

The Augustana Synod and the Missouri Synod

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The history of inter-synodical relations among American Lutherans has, at times, been filled with episodes of misunderstanding, mistrust, and generally poor conditions. Although American Lutherans have generally believed that wider Lutheran cooperation and institutional realignment would occasion a stronger Lutheran witness to the American nation, they seemed often unable or unwilling to move into better relations with each other, or did so rather slowly and cautiously. There was a history of poor relations between the synods that could not be easily overcome with contemporary good will, sabotaging what otherwise might have been promising openings to closer work with each other. The history of relations between the Augustana Synod and the Missouri Synod is a good example of this dynamic; these two groups circled each other cautiously and suspiciously over the course of many decades, with episodes of open hostility and distrust punctuated with occasional, tentative openings for cooperation which never materialized. In terms of distance, it was not that far between the German Missourians in St. Louis and the Swedish Augustanans in Rock Island, Illinois, but the theological and ecclesiastical gulf was often much wider. Yet the difficulties between Augustana and Missouri had an importance beyond just their bilateral relationship; they also had a strong influence on American Lutheran merger negotiations in general, especially in the period of time from 1930 to 1960.

Throughout the nineteenth century, as both Augustana and Missouri sought to establish themselves and gather in as many of the Swedish and German-speaking immigrants as they could, the two organizations took occasional notice of each other, but had very little in the way of direct contact. As they were primarily focused on their ethnic ministries, the two groups did not overlap in significant ways, although developments in each synod often led to comments by one group about the other. Augustana was a mixed organization

of Swedish and Norwegian pastors and congregations until 1870, and a member until 1860 of the Synod of Northern Illinois, a part of the General Synod. Strict Midwestern Lutheran confessional conservatives, such as the Missouri Synod, viewed the General Synod as barely Lutheran (if at all), and the association of these Scandinavians with such a body was distressing to them. The main point of attack on this issue came not directly from Missouri, but from one of its close allies, the Norwegian Synod, which was concerned about the Norwegian pastors and congregations then still a part of the Augustana Synod.¹ In a study of the early history of the Augustana Synod, George Stephenson commented on the “incessant attacks of the Missouri Synod and of the Norwegian Synod” on the Synod of Northern Illinois, although the “Scandinavians . . . had insisted that their organization was truly Lutheran. . . .”² One of the leaders of the Synod of Northern Illinois, William Reynolds, wrote to Swedish leader T. N. Hasselquist in 1859, “The Missourians are now the principle obstacle in our way, and I have a suspicion that their desire to keep the Norwegians under their influence is the secret motive of their attacks . . .”³ The constant attacks on the Synod of Northern Illinois, and certain attempts by the “English” members of that body to weaken its confessional language caused the Scandinavians to withdraw from it in 1860, but this did not stop the attacks on the newly independent Augustana Synod, especially from the Norwegian Synod.⁴

After this episode, the rhetorical war among the Synods cooled, and became less direct. In 1867 a split among the primarily eastern General Synod resulted in the formation of a new body, the General Council, which held more closely to the Lutheran Confessions than did the General Synod (although not close enough for Missouri). Augustana joined the General Council in 1870, which gave it a continuing orientation to eastern American Lutheranism that many of the other Midwestern Lutheran groups did not have. A period of theological dispute between Missouri and the new General Council during the 1860s and 1870s involved a number of points; although Augustana was tangentially involved in some of these issues, it was not a point of direct contact between it and the Missouri Synod. Another major theological dispute in the late nineteenth century,

the Predestination (or Election) controversy, involved Missouri and other Midwestern German Lutheran denominations (the Ohio and Iowa Synods) along with the various Norwegian–America, Lutheran bodies. Augustana was not drawn into this dispute, which raged for several decades, but they were aware of the controversy, and commented on it from time to time. Again, as was the case with the previous controversy, the primary debate was not directly between Augustana and Missouri, but involved other groups with which they were affiliated or opposed.

Direct contacts between Augustana and Missouri were much more evident in the twentieth century, especially as the two groups made the transition to the use of English as their primary language during the 1910s and 1920s. Once the linguistic boundaries were eroded, the Midwestern ethnically-based Lutheran denominations became direct potential competitors and/or partners, resulting in a period of intense activity, negotiation, and realignment that would last until the early 1960s, when Augustana merged into a larger Lutheran body. The areas of contact were many, but mainly focused on theological trends, English-language home missions, cooperative ministry efforts, and above all on the complicated and complex elements of cooperation and merger. Missouri sought to extend its influence over many of the conservative Midwestern Lutheran groups, while Augustana stood with one foot in this circle, and another among the eastern Lutherans with which it had long been affiliated. Often Augustana and Missouri clashed over the directions these cooperative and merger efforts would go, and about who might be invited to the table. Occasionally the two synods sought a tentative cooperation between each other, while more often they saw the other as an obstacle to their vision of a larger American Lutheran community.

The first major intersection between the two synods occurred in 1918. In that year, the General Council and General Synod (along with the United Synod South) merged to form the United Lutheran Church in America (ULCA). For some time past, Augustana had been feeling out of place in the General Council, since as a large national ethnically-based synod it was much different from the other, smaller regional synods within the General Council. As well, Augustana was deeply irritated by the formation within the General

Council of an English-language Synod of the Northwest, which Augustana saw as a direct competitor on its own territory. Thus when the merger occurred, Augustana voted not to enter the new ULCA, despite the efforts of its new president, G. A. Brandelle.

The leaders of the Missouri Synod saw the rise of the ULCA as a direct threat, and were especially suspicious of the presence of the General Synod in the organization, as Missouri had always seen fundamental and fatal flaws in its Lutheran nature. Missouri was delighted, then, with Augustana's refusal to enter the new ULCA, and saw this as an opening for closer relations between Augustana and Missouri. In Missouri's periodical, the *Lutheran Witness*, editor Martin Sommor wrote: "The entire Augustana Synod not only rejected the proposed union, but separated itself now also from the General Council. God grant these staunch men courage and light to continue on the path which they have chosen!"⁵ Sommor saw this action as Augustana's rejection of "unionism" (merger or cooperation without complete doctrinal agreement) and especially of the confessional stance of the General Synod. More likely, Augustana's decision was based on its history of troubled relations with the General Council over home missions and a desire to go it alone. Writing later that summer, Sommor's editorial colleague, Theodore Graebner,⁶ allowed that though practical elements might have played a role in this decision, "the Lutheran conscience of the Swedish synod rebelled against the union with a body so loose in practice as the General Synod."⁷

That summer there were unofficial and low-key overtures from several quarters of the Missouri Synod to members of Augustana, signaling that there should be closer relations between the two denominations. One correspondent to the Augustana publication, *Lutheran Companion*, wrote in that year of a chance contact with a vice president of the Missouri Synod, Frederick Brand. This writer, J. P. Peterson, quoted Brand as saying:

"We (the officials of the Missouri Synod) were very glad to hear that your synod refused to join the Merger!" and continuing he made this remarkable statement: "Now the next step that I hope they will take is to come over to us, the Synodical Conference; and I can assure you that we will reach out both hands to meet you."⁸

Theodore Graebner later recalled that he, too, in 1918 had approached Dr. Frank Peterson, president of Minnesota College of the Augustana Synod, with a similar invitation, and recalled this event to the editor of the *Lutheran Companion* the next year, 1919, repeating his words of invitation, “I informed him then that the possibility of establishing fraternal relations with the Missouri Synod should by no means be considered a vagary.” Graebner further stated, “Nothing came of this correspondence.”⁹ Perhaps Augustana, having walked away from the ULCA merger, was not immediately interested in another close connection of that sort, but it also had its own score of complaints against Missouri.

One common irritant during the 1920s was the new competition between the Lutheran denominations in home missions. Prior to World War One, the various ethnic Lutheran denominations had clearly delimited this field: Augustana sought Swedish-Americans, Missouri, Iowa, Ohio, and others competed for German-Americans, and so on. But with the rapid shift to English these boundaries soon broke down. In 1927, the President of the Iowa Conference of the Augustana Synod, A. T. Lundholm, wrote President Brandelle complaining of Missouri’s encroachment on an Augustana congregation in Keokuk, Iowa: “It seems that the Missourians are going to go into Keokuk with the intentions of starting a congregation there, and they hope to get a number of our members to unite with them.” Lundholm also enclosed a copy of a letter written by the local Missouri pastor, Ernest F. Schwidder, which stated: “We are in Keokuk, not to fight the Augustana Synod established there, but we are there to offer that which that Synod does not offer the people as Lutherans—sound Lutheran doctrine coupled with sound Lutheran practice.”¹⁰

Another letter in 1925 to Brandelle from a pastor in Great Falls, Montana, complained similarly of a local Missouri congregation encroaching on the local Augustana congregation.¹¹ In a letter to Minnesota Conference President P. A. Mattson in 1919, Brandelle himself suggested that, among others, “. . . the Missourians are straining every nerve to branch out and occupy every point of vantage that is to be secured,” and urged Mattson to meet this challenge.¹²

Another irritant between Augustana and Missouri during this period was the issue of the Prohibition, which had become the law of the land with the ratification of the Eighteenth Amendment to the Constitution in 1919. Strongly influenced by the Temperance movement in Sweden and the United States in the nineteenth century, the vast majority within the Augustana Synod (and most other Lutheran denominations in the United States) were strongly in favor of national Prohibition. The Missouri Synod was not in favor. They had a more lenient attitude toward the consumption of alcohol, and further objected to Lutheran support for Prohibition as a confusion of Church and State. Graebner wrote in the *Lutheran Witness* in 1926:

Lutheranism is in agreement with historic Protestantism when it declares the beverage use of fermented wine and beer morally indifferent, an adiaphoron. . . which is *per se* unmoral. . . It regards as a violation of Church and State the participation of the Church in making secular laws.¹³

When Graebner's comments on this subject made their way into local newspapers, loyal Augustana members were outraged. One local Augustana layman wrote President Brandelle: "Although Graebner does not have the authority to speak officially for the Missouri Synod, you will note that these articles are so written as to make it appear that he is speaking for the entire Lutheran Church in America." The writer continues by urging Brandelle to "do something to correct this libel on our Lutheran Church."¹⁴ The cause of temperance and Prohibition was strongly supported in Augustana circles, and thus the strong reaction against Graebner's statements.¹⁵

Missouri had its own concerns about Augustana during the 1920s, questions that perhaps affected their previous interest in reaching out to the Swedes. Missouri was increasingly worried about the influence of "liberal" theology within American Lutheranism, and quite concerned about what was going on in Augustana, theologically. In 1922 Missouri Editor Martin Sommor picked up on an article in Augustana's *Lutheran Companion*, where Editor C. J. Bengston complained of some lack of interest by the Synod's pastors in

theology. Sommor used the occasion to attack the Augustana Synod:

Some may consider it smart to sneer at doctrinal questions. They may believe that they are occupying advanced ground if purity of doctrine means little or nothing to them. But such ought to be told that all those who care nothing for the truth of God's Word care nothing for God Himself.¹⁶

The tendency of the Missouri Synod to be highly critical of every other Lutheran's orthodoxy caused a reaction from the editor of the *Lutheran Companion*, C. J. Bengston. Picking up on an article critical of the second meeting of the Lutheran World Convention in Copenhagen in 1929, which strongly criticized the orthodoxy of the Lutheran churches in Scandinavia, Bengston retorted:

... the Missouri Synod has not been able to join the Lutheran Churches in any World Convention. No other Lutheran body in the world is Lutheran enough to suit Missouri, it seems. But that is the German of it always. . . we have a lurking suspicion that over in St. Louis they honestly believe that one must come there if he wants honest to goodness orthodox Lutheranism.¹⁷

This would be a constant theme of Augustana writers during this time, that Missouri was so exclusive and reserved that no other Lutheran body was, it seemed, good enough for them. In a letter from Bengston to Graebner in 1925, the Augustana editor complained that it seemed to him: "Missouri is the one Lutheran body in America that has nothing to confess, nothing to give up. All the others are more or less 'in error,' either in doctrine or practice or both."¹⁸ Missouri leaders themselves pointed to conservative theological voices within Augustana itself who were worrying about a perceived rise in "liberal" theology within the Synod.

One example of this creeping "liberalism" to which the Missouri leaders often pointed was the visit to America in 1923 of Swedish Archbishop Nathan Söderblom, and his enthusiastic reception by most sectors of the Augustana Synod. Although some conservatives such as Hult and Miller saw the visitor as theologically dangerous,¹⁹ most of the rest of Augustana welcomed the Swedish Archbishop as an ecumenical leader within Lutheranism, and all of Protestantism,

and proudly celebrated this famous Swede in their midst. (Sometimes blood IS thicker than theology!) Missouri leaders were not impressed, and wrote very negatively about Söderblom's visit. Confessing himself to be "uneasy" about Augustana articles praising this visitor, Graebner observed:

The attachment which Swedish Americans feel for their home country is well known, but it is not as a Swede, but as a Swedish Lutheran, that Soederblom will be welcomed by the Augustana Synod. Yet Soederblom is one of the outstanding religious radicals of the day. . .²⁰

Graebner went on, later in the year, to voice his hope that the visit of this "radical" theologian would not pollute the Augustana Synod: "We hope that the seeds of unionism and infidelity which he [that is, Söderblom] has planted will not choke the good wheat of Lutheran doctrine in the Augustana Synod."²¹ In reaction, editor L.G. Abrahamson of the Swedish-language synodical publication, *Augustana*, replied to these aspersions on the Synod's orthodoxy by stating:

Leading men of the Missouri Synod and its pastors have generally looked upon our Synod with suspicion. They have suspected us as not being sound in doctrine. This we regard as an undeserved accusation, since we are as orthodox as our Missouri friends.²²

Graebner responded that the informal, bilateral approaches toward a closer relationship between Missouri and Augustana in 1918 and 1919, though unofficial, were "whole-hearted," and that the avenues of approach were still available in that day (1923), despite Augustana's worrisome embrace of Söderblom.

Some conservative leaders within the Augustana Synod, such as Seminary Professor Adolf Hult, and LBI Minneapolis President Samuel Miller, however, held a more favorable view of Missouri's strong, conservative doctrinal stance, and its confessional "exclusiveness." Over the years, the pages of the LBI periodical, *The Bible Banner*, contained more than a few positive references to Missouri's theological positions. Theodore Graebner later reprinted "an article intended for the *Lutheran Witness* in 1922 (but never published)" from Hult, in which he commented on his perception

of a liberal theological drift within the Augustana Synod, and thanked Martin Sommor for his article, "In What Are They Interested?" critical of Augustana (see note 14). Hult went further, however, to express his appreciation for the Missouri Synod:

I am in Christ persuaded that not the so often derisively styled "Missouri" animosity dictated it, but deep and immeasurable Christian love. . . . Meanwhile, 'God's Word and doctrine pure' – be it ever the great and grand preoccupation of our American Lutheran Church.²³

Graebner gave no indication of why the article was not printed in 1922, or why he decided to make it public in 1935.

In 1932, there was a testy, direct exchange of letters between the presidents of the Augustana and Missouri Synods over the question of the alleged "unionism" within Augustana. Unionism here means the unregulated cooperation between denominations not in full doctrinal fellowship; traditionally Missouri has had a strict definition of the practice, and a constant vigilance against this practice. The exchange began with a brief reference by Missouri President Frederick Pfothenhauer in a synodical meeting September 24, 1930; commenting on the recent formation of the American Lutheran Church (1930-60), he remarked: "The Ohio and Iowa synods have entered into fellowship with the Augustana Synod, which, in turn, has fellowship relations with Baptists and Congregationalists."²⁴ This reference in the Missouri periodical occasioned a terse letter to Pfothenhauer from Augustana President G.A. Brandelle on November 1, 1930, in which he asked: "Will you have the goodness to advise me as to when, where, and how these fellowship relations with the Baptists and Congregationalist were entered into on the part of the Augustana Synod?"²⁵ Pfothenhauer replied on November 15:

It is manifest that the pastors of the Augustana Synod have exchanged and are still exchanging, without being disciplined by their Synod, pulpits with Baptist and Congregationalist ministers which is according to Scripture the most intimate fellowship.²⁶

In a response, dated, December 3, 1930, Brandelle repeated his original question, and then added: "I trust that since you have in the

public press accused the Augustana Synod of wrongdoing you recognize the propriety of proving your charges against it in full.”²⁷ Brandelle was obviously becoming increasingly irritated with his Missouri counterpart. It seems that someone in the Missouri Synod (Graebner?) had been keeping close watch over the activities of the pastors of the Augustana Synod, for Pfothenauer responded with a five-page letter on December 13, in which he listed, in detail, fourteen examples of alleged unionism on the part of Augustana pastors. He further stated: “It is not necessary to prove when and where church fellowship has been established. Evils creep into churches gradually and unawares. The churches are judged according to their practices. Deeds speak louder than words.”²⁸ In a terse reply to Pfothenauer on December 19, Brandelle retorted that the incidents of alleged fellowship were “beside the question,” and that in any case “a lot of your own men are just as guilty as some of our men.” Brandelle called the charge of implicit fellowship “untrue and therefore slanderous.” Further, he pointedly reminded Pfothenauer, “The eighth commandment is still a part of the Decalogue.”²⁹

In the spring of 1931 Brandelle again wrote several times to Pfothenauer. He did not, however, receive a satisfactory response. On August 10, 1931, Brandelle wrote for a final time: “(Augustana) is acquainted also with true and genuine Lutheranism. The attitude towards the Augustana Synod on the part of the Missourians is not appreciated by the Synod nor is it alarmed thereby.”³⁰ In 1932, writing to the Norwegian-American church leader and college president, Lars Boe, Brandelle explained his attitude further. He asserted that no American Lutheran group “is more conservative than the Augustana Synod.” He then asked rhetorically, “In what matter has it departed from the Confessions of the Church?” Brandelle worried that the Missouri definition of confessionalism was clouding potential merger negotiations, and thought that a recent position paper on the subject by Norwegian-American leader T.F. Gullixson was “an attempt to bring in Missourianism.”³¹ Obviously this was not meant as a compliment.

These watchful admonitions and defensive reactions are indicative of the charged atmosphere surrounding the negotiations related to merger and fellowship negotiations among Lutheranism during the

first half of the twentieth century. The two largest American Lutheran denominations—the United Lutheran Church of America and the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod—were on opposite sides of the question. It is unhelpful to use the terms “liberal” and “conservative” for these two groups; rather there was a scale of confessional openness, from a more open confessional stance among the ULCA to a very tight confessional position in the Missouri Synod. In the center between them were a number of ethnically-based Midwestern Lutheran groups, including the Augustana Synod, the Norwegian Lutheran Church in America, and the American Lutheran Church (1930-60). Five of these centrist Lutheran denominations had formed the American Lutheran Conference in 1930, and the Conference had thus become the primary space for merger negotiations during this time period.³²

Missouri deeply distrusted the confessional position of the ULCA, and it soon became clear to many, although not all in the American Lutheran Conference, that though successful merger negotiations might include either Missouri or the ULCA, it was very unlikely that they would include both. Within the centrist group, the Conference, the ALC and the Norwegians generally gravitated toward Missouri, while their long relation with the General Council meant that Augustana pushed to include the ULCA, even if this meant that Missouri would absent itself. Of course, these tendencies set up tensions within the Conference, as well as more generally within attempts to bring the American Lutheran denominations together. These dynamics also complicated the relationship between Augustana and Missouri, as Missouri sought to dominate the centrist Lutheran denominations, and Augustana wanted to persuade its peers to adopt a more open stance toward merger negotiations. Brandelle’s labeling of Gullixson’s merger paper as “Missourian,” then, was in reference to this struggle.

In 1935, Missouri editor Theodore Graebner published a book of essays entitled *The Problem of Lutheran Union and Other Essays*, in which Graebner discussed at length the theological and ecclesiastical shortcomings of the other American Lutheran denominations, especially regarding fellowship or union. His section on Augustana ran twenty-two pages (quite long, compared to chapters on other

American Lutheran groups), and repeated the laundry list of perceived errors to which this study has previously drawn attention.³³ Graebner complained that Augustana pastors practiced un-Lutheran unionism, that “liberalism” or “modernism” ran rampant in the Synod, that theological confusion and laxity was the order of the day (especially concerning “chiliasm,” or millennialism), and that Augustana must settle these issues within its own house before Missouri could ever consider closer relations. Believing that there was an internal war going on within Augustana between conservatives and liberals, Graebner concluded his section, “We must permit the Swedish Lutherans to settle these questions, and settle them right, before we can join them in organic or fraternal union.”³⁴ In a review in the Augustana periodical, *Lutheran Companion*, Pastor Paul Andreen examined Graebner’s critical survey of American Lutheranism, and then wondered why Graebner did not apply similar standards of inquiry to his own denomination. Andreen commented sarcastically:

Certainly our good friends, the Missourians, must by the law of human averages have some faults from which they must be cleansed, possibly a synodical vice or two, before a perfect union can be consummated. What he revealed amounted to a few minor misdemeanors.³⁵

In the same issue Augustana Editor C.J. Bengston chided Graebner for a reference to a “communist” style censorship (of conservative voices) within the Augustana, to which Graebner later responded that the reference came not from him, but from Adolf Hult’s unpublished 1922 article (see note 21).³⁶

For a brief period of time after 1935, it appeared that there might be a slight thawing of relations between Augustana and Missouri, or so it seemed to some of the principals. The occasion was the end of the presidencies of both G.A. Brandelle and Frederick Pfothenhauer, which occurred simultaneously in 1935. Pfothenhauer, the head of Missouri since 1911, retired in that year, and Brandelle, president of Augustana since 1918, was defeated in his bid for a fifth term of office. Brandelle was defeated by P.O. Bersell, who was considered to be more conservative than his predecessor; Graebner certainly considered Bersell in this way.³⁷ In his annual address to the Augustana

Synod in 1938, Bersell applauded the fact that “the American Lutheran Church and the Missouri Synod are well on their way to the establishment of mutual pulpit and altar fellowship,” and voiced the wish that this signaled a larger movement within American Lutheranism.³⁸

Theodore Graebner wrote an appreciative letter to Bersell later in the year in which he thanked Bersell for his “kind spirits,” and then went on to say:

I can see practical difficulties that may put off for sometime the actual practice of church fellowship between our body and yours. But I do not believe that your theologians will find themselves in disagreement with the articles adopted by the A.L.C. and Missouri Synod committees and by their national conventions.³⁹

In the pages of the *Lutheran Witness* Graebner lauded Bersell for his statements, remarking that he was “not suggesting a peace-at-any-price policy for American Lutherans,” that he decried “unionism” and urged “confessional loyalty.”⁴⁰ Here, it must have seemed to Graebner, was a conservative leader within the Augustana Synod with which Missouri might work. Indeed, responding to Graebner’s letter, Bersell wrote: “I am quite concerned about the whole matter of Lutheran unity, but I am becoming more and more confident that ultimately this unity will be consummated on a conservative basis.”⁴¹ Time would tell if this was a real opening, or simply a brief thaw in relations.

The next spring matters took a decidedly chillier tone. A prominent theologian of the Augustana Synod, Conrad Bergendoff—President of the Augustana College and Theological Seminary in Rock Island—sent an open letter to the Missouri Synod. Bergendoff’s letter was occasioned by “a very friendly and frank letter from a pastor in the Missouri Synod” seeking information. Bergendoff’s letter was first printed in the college bulletin, and then reprinted in the *Lutheran Companion*. Initially he explained: “The conviction has grown on me over a considerable number of years that the Augustana and Missouri Synods know very little about each other, and what is worse, the little they do know is largely untrue.” After attempting to correct what he saw as common Missouri misunderstandings of

Augustana, Bergendoff addressed the issue of union: “. . . I say that many Lutherans in America do not accept the Missouri Synod as the judge of their faith, or of their Lutheranism. You treat us as non-Lutherans. We resent it. At once a gulf is created that at the present seems unbridgeable.” Saying this statement came from a “wounded and anxious heart,” wishing to “bridge the cleft that divides us,” he continued: “. . . when Missouri has already judged all others as non-Lutherans, then she can only be left alone. And this is tragic, because we need each other.”⁴² Graebner responded to this open letter in an editorial in the *Lutheran Witness* in which he said he read the Bergendoff letter with “mixed emotions,” but then rejected the portrait of Missouri that Bergendoff had drawn, “Frankly, we do not recognize ourselves in the picture drawn by the president of Augustana Seminary.”⁴³ If there had been a brief thaw in relations, it was now over.

In the early 1940s, with wartime cooperative efforts for chaplaincy and home missions intensifying, negotiations for fellowship and possible union heated up within the American Lutheran Conference. As we have seen earlier, the dynamics of these negotiations were tricky; although on the surface the talks only included the five member bodies of the Conference (including Augustana), it was clear that many envisioned wider talks including the ULCA or Missouri. It seems that these two denominations were also anxious about the proceedings, not wanting, it seems, to be left out, or for there to be a new configuration that would exclude them. Writing to President Bersell in January 1941, *Lutheran Companion* Editor E.E. Ryden told him about events leading up to the first meeting of a unity committee, later referred to as the “Columbus Committee,” to be held in Columbus, Ohio, in the spring. Ryden wrote: “From my correspondence with Dr. Behnken (President of the Missouri Synod), I gather that the Missouri brethren are afraid that we might broaden the scope of the Columbus Conference, and will probably watch the proceedings very carefully.” Suggesting that the conference could be either “a serious setback or a glorious impetus” to the cause of Lutheran unity, he added, “Much depends, of course, on the attitude our Missouri brethren will take.”⁴⁴ Although many of them professed to be unmoved by Missouri’s influence, the Augustana leaders realized

that they could play an important role in the proceedings, albeit indirectly. Later that spring, but before the first conference, Bersell wrote Ryden concerning the negotiations: "The door should be opened as soon as possible for the United Lutheran Church to enter in so that the Conference will become the federation of the great majority of the Lutheran Churches of America."⁴⁵ Bersell had to realize that opening the door for the ULCA would more than likely mean the self-exclusion of Missouri, hence the phrase "the great majority." It seemed that Bersell had made his choice.⁴⁶

By the time of the second Columbus Conference in 1942, it seems that the American Lutheran Conference was going to head in the direction that Bersell, Ryden, and the Augustana representatives sought, namely, the expansion of the Conference and a closer federation. In his article on the meeting, Ryden used the headline, "American Lutherans Close Ranks," with the subtitle "Missouri Synod, However, Remains Aloof." In the body of the story, Ryden commented: ". . . it soon became evident that that Missouri Synod would decline to participate in the contemplated expansion of the American Lutheran Conference . . ."⁴⁷ Later that year, Bersell wrote to Norwegian leader and college President Lars Boe, and explained his feelings on the expansion and Missouri's participation (or lack thereof):

The time has come for a federation that includes all but Missouri. The kindest thing we can do to Missouri is ignore them until they come knocking at our door. And that will happen when they find us strong and united and not allergic to the blandishments nor afraid of their bluster.⁴⁸

There is no ambiguity in this statement; Bersell realized that he was effectively freezing Missouri out of the picture. This 1942 statement represented a significant change from the position he had taken in 1938.

Unfortunately for the Augustana leaders this great opening for Lutheran cooperation was, in fact, eventually derailed by those within the Conference who leaned more toward Missouri and away from the ULCA; the Conference proved not to be "strong and united." In July 1944, Ryden wrote to Bersell for some editorial advice: Was there some hope that Missouri could be enticed into

closer cooperation? “If Missouri is showing indications of cooperating with the NLC without entering into actual membership, perhaps it would not be wise to be too critical, lest we further alienate them.”⁴⁹ Bersell replied to him: “. . . feel free to speak on the subject very frankly, calling attention to the great opportunity which Missouri passed up both for itself and for the good of the Lutheran Church.”⁵⁰

Later in 1944 O.H. Pannkoke, a Lutheran leader and fundraiser, wrote to Bersell, alarmed at Missouri plans for activity in post-war Europe, calling it: “. . . the biggest sectarian invasion of Europe, to build a greater Missouri Synod on the ruins, the despair, the tragedy and the confusion of the European Lutherans.”⁵¹ In January 1945 Bersell responded to him: “As to your comments on Missouri, I sympathize with your point of view. I am getting pretty well fed up with the machinations of the Missouri outfit.”⁵² Several years later, writing to the Executive Secretary of the new Lutheran World Federation (about cooperative efforts), S.C. Michelfelder, Bersell was not only negative about Missouri but got rather pointed and personal in his attacks:

Pardon the sinful and wicked thought, but it does look to me as if Missouri is dallying with us with malice aforethought. If I have evil thoughts perhaps I may be forgiven when such persons as (Missouri President) Behnken and Lorry (Lawrence) Meyer are in the picture.⁵³

It would seem that Bersell had come around to the same position regarding Missouri as had his predecessor, G.A. Brandelle.

In 1952, the merger negotiations within the American Lutheran Conference reached an impasse. Augustana stood for a general invitation to all American Lutheran denominations to join the process. The other four members wanted to limit the call. In the end the Augustana delegates walked out of the negotiations. The other four continued with their talks, which eventually produced the American Lutheran Church (1960-1988). Augustana and the ULCA issued an open invitation to all American Lutheran groups for closer union, and two other groups joined them, eventually to produce the Lutheran Church in America (1962-1988). Missouri did not move

toward affiliation with either group, though for a time in the 1960s and 1970s, it did achieve pulpit and altar fellowship with the ALC.

Relations between Augustana and Missouri were never very good. At times there were glimmers of hope within each group that closer relations between the two might be reached, but such hopes proved to be ephemeral at best. There was usually a coldness between the two that would, at times, break out into outright conflict. This relationship (or lack thereof) was important for more than just their own bilateral relationship, as it seems that the course of merger negotiations within the whole of American Lutheranism in the twentieth century were complicated and clouded by the poor state of relations between these two Lutheran denominations. Augustana and Missouri had two different visions of Lutheran unity in the United States, and differing views on who might be invited to the negotiating table. Augustana stood as a counterweight in the American Lutheran Conference to Missouri's attempts to exclude the ULCA from any projected merger. Thus Augustana was, in effect, the obstacle that stood between Missouri and its vision a center-right coalition of the Missouri-dominated Synodical Conference and the denominations in the American Lutheran Conference. Seen in this light, the poor relations between Augustana and Missouri transcended mere bad blood, and were equally about the future of American Lutheranism.

NOTES

1. Unlike the Swedish immigrants, the Norwegians were divided up into several competing Lutheran denominations. The Norwegian Synod, closely allied with the Missouri Synod, saw itself as *the* denomination for *all* Norwegian immigrants, and often assumed an interest in any and all Norwegian Lutheran congregations in the United States, whether a part of its Synod or not.

2. George Stephenson, *The Founding of the Augustana Synod, 1850-1860* (Rock Island: Augustana Book Concern, 1927), 73-4.

3. William Reynolds to T. N. Hasselquist January 18, 1859, quoted in Stephenson, 83-4.

4. See Oscar N. Olson, *The Augustana Lutheran Church in America, The Pioneer Period, 1846-1860* (Rock Island: Augustana Book Concern, 1950), 235-6, and J. Magnus Rohne, *Norwegian American Lutheranism up to 1872* (New York: MacMillan Company, 1926), 164-79.

5. S. (Martin Sommor), "The Augustana Synod," *Lutheran Witness* 37(14), July 9, 1918, 219.
 6. Even more so than in some of the other American Lutheran denominations, the editors of Missouri Synod periodicals played an important, even a key role in the denomination. Graebner himself was an editor of the *Lutheran Witness* from 1913 to 1949, and a key voice in establishing the public presence of the Synod.
 7. G. (Theodore Graebner), "The Augustana Synod and Church Union," *Lutheran Witness* 37(16), August 6, 1918, 244.
 8. J. P. Peterson, "An Unexpected Invitation (letter)" *Lutheran Companion* 26(50), December 14, 1918, 639.
 9. Theodore Graebner, *The Problem of Lutheran Union and Other Essays* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1935), 44-5.
 10. A.T. Lundholm to G.A. Brandelle, March 8, 1927. G.A. Brandelle Presidential papers, Augustana Synod, in the Archives of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Elk Grove Village, Illinois.
 11. John Helmer Olson to G.A. Brandelle, September 25, 1925. Brandelle papers.
 12. G.A. Brandelle to P.A. Mattson, March 8, 1919. Brandelle papers.
 13. G. (Theodore Graebner), "Prohibition," *Lutheran Witness* 45(4), February 23, 1926, 51.
 14. August N. Brissman to G.A. Brandelle, February 15, 1926. Brandelle papers.
 15. On Augustana's attitude toward these subjects, see Maria Erling and Mark Granquist, *The Augustana Story: Shaping Lutheran Identity in North America* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 2008), 127-8.
 16. S. (Martin Sommor), "In What Are They Interested?" *Lutheran Witness* 41(12), June 6, 1922, 183.
 17. C.J. Bengston, "'Positive' or Rationalistic, Which?" *Lutheran Companion* 37(42), October 29, 1929, 1316.
 18. C.J. Bengston to Theodore Graebner, in Graebner, *The Problem of Lutheran Union*, 48.
 19. See, for example, Adolt Hult, "Söderblom as a Temptation to the Augustana Synod," *Bible Banner* 5(1), January 1924, 6.
 20. G. (Theodore Graebner) "Swedish Lutheran Entanglements," *Lutheran Witness* 42(19) September 11, 1923, 293.
 21. G. (Theodore Graebner), "Honor to Whom Honor is Due!" *Lutheran Witness* 42(26), December 18, 1923, 410.
 22. L.G. Abrahamson, September 6, 1923, quoted in G. (Theodore Graebner), "Our Relation to the Augustana Synod," *Lutheran Witness* 42(22), October 23, 1923, 340-1.
 23. Unpublished article for the *Lutheran Witness* June 1922, by Adolf Hult. Quoted in Graebner, *The Problem of Lutheran Union*, 60-2.
 24. Comments of Frederick Pfothenhauer in "Meeting of the Fiscal Conference," *Lutheran Witness* 49(21), October 14, 1930, 342.
 25. G.A. Brandelle to F. Pfothenhauer, November 1, 1930. G.A. Brandelle papers.
 26. F. Pfothenhauer to G.A. Brandelle, November 15, 1930. G.A. Brandelle papers.
 27. G.A. Brandelle to F. Pfothenhauer, December 3, 1930. G.A. Brandelle papers.
 28. F. Pfothenhauer to G.A. Brandelle, December 13, 1930. G.A. Brandelle papers.
 29. G.A. Brandelle to F. Pfothenhauer, December 19, 1930. G.A. Brandelle papers.
- This author has read fairly extensively in the correspondence of Lutheran synodical officials

in this time period, and would venture to say that this is one of the sharpest exchanges he can recall!

30. G.A. Brandelle to F. Pfothenhauer, August 10, 1931. G.A. Brandelle papers.
31. G.A. Brandelle to Lars Boe, December 31, 1932. Lars Boe Presidential papers, Archives of St. Olaf College, Northfield, Minnesota.
32. On the complex trajectory of these merger negotiations, see E. Clifford Nelson, *Lutheranism in North America, 1914-1970* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1972.)
33. The listing of these unionistic activities on the part of Augustana pastors was virtually identical to the list provided by Frederick Pfothenhauer to G.A. Brandelle in his letter of December 13, 1930 (see note 26).
34. *The Problem of Lutheran Union*, 66.
35. Paul H. Andreen, "'Problems of Lutheran Union: An Evaluation of Prof. Theodore Graebner's Book,'" *Lutheran Companion* 44(31), August 1, 1936, 969.
36. C.J. Bengston, "Augustana Synod 'Censorship,'" *Lutheran Companion* 44(31), August 1, 1936, 965, and G. (Theodore Graebner), "Augustana Synod 'Censorship,'" *Lutheran Witness* 55(18), September 8, 1936, 293.
37. *The Problem of Lutheran Union*, 59.
38. P.O. Bersell, "Presidential Address," *Report of the Seventy-ninth Annual Convention of the Evangelical Lutheran Augustana Synod of North America*, June 21-26, 1938, 19.
39. Theodore Graebner to P.O. Bersell, November 17, 1938. P.O. Bersell Presidential papers, ELCA Archives.
40. Theodore Graebner, "The Augustana Synod on Church Union," *Lutheran Witness* 57(24), November 29, 1938, 410.
41. P.O. Bersell to Theodore Graebner, November 25, 1938. P.O. Bersell papers.
42. Conrad Bergendoff, "'Here We Stand: Teachings and Practices of the Augustana Synod,'" *Lutheran Companion* 47(13), March 30, 1939, 392-3.
43. G. (Theodore Graebner), "The Augustana Synod and Missouri," *Lutheran Witness* 58(6), March 21, 1939, 92-3.
44. E.E. Ryden to P.O. Bersell, January 9, 1941. P.O. Bersell papers.
45. P.O. Bersell to E.E. Ryden, April 15, 1941. P.O. Bersell papers.
46. By this time Bersell had been in office as President of the Augustana Synod for six years, and his extensive contacts with other Lutheran leader had widened his horizons, and perhaps soured his views on the Missouri Synod.
47. E.E. Ryden, "American Lutherans Close Ranks," *Lutheran Companion* 50(22), May 28, 1942, 675-77.
48. P.O. Bersell to Lars Boe, November 20, 1942. Lars Boe papers.
49. E.E. Ryden to P.O. Bersell, July 14, 1944. P.O. Bersell papers.
50. P.O. Bersell to E.E. Ryden, July 20, 1944. P.O. Bersell papers.
51. O.H. Pannkoke to P.O. Bersell, November 21, 1944. P.O. Bersell papers.
52. P.O. Bersell to O.H. Pannkoke, January 6, 1945. P.O. Bersell papers.
53. P.O. Bersell to S.C. Michelfelder, November 1, 1949. P.O. Bersell papers.