatives of the American Lutheran Church at the request of the Missouri Synod, in response to the urgings of the sister synods of the Synodical Conference. The document was formulated in the closing weeks of the triennium 1941—44 and could not therefore be acted on by the 1944 convention. It had meanwhile been circulated in both church bodies. It had been received without enthusiasm in the American Lutheran Church, and the "Clarifications" submitted by the Missouri Committee after consultation with the synods of the Synodical Conference had the effect of making the document even less acceptable to the American Lutheran Church. The 1947 convention took note of the fact that "all efforts to unite the contents of *A Brief Statement* and *The Declaration* by means of *The Doctrinal Affirmation* have admittedly been unsatisfactory" ('47, 510). The convention made a *de novo* approach by declaring that "the 1938 resolutions . . . no longer be considered as a basis for the purpose of establishing fellowship with the American Lutheran Church "and by calling for a new instrument," one document which is Scriptural, clear, concise, and unequivocal." (Ibid.)

The 1947 convention made no change in the relationship of the Missouri Synod to the National Lutheran Council; it declined membership but professed "willing-

ness to co-operate in matters agreeing with Synod's principles" ('47, 536). The one new feature in this area was the resolution "that a committee . . . be appointed by the *Praesidium* and the Board of Directors to continue to study the question of our relationship as a participating body in the National Lutheran Council and report its findings to the next synodical convention, after having submitted its findings to all pastors and congregations six months prior to the convention." ('47, 536, 537)

1950 (MILWAUKEE)

The 1947 convention had requested the Committee on Doctrinal Unity to strive, in its dealings with the American Lutheran Church, for "one document which is Scriptural, clear, concise, and unequivocal" ('47, 510). To this request the committee responded at the 1950 convention by submitting for adoption *The Common Confession*, prepared by subcommittees of the American Lutheran Church's Committee on Intersynodical Fellowship and the Missouri Synod's Committee on Doctrinal Unity and approved in a plenary session of the two committees on Dec. 6, 1949. After much discussion the convention accepted *The Common Confession* as in harmony with the Scriptures in the doctrines treated, to be recognized as a "statement of agreement on these doctrines between us and the American Lutheran Church" if accepted by the American Lutheran Church at its convention ('50, 585). The convention made provision for the formulation of further articles if "further study of future developments should show" the need of "clarification or expansion" ('50, 585, 586). The convention also proposed that "the President, the Vice-President, and the District

Presidents of our church endeavor to hold conferences with the President, Vice-Presidents, and District Presidents of the honorable American Lutheran Church" to survey the problems in the field of church practice and "to see how uniformity in church practice can be brought about" ('50, 586). And finally the convention requested the President of Synod "to place this matter before the Synodical Conference in order to secure the consent of the constituent synods to the actions outlined in these resolutions" and to request the President of the American Lutheran Church to take similar steps to secure the approval and acceptance of the sister synods of the American Lutheran Church. ('50, 587)

The mounting tensions within the Synodical Conference are reflected in *The Questions Asked by the Hon. Wisconsin Synod*, questions relating to fellowship and co-operation practices within the Missouri Synod, and *The Appeal of the Norwegian Synod* ('50, 666—668), which was concerned with the question of co-operation in externals, prayer fellowship, and the advisability of calling for a free conference of all Lutherans. The last item referred to Dr. J. W. Behnken's call for a free conference of all Lutherans in America, issued at the request of the College of Presidents of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod in their meeting of May 6, 1949 ('50, 565, 566). The National Lutheran Editors Association had at its meeting in September 1948 passed a resolution calling upon the Lutheran synods to meet in free conferences. The American Lutheran Conference at its meeting of November 1948 also recommended that its constituent bodies petition the National Lutheran Conference to call an all-Lutheran free conference; in

March 1949 the Executive Committee of the American Lutheran Conference again went on record as favoring the calling of an all-Lutheran free conference. The Church Council of the Evangelical Lutheran Church had in February 1949 also expressed the hope that the all-Lutheran conferences proposed by the American Lutheran Conference might become a reality. None of these proposals or requests eventuated in the calling of free conferences of all Lutherans.

Two other items of this convention, more loosely related to the work of the Committee on Doctrinal Unity, call for brief mention. The relationship of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod to the National Lutheran Council remained unchanged ('50, 692). The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Former Old Prussia (popularly known as the Breslau Synod) was welcomed into fellowship. ('50, 665, 666)

1953 (HOUSTON)

The provision made by the Milwaukee convention in 1950 for the formulation of further articles of agreement with the American Lutheran Church, as "further study or future developments" might "show the need of clarification or expansion," led to the drawing up of Part II of *The Common Confession* by the representatives of the American Lutheran Church and The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. Chief among the developments that led to the framing of Part II were the reactions to *The Common Confession*, Part I, on the part of the sister synods of the Synodical Conference. The Slovak Evangelical Church expressed "its agreement with the doctrines set forth in *The Common Confession*" and granted "its consent to the

course of action as outlined in the resolution of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod" but gave seven suggestions for improvement in the wording of the document ('53, 497). The Norwegian Synod declined to give its consent to *The Common Confession* as a settlement of the doctrinal differences between the Synodical Conference and the American Lutheran Church and entreated The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod to reconsider its adoption of *The Common Confession* and "to discontinue negotiations with the American Lutheran Church except on the basis of a full acceptance of *The Brief Statement*" ('53, 495, 496). The Wisconsin Synod resolved to concur in the findings of its Standing Committee on Church Union (which found "a number of serious omissions in the articles dealing with doctrines that have been in controversy") and to "inform The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod that we not only find *The Common Confession* to be inadequate in the points noted . . . but that we also hold that the adoption of *The Common Confession* by The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod involves an untruth and creates a basically untruthful situation, since this action has been officially interpreted as a settlement of past differences which are in fact not settled." The Wisconsin Synod therefore asked The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod "to repudiate its stand that *The Common Confession* is a settlement of the doctrines treated by two committees" ('53, 496, 497). The following resolution of the Wisconsin Synod is also significant:

- a. That we direct the attention of our sister Synod of Missouri to the position which the American Lutheran Church has taken in the Friendly Invitation . . . with the remark contending for "an

area where there exists an allowable and wholesome latitude of theological opinion on the basis of the teaching of the Word of God," and that we indicate to the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod that this position of the American Lutheran Church challenges the clarity and therefore the authority of the Scriptures (Ps. 119:105). This can only cause confusion and disturbance in the church. Therefore negotiations should be suspended.

- b. That we further indicate to the sister Synod of Missouri that not until the American Lutheran Church recognizes this as the basic problem which must first be considered and settled, will the obstacle to the renewal of doctrinal discussions have been removed. ('53, 497)

The Houston convention postponed action on Part II of *The Common Confession* because the document had appeared too late (spring of 1953) to allow either the members of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod or the sister synods of the Synodical Conference to study and evaluate it ('53, 528). The convention further resolved "that for purposes of study, Parts I and II of *The Common Confession* hereafter be treated as one document with the understanding that Part II has not yet been adopted." ('53, 528)

The convention urged the Committee on Doctrinal Unity to continue discussions with the representatives of the American Lutheran Church and authorized further meetings of the Committee on Doctrinal Unity, the Praesidium, and the District Presidents with corresponding representatives of the American Lutheran Church ('53, 535). The Committee on Doctrinal Unity was now given the status of a standing committee. ('53, 533)

With regard to the National Lutheran Council the Houston convention reaffirmed

the resolution of 1950, declining membership in the council but expressing willingness to co-operate wherever such co-operation was possible "without compromising Scriptural principles" ('53, 557). The Committee on the National Lutheran Council also dealt with the invitation to membership in the Lutheran World Federation and recommended that "the membership invitation to the Lutheran World Federation should receive the studious consideration of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod in the Scriptural light of the need for oneness as well as in the Scriptural light of the need for doctrinal faithfulness in order that a God-pleasing answer may ensue at our 1956 convention" ('53, 562). The convention resolved that the *Praesidium* of Synod should appoint a committee of three to study the constitution and objectives of the Lutheran World Federation, evaluate the practical working of this body, and make recommendations regarding membership in, or the extent of possible co-operation with, the Lutheran World Federation. This committee was requested to submit its findings and recommendations to the College of Presidents by September 1954 and to all pastors and congregations by Jan. 1, 1955, for study with a view to action at Synod's general convention in 1956. ('53, 563)

1956 (ST. PAUL)

The 1956 convention recognized *The Common Confession*, Parts I and II, as a statement in harmony with the sacred Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions but resolved "that hereafter *The Common Confession* (Parts I and II) be not regarded or employed as a functioning basic document toward the establishing of altar

and pulpit fellowship with other church bodies." ('56, 505)

Relations with the Wisconsin Synod and the Norwegian Synod had meanwhile become strained to the breaking point.³ The convention reacted to this situation with a long resolution on intersynodical relations ('56, 516, 517). This resolution expressed regret for any lovelessness or lack of brotherliness on the part of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod in intersynodical relations, gratefully acknowledged all expressions of concern and guidance in matters of doctrine and practice which had come from brethren in the Synodical Conference, pleaded with the sister synods to accept fraternal expressions in the same spirit, suggested that all members of the Synodical Conference "study and work together toward the goal of producing jointly one clear, comprehensive statement concerning doctrine and practice for today on the basis of Scripture and in dynamic conformity with the Lutheran Confessions," and authorized the Committee on Doctrinal Unity to represent The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod in drawing up such a statement.

The delineation of the duties of the Committee on Doctrinal Unity, to be set forth in the *Handbook*, was approved by this convention ('56, 485, 486). When the convention declined the invitation to membership in the Lutheran World Federation, on the basis of the report of an especially

³ Cf. *Proceedings*, 1956, pp. 505—514, for action on the part of the Wisconsin Synod and the Norwegian Synod over against The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. For the Synodical Conference's "Request and Petition" to The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod regarding ways and means of re-establishing harmony in the Synodical Conference, see pp. 514—516.

appointed committee ('56, 538), but provided "that Synod express its willingness to meet with official representatives of the LWF to discuss all points in question," the Committee on Doctrinal Unity was designated to represent The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod in meetings with the officials of the Lutheran World Federation (*ibid.*). This was in accord with the provisions in the description of the duties of the committee: "It shall be the duty of this committee to represent our Synod in *official* contacts with other Lutheran churches and synods for 'the conservation and promotion of the true faith and a united defense against schism and sectarianism' (Constitution, Article III)." ('56, 485)

The convention declined the invitation of the United Lutheran Church and the Augustana Synod "to designate duly authorized representatives to meet with the commissions of our two churches . . . to consider such organic union as will give real evidence of our unity in the faith, and to proceed to draft a constitution and devise organizational procedures to effect union," on the ground that "organic union should not be considered before doctrinal unity has been established." ('56, 519)

1959 (SAN FRANCISCO)

The Committee on Doctrinal Unity submitted to the San Francisco convention two fruits of the joint work of the Synodical Conference committees authorized by the 1956 convention, a "Statement on Scripture" and a "Statement on the Antichrist." The Synod adopted the "Statement on Scripture" but deferred action on the "Statement on Antichrist" ('59, 189, 190). The convention commended the Committee on Doctrinal Unity for its work

in the area of the Synodical Conference and requested the committee "to face all issues confronting the members of the Synodical Conference, and by God's grace, help to resolve them." ('59, 186)

The Committee on Doctrinal Unity had sponsored a Theologians' Conference at Oakland, Calif., just prior to the 1959 convention, in order to establish closer and more active contact between Lutherans already in fellowship with The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. The convention recognized the value of the conference and encouraged and authorized the Committee on Doctrinal Unity "to continue such efforts." ('59, 187, 188)

The convention invited the National Evangelical Lutheran Church to establish organic union with The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod and instructed the Finnish Relations Committee and the Committee on Doctrinal Unity to arrange the necessary meetings with the National Evangelical Lutheran Church ('59, 187). At this convention the India Evangelical Lutheran Church was recognized as a sister church. ('59, 165)

Action on the question of affiliation with the Lutheran World Federation was deferred until the report of the Committee on Doctrinal Unity on its discussions with officials of the Lutheran World Federation should be available ('59, 196, 197). Action was also deferred on the question of participation in the National Lutheran Council, pending a report from the Committee on Doctrinal Unity, which was planning an exploratory meeting with officials of the National Lutheran Council ('59, 197). The convention also instructed the Committee on Doctrinal Unity to invite representatives of The American Lutheran

Church (The ALC) to meet for the purpose of seeking a God-pleasing unity and fellowship and resolved that "the sister synods of the Synodical Conference be invited to join in this endeavor." ('59, 196, 197)

At the 1959 convention, for the first time in these 25 years, official contact with non-Lutheran Christians was envisaged. The convention resolved that The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod should be represented by official observers at the 1961 assembly of the World Council of Churches, that there be official representatives at other similar conventions, such as that of the National Association of Evangelicals and the Lutheran World Federation, and "that the arrangements for such representation be made by the Praesidium of the Synod in consultation with the Committee on Doctrinal Unity." ('59, 197, 198)

* * * *

As one looks back over these 25 years, one is not moved to make dramatic statements. For these years have not produced striking "results." But one can make a number of observations on persistent trends and constant characteristics of the committee's activities during this quarter century. First, during these 25 years The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod has, through the work of this committee, endeavored to live up faithfully to the ideal set forth in the first paragraph of Article III of the Synodical Constitution: "The objects of Synod are:

"1. The conservation and promotion of the unity of the true faith (Eph. 4:3-6; 1 Cor. 1:10) and a united defense against schism and sectarianism (Rom. 16:17)." It has done this in the face of criticism and

disappointing experiences in almost every area and in spite of its own sometimes uncertain and halting steps. It has emphasized the need of deep and thoroughgoing agreement in doctrine and practice for church fellowship and has always been ready to meet with others to discuss doctrine and practice on the basis of the Holy Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions. Where it could co-operate in externals without violation of its principles, it has done so.

2. The Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod has through its committee worked consistently at the articulation of its theology in the endeavor to make it relevant to the age and the situation to which the church must address itself. While recognizing and upholding the value of *A Brief Statement*, it has not hesitated to authorize commentaries on, or restatements of, that document (*The Doctrinal Affirmation, The Common Confession*, the Synodical Conference "Statement on Scripture") where such restatements appeared necessary or salutary.

3. The sincere interest of The Lutheran

Church — Missouri Synod in its fellow Lutherans and fellow Christians is illustrated by the enlargement of the committee (it has grown from five members to eight and finally to ten) and by steady enlargement of the scope of its work. The committee is now actually in contact or seeking contact, in one way or another, with the Synodical Conference, the American Lutheran Church, the National Lutheran Council, the Lutheran World Federation, the World Council of Churches, and the National Association of Evangelicals. And it is seeking to exploit further the existing ties of fellowship the world over; the Thiensville Theologians' Conference of the summer of 1960 should be added to the record in this area.

4. The Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod has sought, not always successfully but (it must be said) conscientiously, to play its difficult role as the senior and major member of the Synodical Conference with sincere and sensitive regard for the concerns of its sister synods.

St. Louis, Mo.