

14

THE NATIONAL EV. LUTHERAN CHURCH'S
40 YEARS OF FELLOWSHIP
WITH THE MISSOURI SYNOD -
BENEFICIAL, DETRIMENTAL, OR BOTH?

A Church History Thesis
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Outline

- I. Early history of the NELC p.1
- II. 40 years of fellowship with LC-MS p.2
- III. Was the merger necessary? p. 6

The annals of American Lutheran Church history contain many stories of the struggles of small church bodies to survive. One of these stories concerns the National Ev. Lutheran Church (NELC), a Finnish church body which was a small, yet active force in American confessional Lutheranism until 1963, when it merged with the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. In fellowship with Missouri since 1923, the NELC spent forty years working with Missouri as a separate, independent body. These years were years in which Missouri served the primary role of nurturing the NELC. Unfortunately, these years also saw the end of the NELC through the influence of its Missouri-trained pastors. We intend to look at these years and see that while the merger might have seemed a worthy cause to pursue, it was not really necessary, and that by taking a few bold steps, the NELC could have possibly still been with us today.

I

To get an idea of what led up to the 1923 fellowship with Missouri, we will look very briefly at the history of the NELC. As Finns immigrated to America in the late 1800's, they naturally brought over various ideas of what a church should be. One group which believed in carrying out the policies of the state church of Finland, which was Lutheran, organized the Suomi Synod. Another group was totally opposed to this concept and believed lay preachers and total congregational independence was the answer. These were the Laestadians, or the Apostolic Lutherans. The final group, the eventual NELC, fit in somewhere in between. They were the most confessional

and believed in a synodical style of church government. It is estimated that if we add together the members from all these groups, only one in four Finns had any religious affiliation.¹

In 1898, enough people were convinced that neither Suomi nor the Laestadians were adequately scriptural, so the Finnish National Ev. Lutheran Church was organized. Problems plagued the new body almost immediately. The publishing house went broke, the president was forced to resign because of a morals charge, and worst of all, Finnish Socialists took over the church's college and Seminary by buying out the public stock which financed them. Talks with Suomi were held, but broke up when Suomi would not allow some of the NELC's lay preachers to enter the Suomi preaching ministry without further study at Suomi's seminary.

Conditions in Finland in the early 1920's were to prove to play a big part in the NELC's eventual association with Missouri. In 1922, religious freedom was declared in Finland and a few confessional Lutheran pastors left the state church. The Finnish Gospel Association, however, which had been in close contact with the NELC, decided to remain in the state church. The NELC was very active in exposing the errors of many of the preachers of the state church. This created strained relations with the GA and eventually resulted in breaking off fellowship in 1923.

II

During the early 1920's. the NELC was lookiⁿ_g for a confessional Lutheran church body for help, especially for pas-

tors, since another attempt at having a seminary failed after five years in 1923. The NELC could have done nothing better than to go to the Missouri Synod for help. This it did early in 1923. The meeting was very encouraging for both parties, and after a second meeting was held, Pres. Pfothenauer, in the 1923 Missouri convention, reported that the two groups were agreed in principal doctrines and were thus in fellowship. Only the problem of women suffrage remained, but talks were to be held concerning that issue. Finns were also to be allowed to attend Missouri schools.² From now on, a Committee on Finnish Relations (CFR) was to regularly meet with the NELC and report to the Missouri conventions.

Looking at the Missouri convention proceedings and the CFR's report of 1926, it seems that already in 1924 or 1925 talks were held concerning a possible amalgamation of the NELC into the Missouri Synod. The talks, however, were broken off. In 1929, the CFR reported that a lack of money and pastors was severely hampering the NELC's work. In response to this need, Missouri voted to grant the NELC \$1200. yearly to subsidize Finnish students attending the seminary and to help out Finnish pastors.³

In 1932, the CFR gave an optimistic report to the synod. It reported that E. Nopola was to become the first Finnish graduate of the the Springfield seminary.⁴ It should be noted that Nopola was to become the final president of the NELC and be the prime force behind merger with Missouri. The 1935 CFR reported the ordination of Nopola, and that relations

between the two groups continued to be "freundschaftlich und bruederlich."⁵ The previous subsidy of \$1200. was cut to \$600. at the recommendation of the CFR.

In the mid-30's, the Suomi Synod had approached the NELC, looking for a possible merger. The NELC saw, however, that such a merger would not be scripturally sound, so it rejected the proposal. Therefore, in the 1938 conventoon report, The CFR said that the NELC continued to "treu an Schrift und Bekenntnis festhalten,"⁶ despite Suomis offer. It was also reported there were several Finnish students at Springfield, and two had already been ordained.

The continued use of Springfield by Finnish students from the NELC prompted Missouri in its 1938 convention to authorize the calling of a Finnish professor for Springfield. This call was filled in 1939 by A. Monto, who taught Finnish and Finnish history, along with other Seminary courses. This obviously helped in recruiting Finnish students, for the 1941 CFR report states that 11 Finnish students were enrolled at the Sem. Relations between the two groups continued to be "cordial and beneficial."⁷ At this time, there were in the NELC 70 congregations, 5000 communicants and 14 pastors.⁸

In 1944, the CFR expressed the cordial relationship by recommending that "mutual relationship between our body and the Finnish National Church should be promoted on every possible manner."⁹ The 1947 convention report stated that the word "Finnish" had been dropped from the official church name, for the church was becoming increasingly bilingual. At this time,

there were eight Finns at Springfield. Also discussed at a talk in Springfield in 1947 were women suffrage and, interestingly, possible merger of Missouri and NELC congregations in areas where both had congregations. The merger "ball" was beginning to roll. At this time there were 24 pastors on the NELC, an increase of ten in six years, and of the 24, 15 were graduates of Springfield.¹⁰ Missouri also voted to help support a Finnish-American missionary to Finns living in Queensland, North Australia.

Little was said about the NELC in the 1950 convention and nothing in 1953. That does not mean, however, that nothing was going on in the NELC. In 1953, Pastor E. Nopola, the first Finnish graduate of Springfield, was elected president of the NELC. He has been characterized as a "man of unwavering and forthright doctrinal convictions."¹¹ We might also add that he must have been a man who loved very dearly the Synod that gave him his education, for he continually worked for a merger of Missouri with the NELC. In the 1956 Missouri convention Nopola addressed the Synod, "Our bodies have been in fellowship since 1923. A committee of the NELC is considering amalgamation into the Missouri Synod, and the time is not too far distant when we shall be an organic part of the Missouri Synod."¹²

In that same convention of 1956, The CFR reported that once again, the NELC had shown its confessionalism and solid scriptural stand. The question of lodge membership had come up in Irowood, Michigan, in the church's largest congregation, Zion. The NELC stood firm and as a result, the congregation

split.

The 1956 convention report also gave some interesting statistics. In 1956, there were 73 preaching stations, 50 of which were congregations that were organized. Thirty-three pastors were serving those stations, and of the 33, 28 were graduates of Springfield. About the same number were enrolled at that time in Springfield. This was anticipated to relieve the critical shortage of pastors.¹³

Talk about a possible merger, which Pres. Nopola was pushing, was getting around, so perhaps it is not too surprising to hear in the 1959 convention report that the Missouri Synod officially invited the NELC to establish organic union with the Missouri Synod. The CFR was directed to arrange the necessary meetings.¹⁴ In the President's report of 1962, it was mentioned that talks were being held.¹⁵ In 1963, the merger was finalized and was to take effect in 1964. In 1965, Pres. Harms reported that merger had been accomplished.¹⁶ At the time of the merger, the NELC had about 12,000 members.

III

There are several crucial questions in this merger. First of all, and most basic, was the merger really necessary? Looking at the conditions of the time, it would not seem so. The critical pastor shortage was being relieved, as the 1956 CFR report mentioned. Contributions were up and even some home mission stations were being opened. As one man says, "Things were going much better for the National Church after

the Second World War than at any other time of their history."¹⁷

A former pastor of the NELC says, "There were no special problems that I know of, that would have demanded the merger."¹⁸

Why, then, did Pres. Nopola doggedly pursue the merger?

We must let him speak,

As a small synod the National Church faces the question of affiliation with other Lutheran churches even more acutely than the larger bodies. It is not only a matter of unity but involves the entire work of the church. Since it is not possible for a small church to provide adequate schools for the training of its ministry, but must rely upon the resources of larger churches, the conviction is growing that the true solution is to become a part of the larger organization, upon whose benevolence we must depend. The problems facing the small church's publishing house, foreign mission program, and the church-wide programs for men, women, youth and children are becoming increasingly difficult to solve. The future seems to speak the clear language of union by necessity, if not by choice.¹⁹

The former pastor of the NELC also said these reasons were proposed, "Being a separate little church body makes mission work almost impossible, 'Who's going to listen to you when you say you're from the National Lutheran Church?' and 'we owe it to the Missouri Synod to join because we use their hymnal and their seminary!'"²⁰

Are these reasons valid? As we have seen, the NELC was not in that bad of condition. It certainly is true that a small church body has more problems providing church workers, yet we see that the ELS and CLC are able to survive by having their own training schools. Pres. Nopola was without a doubt trying to do what he felt was best for his church body. Unfortunately, his judgment in this area seems to be less than proper and clouded perhaps by 40 years of association with the Missouri

Synod.

Why did Nopola have so much influence? A former NELC pastor explains, "

It was Pastor Nopola, who as editor of the Church's publications, "The Lutheran Voice" and the "Auttaja", first brought up the idea of the merger in the 1950's. He pursued the idea relentlessly. At the time there was a big "generation gap" among the pastors of the National Church. Nopola had graduated from the Seminary in the early 1930's. During the 1930's, only two other pastors were ordained. A few were ordained in the early 1940's, and the rest after 1945. Pastor Nopola, therefore, being quite a bit older, with 10 to 15 years more experience in the ministry wielded a big influence on the younger pastors of the Church. It was almost like the relationship of a seminary professor and his students. 21

Along with Nopola's influence, we cannot underestimate the strong influence and ties the Finnish pastors trained at Springfield had with fellow Missouri Synod men. Merger with Missouri, humanly speaking, seemed the only proper thing to do, and in that light, it is perhaps surprising that the merger did not take place sooner.

If the NELC was so confessional, why did it not see the deteriorating doctrinal position of Missouri? Some pastors did see the problem. Unfortunately, Pres. Nopola either did not see the problems, or he did not consider them to be too serious. Pres. Behnken was very industrious in sweeping "little" problems under the rug and maintaining that everything in Missouri was just as it had always been. Even if we accept Pres. Nopola's "union by necessity, if not by choice," union with a church body that does nothing about heterodox teachers in its midst is not a scripturally acceptable union. Perhaps,

we should find fault with Nopola not so much for pushing union, but for pushing union with the Missouri Synod. It was not the same synod from which he had received his education.

How many people opposed the merger? There was strong opposition to the merger from from about a half dozen pastors of the NELC, including a man with a WELS background, Frank Pies. Unfortunately, these mens' voices were drowned out by the 30 or so pastors in favor of the merger. Strangely enough, the vote for the merger was very close, being decided by only one or two votes.²² When the merger came, four congregations and two pastors remained independent. The congregations were Trinity, Covington, MI, National, Calumet, MI, Betania, New York, and Bethlehem, Toronto, ONT. Pastors A. Kokkonen and R. Efraimson remained independent.

Could anything have been done to avoid merger with the Missouri Synod and to merge with the WELS or ELS? The ELS did approach the NELC to hold talks, but they broke up over an unhappy incident about prayer fellowship occasioned by J.A.O. Preus, who was with the ELS at the time. Pastor Pies of the NELC wanted to see talks begun with the WELS, but nothing ever materialized. Pastor Kokkonen of Calumet had an open invitation to attend the Lake Superior Conference meetings of our N. Wisconsin district, but he never found it possible to attend.²³

The NELC certainly owed a great debt of thanks to the Missouri Synod for supporting it with money, prayers and workers, keeping it doctrinally sound, and generally serving

as a "mother." Without Missouri at its side in its early years, the NELC would probably either have folded or been forced into weakening its confessional stand by unscriptural union or accepting less than sound men into its ministry. It is sad, however, that the "mother," who had nourished, guided, and provided for her "child," gradually went astray itself. It is equally sad that her child, who had since grown up and should have seen her mother's problems, decided to follow her, when a few steps of its own might possibly have made her a strong, independent, confessional Lutheran church, able to stand on its own two feet.

FOOTNOTES

- ¹D.J. Ollila, The Faith of the Finns, (Ann Arbor: MSU Press, 1972), p. 167.
- ²Proceedings of MS convention, (St. Louis:Concordia, 1923), p. 84.
- ³Proceedings of MS convention, (St. Louis:Concordia,1929)p.170.
- ⁴Proceedings of MS convention, (St. Louis:Concordia, 1932)p.152.
- ⁵Proceedings of MS convention, (St. Louis:Concordia,1935)p.144.
- ⁶Reports and Memorials, (St. Louis:Concordia,1938)p.185.
- ⁷Reports and Memorials, (St. Louis:Concordia,1941) p.206.
- ⁸Proceedings of MS convention, (St. Louis:Concordia,1941) p.304.
- ⁹Proceedings of MS convention, (St.Louis:Concordia,1944)p. 253.
- ¹⁰Reports and Memorials, (St.Louis, 1947) p.405.
- ¹¹Proceedings of MS convention, (St. Louis:Concordia,1956)p.791.
- ¹²Dr. J.M. Skaates, Historical Survey of the Finnish Lutheran Churches in America, p. 15.
- ¹³Proceedings, 1956, p. 791.
- ¹⁴Proceedings of MS convention, (St. Louis:Concordia,1959), p.187.
- ¹⁵Proceedings of MS convention, (St. Louis:Concordia,1962)p.12.
- ¹⁶Proceedings of MS convention, (St. Louis:Concordia,1965)p.13.
- ¹⁷Dr. J.M. Skaates, correspondence.
- ¹⁸Pastor R. Efraimson, correspondence.
- ¹⁹E. Nopola, Our Three Score Years and 10, as quoted by Dr. Skaates in correspondence.
- ²⁰Efraimson, correspondence.
- ²¹Skaates, correspondence.
- ²²Efraimson, correspondence.
- ²³Pastor J.J. Wendland, emeritus, correspondence.

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