ELS Centennial Bulletin Readings

History for Each Sunday’s Bulletin

January 1

Proclaim the Wonders God Has Done: 1918–2018

The anniversaries continue. In 2018 the Evangelical Lutheran Synod (ELS) is observing the centennial anniversary of its reorganization. Throughout this year, a series of historical centennial readings will be printed every Sunday in the bulletin. We *Proclaim the Wonders God Has Done* as the ELS observes one hundred years of grace.

January 14

Proclaim the Wonders God Has Done: 1918–2018

Although this year the Evangelical Lutheran Synod (ELS) is observing the 100th anniversary of reorganization, the synod has its roots in the former Norwegian Synod which was organized in southern Wisconsin in 1853. The Norwegian Synod was a liturgical church body which sought to maintain the doctrine and liturgy of the State Church of Norway.

January 21

Proclaim the Wonders God Has Done: 1918–2018

As the successors of the Norwegian Synod, members of the ELS remember the oak trees at Koshkonong, Wisconsin where in 1844 a Lutheran pastor from Norway gathered a small group of immigrants. The words of Psalm 78 directed the pastor as he answered the question, “Can God Furnish a Table in the Wilderness?” God fed His people then, as He does today, with His inspired Word and the Sacraments.

January 28

Proclaim the Wonders God Has Done: 1918–2018

Today, as the ELS observes its centennial, the synod consists of 17,000 members in 131 congregations. But prior to 1917, the synod consisted of 150,522 souls in 986 congregations. At that time, the Synod also operated one college, one teacher-training school, one seminary, twelve academies (high schools), four orphans’ homes, three old-people’s homes, two hospitals, and a publishing house.

February 4

Proclaim the Wonders God Has Done: 1918–2018

During this anniversary year, we remember the three “fathers,” of the Synod who are Herman Preus, Jakob Ottesen, and Vilhelm Koren. The Rev. H.A. Preus served Spring Prairie Lutheran Church (near Keyser, Wisconsin). He is regarded as the “administrator” of the Synod and served as its president for thirty-two years. At his funeral in 1894, he was remembered as a “scriptural theologian.”

February 11

Proclaim the Wonders God Has Done: 1918–2018

The Rev. Jakob A. Ottesen was another of the three “fathers,” of the Synod. He served the Koshkonong Lutheran Churches (near Cottage Grove, Wisconsin). He is remembered as a “model pastor” for the Synod. Following his daughter’s death in 1931, his household estate and library were given to the reorganized synod. This collection became the core of the Ottesen Museum, which is located on the campus of Bethany Lutheran College in Mankato, Minnesota.

February 18

Proclaim the Wonders God Has Done: 1918–2018

The third “father” of the Synod was the Rev. Ulrik Vilhem Koren. He served Washington Prairie Lutheran Church (near Decorah, Iowa). He is remembered as the “theologian” of the Synod. In 1884, he wrote “An Accounting” to the congregations of the Synod stating the Synod’s doctrinal position. He also wrote the hymn “Ye Lands, to the Lord Make a Jubilant Noise.”

February 25

Proclaim the Wonders God Has Done: 1918–2018

The Norwegian Synod, as the predecessor body of the ELS, was concerned with preserving the doctrinal truths which God has given in the Bible. In the late 1800s a doctrinal controversy rocked the Norwegian Synod. One-third of the congregations and pastors left the synod at that time. The synod sought to defend the teaching that eternal salvation is entirely by God’s grace and mercy on account of Jesus Christ and does not consist of any merit in sinful people.

March 4

Proclaim the Wonders God Has Done: 1918–2018

The precipitous event which led to the reorganization of the Norwegian Synod as the ELS occurred in 1917 when a merger of Norwegian Lutheran church bodies occurred. The issue under discussion from 1912–17, as it was in the 1880s, was the teaching that salvation is completely a gift of God’s grace in Jesus Christ. This is not a small matter or a fine point in doctrine but a question of the central Biblical teaching of justification by grace alone. The minority that later formed the ELS sought to uphold this teaching in the face of impending merger with those who taught differently.

March 11

Proclaim the Wonders God Has Done: 1918–2018

One year before the ELS was reorganized the merger of Norwegian church bodies occurred. The former Norwegian Synod, overlooking what had happened in the 1880s, unfortunately went along into the merger with churches who had opposed the scriptural position on predestination. The merger came about on the basis of a 1912 doctrinal compromise document known as the “Madison Settlement.”

March 18

Proclaim the Wonders God Has Done: 1918–2018

In 1917, the merger of three Norwegian Lutheran synods was the “greatest church demonstration ever held by Norwegian Lutherans anywhere in the world.” During the days before, a small minority had gathered at the Aberdeen Hotel in St. Paul, Minnesota. The following Sunday, the minority who would eventually reorganize as the ELS worshipped with Fairview Lutheran Church (today, King of Grace Lutheran Church) in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

March 25

Proclaim the Wonders God Has Done: 1918–2018

Immediately after its reorganization in 1918, the ELS found its fellowship with the congregations and synods of the Evangelical Lutheran Synodical Conference. The former Norwegian Synod had helped to organize the conference in 1872. The ELS continued in the Synodical Conference until 1963 when it withdrew because of doctrinal concerns. The conference was dissolved four years later.

April 1

Proclaim the Wonders God Has Done: 1918–2018

The following announcement appeared in the April 1, 1918 issue of the church paper *Luthersk Tidende*: “Pastors and members of congregations who desire to continue in the old doctrine and practice of the Norwegian Synod will, God willing, hold their annual meeting in the Lime Creek congregation, Pastor H. Ingebritson’s charge, June 14 and following days.”

April 8

Proclaim the Wonders God Has Done: 1918–2018

Following 1918, the reorganized synod was small. Yet this did not dampen the spirit of its members. It was said, “A small body such as our synod still enjoys certain privileges and advantages … We are as it were, one family and still of the first generation; and though it is readily granted that large numbers can accomplish vastly greater things, we do well in enjoying while we have it, the intimacy … where plans and aims and hopes still largely take place.”

April 15

Proclaim the Wonders God Has Done: 1918–2018

Since the synod from its beginning already was in fellowship with the Wisconsin Synod and the Missouri Synod, the training of pastors and teachers in its early years occurred through these sister synods. In particular, the pastors often were educated at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis, Missouri.

April 22

Proclaim the Wonders God Has Done: 1918–2018

In 1927, the ELS voted to take over the ownership and operation of Bethany Lutheran College in Mankato, Minnesota. The school was established in 1911 as Bethany Ladies’ College and became available for purchase the previous year. An association was formed first to acquire the college. The price was $90,000, and carried with it an immediate payment of $20,000. The fifteen acre campus was valued at $400,000.

April 29

Proclaim the Wonders God Has Done: 1918–2018

A notable remark was made at the time the ELS purchased Bethany Lutheran College: “Once we have discovered that the school is a necessity, we will discover we can afford it. We can do a lot of things that we think are absolutely necessary once they have become a matter of life or death to us.” For many decades Bethany Lutheran College existed as a junior college. In 1996 the synod decided to make the college a four-year baccalaureate-degree granting institution.

May 6

Proclaim the Wonders God Has Done: 1918–2018

Bethany Lutheran College became a co-educational junior college in 1927 when it was purchased by the ELS. At that time a high school department also was established which shared both the faculty and the dormitories. The high school was discontinued in 1969. Today, Bethany Lutheran College offers twenty-four majors, twenty-four minors, and eight pre-professional programs taught by seventy-five full-time and adjunct faculty.

May 13

Proclaim the Wonders God Has Done: 1918–2018

The Bethany Lutheran College Choir was established in 1929, two years after the synod took over the operation of the school. In early years, concerts concluded with *“The Benediction”* by P. Lutkin. Since the 1940s, concerts have concluded with a time-honored tradition of singing the hymn *“On My Heart Imprint Thine Image”* written by T. Kingo. A distinctive mark of the synod, since the publication of the *Evangelical Lutheran Hymnary* in 1996, also is the congregation’s chanting of the Lord’s Prayer.

May 20

Proclaim the Wonders God Has Done: 1918–2018

The Evangelical Lutheran Synod and Bethany Lutheran College are intimately united. The college gives a visibility and identity to the synod. In turn, the synod gives moorings to the college and elects both the Board of Regents and Board of Trustees for the college. Since 1928, most conventions of the synod have been conducted on the college campus.

May 27

Proclaim the Wonders God Has Done: 1918–2018

The ELS has always had a commitment to Lutheran elementary education. It has been questioned if our present synod would ever have been organized if it had not been for the support of those who had been educated in Christian day schools. We may properly say that we owe our present existence as a Biblical-teaching synod in large part to the Christian day school. Today eighteen ELS congregations operate Lutheran elementary schools or preschools for 1,329 students.

June 3

Proclaim the Wonders God Has Done: 1918–2018

One hundred years ago, during the reorganization convention of the ELS, the Rev. Bjug Harstad, who was the first president of the newly formed church body, encouraged the small gathering. He referenced words from the book of Jeremiah: “Stand in the ways and see, and ask for the old paths, where the good way is, and walk in it; then you will find rest for your souls” (Jeremiah 6:16).

June 10

Proclaim the Wonders God Has Done: 1918–2018

One hundred years ago, over two-hundred pastors and representatives from congregations were preparing to make their journey to Lime Creek Lutheran Church near Lake Mills, Iowa for the synod’s reorganizing convention which was to meet Friday, June 14 through Wednesday, June 19, 1918.

June 17

Proclaim the Wonders God Has Done: 1918–2018

One hundred years ago today—on June 17, 1918—at Lime Creek Lutheran Church in northern Iowa, our synod was reorganized as “The Norwegian Synod of the American Evangelical Lutheran Church.” The synod was contending for the same confessional doctrine of the old synod of 1853. In 1957 the name was changed to “Evangelical Lutheran Synod,” reflecting a broader membership and an emphasis on gospel outreach.

June 24

Proclaim the Wonders God Has Done: 1918–2018

One hundred years ago, because there were war-time restrictions in the state of Iowa prohibiting the use of any language other than English in public gatherings, a tent was erected in Minnesota, one mile north of the Lime Creek Lutheran Church. Some of the 1918 convention sessions were held in this sixty-foot square tent where the Norwegian language could be used without the appearance of disloyalty to the nation.

July 1

Proclaim the Wonders God Has Done: 1918–2018

The first officers elected for the reorganized ELS in 1918 were: Bjug Harstad, president (Parkland, Washington); John A. Moldstad, vice-president (Chicago, Illinois); C.N. Peterson, secretary (Minneapolis, Minnesota); A.J. Torgerson, treasurer (Northwood, Iowa). Committees also were elected for Missions, Publications, History, and Constitution. It also was determined to continue the publication of the *Luthersk Tidende* (today, *Lutheran Sentinel*).

July 8

Proclaim the Wonders God Has Done: 1918–2018

Fourteen congregations sent representatives to the 1919 constituting convention which was hosted by Our Savior’s Lutheran Church in Albert Lea, Minnesota. Along with twenty-two clergy, these congregations are regarded as the charter members of the reorganized synod. This constitution remained in force until 1986, when the present constitution and bylaws were adopted.

July 15:

Proclaim the Wonders God Has Done: 1918–2018

The first issue of the *Luthersk Tidende* (today, *Lutheran Sentinel*) was dated July 16, 1917 which was one year prior to the reorganization of the synod. That inaugural issue said, “If there are enough subscribers for the paper, it will come out twice each month with eight or sixteen pages. If not enough favor is gained for that, it will come out as a pamphlet as money to defray publishing expenses comes in. The subscription price in either case is a dollar per year.”

July 22:

Proclaim the Wonders God Has Done: 1918–2018

During this anniversary year, the *Lutheran Sentinel* continues to be the voice of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod. Until 1982, the *Lutheran Sentinel* was published in a bi-weekly format. An early editor wrote, “We have tried to live up to both the name and the motto (It Is Written!) of the paper … We have endeavored to be a faithful sentinel and make use of the weapons the motto indicates.”

July 29

Proclaim the Wonders God Has Done: 1918–2018

In observance of the synod’s centennial year, the Lutheran Youth Association (LYA) is holding its annual convention in Parkland, Washington. The site was selected because, in 1918, this location was the home of the first president of our reorganized synod. By God’s grace, the ELS has endured these one hundred years *“Even When Steeples Are Falling.”*

August 5:

Proclaim the Wonders God Has Done: 1918–2018

Mission work always has received much attention in our Evangelical Lutheran Synod. Already at the 1918 convention, a Home Mission Board was established. Much of the early mission work in those days was found in supporting small groups who had been displaced or left without church buildings as a result of the merger of 1917. In 1918, the synod called two pastors to serve as missionaries-at-large in the upper Midwest.

August 12:

Proclaim the Wonders God Has Done: 1918–2018

In the 1980s the focus for home missions shifted from offering aid to established churches to that of supporting exploratory missions. Former President Orvick observed, “Where would we be today if it were not for the dedicated efforts of our members and our mission boards who, with limited resources, boldly took steps to organize mission churches?”

August 19:

Proclaim the Wonders God Has Done: 1918–2018

A sermon preached at the 1918 reorganizing convention of the ELS reminded the faithful few that their purpose was to extend God’s kingdom and they “should not weary in this work.” Since its reorganization in 1918, the ELS has participated in foreign mission work in fifteen nations. Working through the synods of the Synodical Conference, early missionaries served in China, India and Nigeria.

August 26:

Proclaim the Wonders God Has Done: 1918–2018

As the ELS observes the 100th anniversary of reorganization, we also remember this year marks the 50th anniversary of the start of mission work in Peru. In 1968, following years of cooperating jointly through the Synodical Conference, the ELS decided to establish its own foreign mission in Lima, Peru. The first missionary arrived on January 1, 1968. Work also expanded into the Amazon jungle.

September 2:

Proclaim the Wonders God Has Done: 1918–2018

Since its reorganization in 1918, the ELS has participated in foreign mission work in fifteen nations. Today, in addition to the ongoing work in Peru, the ELS conducts mission work in Chile, India and South Korea. In 2008, through the acquisition of Thoughts of Faith, Inc., a church-related organization founded in 1979, the synod helps promote gospel outreach in Latvia and in the Czech Republic (Czechia), and also supports the Gift of Life and Medical Clinic on Wheels projects in Ukraine.

September 9:

Proclaim the Wonders God Has Done: 1918–2018

The Synodical Conference came to a close after the ELS and the WELS separated from the Lutheran Church­–Missouri Synod over the doctrine of church fellowship. In 1993 efforts by the ELS and the WELS to form a new international organization of fellowship came to fruition in what today is known as the Confessional Evangelical Lutheran Conference (CELC) which meets on a triennial basis.

September 16:

Proclaim the Wonders God Has Done: 1918–2018

During this centennial year, the ELS holds dear the fellowship which we have with the member church bodies throughout the world in the Confessional Evangelical Lutheran Conference (CELC). The thirty-two church bodies consist of about 500,000 souls. The Rev. Gaylin Schmeling, of the ELS, currently serves as the president of the CELC being elected at its latest triennial convention at Grimma, Germany in the summer of 2017. The next international convention will be hosted in 2020 in South Korea.

September 23:

Proclaim the Wonders God Has Done: 1918–2018

The opening service for Bethany Lutheran Theological Seminary was conducted on September 24, 1946. Five students were enrolled during the first year. Norman A. Madson, Sr., the first dean of the seminary wrote, “Our own seminary is no longer merely a child of our fond desires, but has become a living reality.” The seminary shared classroom space with Bethany Lutheran College, and in a practice still in existence today, professors often taught both in the college and the seminary.

September 30:

Proclaim the Wonders God Has Done: 1918–2018

The president of Bethany Lutheran College also served as the president of Bethany Lutheran Theological Seminary until 1976. At that time, the first full-time president was installed for the seminary. In the following years, two separate and newly erected buildings (one in 1978; the other in 1997) have housed the seminary. The location of the seminary is at 6 Browns Court in Mankato, Minnesota.

October 7:

Proclaim the Wonders God Has Done: 1918–2018

A custom within the old Norwegian Synod was to regard October 14 as Founders’ Day. Over the years, many church dedications and special events took place on that day. The ELS which was reorganized in 1918 has carried on this tradition. We will yet observe that tradition next Sunday as a public testimony that the ELS, which was organized 100 years ago, is the spiritual successor to the doctrine and practice of the old Norwegian Synod.

October 14

Proclaim the Wonders God Has Done: 1918–2018

As we gather today, on Founders’ Day, we *Proclaim the Wonders God Has Done.* It is by God’s grace that the Evangelical Lutheran Synod has survived to this centennial year. We tell the history not to laud ourselves but to praise the Triune God who has sustained us. It is the Lord God who has washed us with water. It is the Savior Jesus Christ who prepares a table of bread and wine. It is the Holy Spirit who has preserved us to this day. May He strengthen us to continue to *Proclaim the Wonders God Has Done.*