

REPORT TO THE TWELVE DISTRICTS SUBMISSION

WELS HISTORICAL INSTITUTE**Our calling**

The WELS Historical Institute had its first meeting on October 28, 1981 at Wisconsin Lutheran College, Milwaukee. The initial idea of an organization of WELS Lutherans dedicated to preserving and relating the history of our synod goes back to a bibliographic conference in 1978 at what was then Dr. Martin Luther College, New Ulm, Minnesota. The Institute's constitution mandates its efforts involve *promoting* interest in North American Lutheranism, especially the history of the Wisconsin Ev. Lutheran Synod, *publishing* the results of research into Lutheran history, and *preserving* significant artifacts relating to the history of the synod.

Our current situation

The Institute—like many historical societies of a similar nature—is experiencing a gradual erosion of its membership base. In the second issue of the *WELS Historical Institute Journal* (Fall 1983), the Institute's then president, Rev. Roland Cap Elke, reported: "The Institute's charter membership stands at almost 600. This represents numerous lay people as well as pastors and teachers." Thirty-five years later, the current president regrets to report to the twelve districts that membership in the WELS Historical Institute has declined to less than 250 members. The major reason for this membership erosion is simple demographics. Many of the Institute's founders and charter members have gone to be with the Lord in heaven and they have not been significantly replaced with a new, younger membership base. Generation X and Millennials are not nearly as inclined to join a historical organization as their grandparents or parents have done in the past. This reality represents a long-term and potentially serious problem for the sustainability of the WELS Historical Institute. The Institute's board of directors is acutely aware of this situation and are working to develop plans for the long-term health and viability of the organization.

Despite the ongoing challenges of maintaining a sustainable membership base, the Institute in 2017 experienced one of its most productive years in recent memory. The highlight of the year was the refurbishing, painting, and stenciling of both of the sidewalls of Salem Lutheran Landmark Church. This expensive project was paid for by generous individuals who believe the history of the WELS needs to be preserved and financially supported. This building has served as the official WELS Museum for over a generation. The WELS had its first and its constituting convention in what was then Granville, Wisconsin on May 26, 1850, marking the birth of the synod. The first synod convention took place in a log church, which was Salem's place of worship before the current Landmark Church was constructed in 1863, near the location of the log church. The WELS Historical Institute has made the preservation and restoration of Salem Lutheran Landmark Church on Milwaukee's northwest side one of its ongoing endeavors.

There were many other highlights of our work in 2017. Once again, the Institute hosted a bus tour of significant sites of Milwaukee-area Lutheranism this past August. The bus tour began an informative day of WELS history at David's Star, Jackson, toured the WELS archives and the WELS Center for Mission and Ministry, Waukesha, enjoyed lunch at Wisconsin Lutheran College, and finished the day by touring St. Lucas, Bayview and St. Marcus, Milwaukee. The next bus tour is tentatively scheduled for the summer of 2020, with visits to WELS sites in the Watertown area.

Each year around a dozen different groups of various sizes come to tour the Landmark Church, view the historical exhibits, and walk the grounds where the synod was founded. These groups represent a cross section of WELS congregations, schools, organizations, and individuals.

Twice a year, under the editorship of Prof. John Brenner of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, the *WELS Historical Institute Journal* is published, which features scholarly articles on various persons, places, and events connected with WELS history and American Lutheranism. Past issues of the *Journal* up to 2015 are available online from the synod website under WELS Historical Institute. In addition to the *Journal*, a semi-annual newsletter is also published, informing Institute members of happenings and upcoming events of interest.

Since its founding, the WELS Historical Institute has endeavored to offer annual lectures and presentations which are of interest to WELS members and the general public. This past year, Mr. James Moeller hosted another informative tour of West Granville Cemetery, across the road from Salem on 107th Street, the burial place of many of Salem's original members. The Institute, together with members of the current Salem Ev. Lutheran Church, opened the Landmark Church for the popular "Doors Open Milwaukee" event, which attracts numerous visitors from the general public to Salem. At the Institute's annual meeting on Sunday, October 22, 2017, held at WELS CMM, Prof. Brenner gave the presentation, "From Federation to Final Amalgamation: The Birth of the Wisconsin Synod as We Know It Today."

The WELS Historical Institute wishes to honor the memory and service of our late former president, Prof. Robert Bock, who was called to his eternal home in heaven on September 26, 2017. In addition to a long and distinguished teaching career in WELS schools, the last forty as a professor at Northwestern and Luther Preparatory School, Watertown, Bob served for many years on the WELS Historical Institute board and as its president. We, along with his family and friends, mourn his passing but rejoice that Bob's soul is safely with the Lord in heaven. Blessed be his memory.

Finally, the board of directors also wishes to acknowledge Mr. Ken Artlip's service to the board and the organization. Ken helped conduct numerous tours of Salem and is retiring due to health concerns. We thank him for his contributions to the Institute.

A look ahead

The WELS Historical Institute continues to assume responsibility of the upkeep and maintenance of Salem Lutheran Landmark Church. There is still much work that needs to be done to fulfill the Institute's goal of restoring the building to its original 1863 appearance. The next major project which has to be addressed is re-roofing the church building. Generous donations have already been given for this project but significant funds still need to be raised.

New for 2018 is that the WELS Historical Institute website has ended its independent existence and has been incorporated into the WELS website. This will enable the Institute to update its information in a timelier manner to better serve its constituency.

The board of directors of the WELS Historical Institute meets four times a year to oversee the work of the Institute and to provide general governance. Board meetings are normally held in February, April, September, and October, immediately after the annual meeting. The annual meeting the past several years has been held in late October at the WELS CMM and always features a presentation on some aspect of WELS history. Reports from various board committees and elections are also held.

WELS congregations, schools, organizations, and individuals have a standing invitation from the Institute to tour the Landmark Church and its grounds. Normally tours are conducted from April through

October, although special arrangements can be made for out-of-town guests. To arrange a tour, contact the tour coordinator, Dr. Joel Pless, at 414-443-8930 (office), 262-677-2109 (home) or joel.pless@wlc.edu.

The finances of the WELS Historical Institute remains solvent, but the Institute always welcomes donations to fund its general operations and special projects. New members of the Institute are always welcome and they are genuinely needed for the important work of the Institute to continue. For information in becoming a member of the WELS Historical Institute and participating in its historical preservation work, visit www.wels.net, and click on WELS Historical Institute.

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