

# Lutheran Denominations in America



# A Comparative Study of ELCA, LCMS & WELS

## *Session 6: History, Background & Doctrine of WELS*

### Introduction

Watch the YouTube [video](#), “Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod Explained in 2 Minutes,” by Ready to Harvest (a Christian denominations channel). How well do you think they did?

### The Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod: History

#### *Brief History of WELS*

The Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod began on December 8, 1849, when John Muehlhaeuser, John Weinmann, and William Wrede met at Grace Lutheran Church in downtown Milwaukee. On May 26, 1850, the “First Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Wisconsin” was officially founded at Salem Lutheran Church in Granville (now northwest Milwaukee). Muehlhaeuser was elected the first synod president. He was born in Germany, was educated at a mission school, and came to America as a missionary. He began in New York but eventually settled in Milwaukee in 1848. He did not particularly like doctrinal controversy and was more concerned about mission work. Since he lacked an in-depth theological training, Muehlhaeuser did not necessarily oppose a stronger confessional mindset, but he did not really promote it either. This began to change with the second synod president, John Bading, who assumed the role in 1860 at the age of 35. Bading led the synod to a stronger confessional and doctrinal position and supported pastors subscribing to the Lutheran Confessions at their ordination. He was assisted by Adolf Hoenecke in this endeavor. In 1866, Adolf Hoenecke, who studied Lutheran doctrine in Germany, accepted a call to be the dean of the college/seminary in Watertown, Wisconsin. He helped the Wisconsin Synod agree in doctrine and practice with the Missouri Synod in 1868. In 1869, there was a joint agreement between Wisconsin and Missouri whereby the joint college would be in Watertown and the joint seminary in St. Louis. After a brief time, the Wisconsin Synod reopened its own seminary in Milwaukee in 1878. Hoenecke became the president of the seminary and was the Wisconsin Synod’s leading theologian of the time.

Meanwhile in Michigan, Friedrich Schmid was sent by a German mission society to the area around Ann Arbor. He was the first Lutheran pastor in Michigan and founded the first Lutheran congregation in Michigan, Salem in Scio. He was passionate about missions and traveled all around southern Michigan. Schmid eventually became the president of the Michigan Synod. Michigan Lutheran Seminary was founded in 1885 in Manchester and moved to Saginaw in 1887. Meanwhile in Minnesota, John Heyer helped found the Minnesota Synod in 1860 and was its first president. In 1884 the Minnesota Synod founded Dr. Martin Luther College in New Ulm.

In 1892, the Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Michigan Synods formed a federation in Milwaukee. The agreement was that Wisconsin would operate a theological seminary, a pre-seminary college, and a prep school. Minnesota would operate a teachers' college and prep school. Michigan would operate a prep school. Michigan ended up backing out of this federation because it did not want to lose its seminary, but then it later publicly expressed its remorse over its actions. In 1910, the federation was healed and Michigan Lutheran Seminary opened as a prep school.

Meanwhile in Nebraska, some Lutherans had moved from Wisconsin to Nebraska and eventually formed the Nebraska Synod in 1904. In 1917, all these synods amalgamated into the "Evangelical Lutheran Joint Synod of Wisconsin, Minnesota, Michigan, and Other States." Wisconsin was divided into three districts, with Minnesota, Michigan, and Nebraska their own districts. In 1919, the name was shortened to "Evangelical Lutheran Joint Synod of Wisconsin and Other States." Eventually it became the "Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod." The Pacific Northwest District was added in 1918, the Dakota-Montana District in 1920, the Arizona-California District in 1954, the South Atlantic District in 1973, the North Atlantic District in 1983, and the South Central District in 1983.

After the Wisconsin Synod broke fellowship with the Missouri Synod in 1961, many feared that the smaller Wisconsin Synod would not be able to stand on its own without the help of the larger Missouri Synod. Actually, the years right after the split proved to be the greatest era of mission expansion. WELS congregations increased from 695 in 1960 to 1110 in 1980. There was a slogan among home missions, "Every State by '78." By 1983, the Wisconsin Synod hit that goal and became a truly nationwide church body.

### **Quick Facts of WELS**

- WELS is the third largest Lutheran denomination in America, with about 1250 congregations and 340,000 members (as of 2022).
- The Wisconsin Synod is divided into 12 districts.
- The headquarters of WELS, the Center for Mission and Ministry, recently moved from Milwaukee to Waukesha, Wisconsin (suburban Milwaukee).
- The current synod president is Mark Schroeder, who was first elected in 2007.
- The current ministerial education system is a three-tiered, four-school system, formed from an amalgamation of various schools in 1995. Michigan Lutheran Seminary in Saginaw and Luther Preparatory School in Watertown are the two prep schools at the high school level. Martin Luther College in New Ulm is the college of ministry for pastors, teachers, and staff ministers at the college level. Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary in Mequon (suburban Milwaukee) is the seminary for pastors at the graduate level.
- WELS also operates a very extensive school system for its size, with 362 early childhood centers, 284 elementary schools, and 29 area Lutheran high schools (as of 2022).
- Wisconsin Lutheran College was formed in 1973 in Milwaukee and is affiliated with WELS.
- WELS conducts world mission work in 45 countries and 19 prospective fields (as of 2022).
- WELS is a member of the Confessional Evangelical Lutheran Conference (CELC), an international fellowship of 34 confessional Lutheran churches (as of 2023).
- The publishing house of WELS is Northwestern Publishing House (NPH). NPH recently sold its physical location in Milwaukee, shifted to a more online presence, and moved its administration to the WELS Center for Mission and Ministry in Waukesha.

## Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod: Background & Doctrine

Let's wrap up any unanswered questions or unresolved issues from our previous sessions on how WELS compares to the ELCA or LCMS.

1. **Brainstorm** any questions or issues you still want to talk about.
2. **Share** those questions or issues with those at your table.
3. **Rank** your small group's most pressing question or issue you'd like to still address.
4. We will **discuss** as many of those questions or issues as time allows.

Respond to outside impressions that other people have of WELS:

1. "You're the really strict synod."
2. "You're the really conservative synod that needs to get up with the times."
3. "You're the synod that is anti-women—and against abortion, against the Boy Scouts, against lodges, really against everything."
4. "You're the synod that won't pray with us."
5. "You're the synod that is overly bent out of shape about doctrine."

## Conclusion

Put everything together from our study. **Respond:** "There's different kinds of Lutherans. Why are you WELS?"