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The Wisconsin Synod Lutherans Print in German

Wisconsin's Lutherans Need to Print in German

The year 2025 marked the 175th anniversary of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS).¹ This paper explores how and why the Wisconsin Synod utilized the German language in its printed materials for more than a century and analyzes some of the cultural, religious, and historical implications of its shift to English. Founded amidst the surge of German immigration to Wisconsin in the mid-19th century, WELS initially served German-speaking Lutheran communities who arrived in America without sufficient religious leadership. From its beginning, the German language was central to the synod's identity. While initially challenged by the regional diversity within the German immigrant community, Wisconsin Synod leaders successfully expressed Lutheran theology through printed materials, such as church papers, liturgies, and hymnals. By examining themes of language as religious identity, assimilation pressures, cultural heritage retention, and theological fidelity, this paper situates the synod's linguistic journey within the broader narrative of immigrant adaptation in America. Utilizing primary sources—including synodical documents, personal writings, and diaries—it traces critical phases, from the era of publisher George Brumder to the significant linguistic transformations sparked by the two world wars. Ultimately, this analysis sheds light on the nuanced interplay of faith, culture, and language,

providing insights relevant both historically and in contemporary discourse about religious and immigrant identity in America.

In December 1849, moderate Lutheran Johannes Muehlhaeuser² and two other pastors in the Milwaukee area met to organize the “First German Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Wisconsin.” It formally adopted its constitution in 1850. The synod was “Evangelical” since it sought to make the proclamation of the gospel (the *euangelion*) its chief endeavor. Yet to some, the term “*Evangelisch*” could signal unionism with other denominations. This issue was one the young synod had to resolve in its first generation. The synod was “Lutheran” because it sought primarily to serve churchless Lutherans (as opposed to those who served German Protestants more generally). It would eventually establish that it subscribed to the Lutheran Confessions because they believed that these documents correctly taught God’s Word. Finally, the synod was “German” because its ministers came from Germany and it sought to serve the large population of German immigrants who often had no trained spiritual leaders. The main flow of German immigration from the 1840s to the 1880s meant that for several generations, the German Wisconsin Lutheran Synod would naturally speak, read, sing, and print in German.

Initially, the synods primary focus was on organizing congregations in the rapidly developing frontier and cities in Wisconsin as many thousands of German immigrants settled in the young state. Next came the need to acquire trained and reliable pastors. Therefore, for much of the 1850s, the small synod did not take up any major printing projects of its own. Unique documents, such as synod meeting minutes, were kept in manuscript form for several years. When they were printed in the latter half of the 1850s, local print shops conveniently met the small demand of such minor projects. Yet congregational life and worship regularly required printed materials. It was all-but inevitable that a Lutheran church would both rely on and develop printed materials. After all, the printed word, image, and song was a major tool and feature of Luther’s reformation.³

Lutheran worship assumes congregational participation and singing. For 500 years this has been largely facilitated by printed songbooks or hymnals. Initially, the Wisconsin Synod congregations relied on the hymnals that the immigrant members brought with them from Europe. However, this method worked well only if people actually brought their hymnals with them (which they often did not) and if the hymnal-toting worshipers had come from the same region. While this occasionally was the case, in both the cosmopolitan centers like Milwaukee and even in many rural areas, German-speaking Lutherans often came from a dozen or more different kingdoms, duchies, and principalities from the German Confederation. Each German nation, through its government-run Church consistory, produced at least one

hymnal for its territories—or even multiple ones if the state had inherited historically distinct regions with a strong local sense of identity following the Napoleonic Wars.⁴

The result was that often the pastor would have to announce multiple hymn numbers during the service, corresponding to different hymnals. Inevitably, textual variants and different verses and stanzas often led to frustrating chaos in worship, which the German Lutherans (perhaps even more than most) would have preferred to have been both dignified and orderly. As some WELS historians have put it, “It was like the time of the Judges—everyone did what was right in his own eyes”—worship anarchy.⁵

Furthermore, many of the immigrants who identified as “Lutheran” had officially been part of the newly invented “Evangelisch” or “Union” Church in Prussia and many other Protestant states. This was the forced merger of the Reformed and Lutheran traditions. While it was impossible to force or decree a change of heart or conscience (as Luther himself famously exemplified at the Diet of Worms in 1521), there were many ways the states’ church Union could be enforced externally. Chiefly, this took place in the officially sanctioned agendas, orders of worship, and hymnals—many of which were brought into Wisconsin by the “Lutheran” immigrants who made up the new synod.

As the very-much “Lutheran” German synod in Wisconsin embraced the American freedom to be as distinctly Lutheran as it wished, it began to reckon with elements that undermined pure Lutheran theology and worship. It was the need for trustworthy and consistent worship and education materials that compelled the Wisconsin Synod to look into printing its own materials.⁶ Of all people, it was Johannes Muehlhaeuser at Grace Lutheran in Milwaukee who came under criticism for using the “United Lutheran and Reformed Hymnal.”⁷ By 1863, there was a general consensus in the Wisconsin Synod that there was a need to address the agenda issue, but leaders were divided on whether to use a reputable agenda from Germany, adopt an American one, or make its own. Muehlhaeuser pointed out that the German agendas did not contain all the rites one would use in the American context. Others asserted that the Pennsylvania Synod’s agenda had many of the theological problems of the Union agendas.⁸ The issue was delegated to a committee, whose recommendation to use the Ohio Synod’s agenda in 1864 was adopted. However, attempts to work with the Ohio synod in developing a hymnal ultimately came to nothing.⁹

At the same time, the synod resolved to publish a church paper, the *Evangelisch-Lutherisches Gemeinde-Blatt*.¹⁰ This paper was meant to inform laity and leaders alike in the synod of church news, programs, and mission work. It often included articles on doctrine and church history. In this sense,

it was very similar to a large number of church papers in the United States and was one of dozens of German Lutheran periodicals.¹¹ The paper's motto, "Halte was du hast..." crowned the top of each front page for over 100 years.¹² Its message, "Hold what you have," reflects the conservative concern of the ministers who encouraged Lutheran immigrants to preserve their faith and pass it on to future generations. Initially, the paper was printed in Watertown by local shops, where it was edited by the seminary professors in the same city.

In the meantime, after several years of hymnal committee work looking at the Pennsylvania Synod's hymnal, the Wisconsin Synod, approved a *Liederbuch für christliche Schulen* in 1867—its second major printing project. Finally, the synod approved a heavily revised hymnal the *Evang.-Lutherisches Gesangbuch* in 1870. That same year, the Wisconsin Synod experimented with merging its seminary program with the Missouri Synod in St. Louis and closed the Watertown, Wisconsin seminary (while keeping its Northwestern University in the same locale). The editing was moved to Milwaukee where its two editors, Johannes Bading (synod president) and Adolph Hoenecke (former seminary president) served as pastors.¹³ For all these projects, the synod had a convenient connection, ready to put their plans into print and meet the needs of the synod—George Brumder.

The Brumder Era

Brumder was born near Strassburg in Alsace in 1839. He immigrated in 1857 to the United States at the age of 18. In 1864, he opened a bookstore on Water Street in Milwaukee. In 1874, Brumder and two associates acquired *Germania* and *Hausfreund* and organized Germania Publishing Company, publishing daily and weekly newspapers. Brumder became the sole owner of *Germania* (the largest German paper in the United States) in 1880. He built the Germania building in Milwaukee in 1896.¹⁴ After acquiring more papers, Brumder was recognized by Presidents Roosevelt and Taft as a man with significant influence in the country and was a guest in the White House.¹⁵ But before printing his daily German papers and before he was noticed by the presidents of the United States, George Brumder was first a printer of church materials and intimately connected with the presidents of the Wisconsin Synod.¹⁶

George's sister, Maria, immigrated in 1852 and married Wilhelm Streissguth. They moved to Milwaukee in 1856 where she died the following year. In 1858 Streissguth married sister Magdalena Brumder. In 1857, another sister, Anna Brumder, also immigrated to Milwaukee, where she married Gottlieb Reim.¹⁷ Both Reim and Streissguth were pastors in the Wisconsin Synod, and both served as president of the synod briefly in the

mid-1860s. George lived in the parsonage of St. John's where his brother-in-law, Streissguth, was pastor. The two men worked together on one of Brumder's earliest large productions, the weekly *Der Familienfreund*. George remained with the Streissguth family until 1864, when he married Henriette Brandhorst.¹⁸

George and Henrietta met at Muehlhaeuser's Grace Lutheran Church, where Henrietta had earlier, according to their grandson, "regularly attended the Grace Church Sunday School." She was a sharp student. "In a contest held by the school, she was awarded the first prize, a small bible, for memorizing the greatest number of verses in one week's time.... Grandmother treasured this prize all her lifetime."¹⁹ She was famous for her direct encouragement to her family members to attend worship weekly, "Du gehst zur Kirche."²⁰

The Brumders were "extremely religious in their Lutheran faith. They took great interest in building up the Grace Lutheran Church...which remained their church throughout their lives." George helped manage the congregation's finances while Henrietta was the head of the *Frauverein*.²¹ The pastors who succeeded Muehlhaeuser at Grace (Theodore Jaekel and Carl Gausewitz) were likewise leaders in the Wisconsin Synod and "intimate friends" with the Brumders.²² Even when the Wisconsin Synod president was not a resident pastor in Milwaukee, the president would personally meet with Brumder.²³

In 1869, Brumder signed a contract with the Wisconsin Synod to publish the hymnal. He would have all rights to the book and its publication for 30 years and would pay the synod \$.05 for every copy sold.²⁴ The hymnal would undergo some significant revisions in its first few years. Significantly, some of the major changes, apart from adding or dropping hymns, were the addition of the Augsburg Confession, Luther's Small Catechism, and a rite for emergency baptism. At the same time, the Minnesota Lutheran Synod adopted the hymnal and was consequently served by Brumder.²⁵

To help facilitate the adoption of the Wisconsin synod hymnal, Brumder offered to exchange a new Wisconsin Synod hymnal for a used Missouri Synod one in good condition for no extra cost. Evidently, the acceptance of the Wisconsin hymnal by congregations was not widespread in the early years. Perhaps this was due to the plethora of options—even confessional Lutheran ones from the sister Missouri Synod.²⁶ Brumder felt compelled to write to the synod to urge its pastors to adopt the hymnal and promote it among their members.²⁷ Eventually, the hymnal would prove to be largely popular and would remain in print through 1960.

In the meantime, Brumder's business grew beyond the needs of the Wisconsin Synod. At times, his broader endeavors would develop tensions with his de facto status as the church's official printer. In 1873, when Brumder joined the German Protestant Printers Association to print the *Germania*, an

attempt was made to establish a balance of being principled and flexible when it came to religious content:

[The *Germania*] shall be edited in a truly Christian Spirit in accordance with positive Christian principles, and shall not contain anything that goes against the fundamental doctrines and truths of the Holy Scriptures. On the contrary, it shall, in general defend Christianity, when and where necessary, but at the same time strictly avoid all confessional controversies.²⁸

Yet, the problem among Christians, and even between the various Lutheran synods, was determining what were truly the truths of the Holy Scriptures. Furthermore, Brumder's own Wisconsin Synod had rejected union with Lutherans on the basis of only partial agreement on doctrine. In 1872, it joined with five other synods to form the Evangelical Lutheran Synodical Conference of North America on the grounds of full doctrinal agreement. However, it seems that the *Germania* was not seeking to replace the *Gemeinde-Blatt* or other church papers but was rather establishing a basic standard regarding any incidental religious or moral content. It perhaps was a moot point as Brumder took full control of the paper after a few years.

Indeed, the Wisconsin Synod found Brumder and his *Germania* to be a powerful friend and ally. Brumder came out in full force against the infamous Bennett Law of 1889, which threatened the viability of any non-English language school in Wisconsin—of which the Wisconsin Synod had hundreds. Brumder powerfully advocated for a political change and helped turn the election of 1890 over to the Democrats, who repealed the Bennett Law.²⁹ The synod's *Gemeinde-Blatt* likewise had urged pastors to “fight the enemy.”³⁰ Upon the political reversal of the Bennett Law, it gave thanks for deliverance from “the fanatic, native-born enemies of the German parochial schools.” The enemies of the Church had been defeated, and the victory was given to the side of “freedom and knowledge.”³¹

Nevertheless, real tension broke into open conflict when the *Germania* began printing ads for the theatre in 1896. Several Lutheran pastors began advocating for a boycott of the paper in their congregations.³² It is unclear if these pastors were part of the Wisconsin or Missouri Synods. While the two groups had established fellowship and public agreement, each maintained its own institutions—resulting in unique emphases and doctrinal applications in everyday situations. The Missouri Synod had been more vocally opposed to the corrupting influences of the theatre.³³ While the boycott proved to be a complete failure, by the turn of the century, the Wisconsin Synod had decided to take responsibility for its printing.

The Wisconsin Synod's move away from Brumder was certainly not carried out on bad terms. Already in 1890, Brumder had offered to transfer the printing and sale of the hymnal to the synod, almost ten years before his contract ended.³⁴ For several years, Brumder had doubled the synod's hymnal royalty.³⁵ In 1910, seminary student Henry A. Koch reported that Brumder had attended a banquet at Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church³⁶ on Broadway Avenue in Milwaukee held to benefit the synod's college in Watertown, Wisconsin and had donated \$3000 for a new athletic building. When Brumder died a few weeks later, Koch noted that Brumder was a widely respected man in both synod and German American circles.³⁷

Self-Sufficient but not Insular

The Wisconsin Synod did not decide to move to one of Brumder's competitors but rather to establish its own publishing house. The synod had already established a "synodical bookstore" in 1876, run by F. Werner and Son on Broadway St. in Milwaukee. In 1891, the synod convention decided that the steady demand, along with the benefits of direct oversight, made establishing a publishing house the logical choice. At first, Northwestern Publishing House (NPH) rented out several spaces in the south 300 block on 3rd Street in Milwaukee. Julius Luening became manager in 1894. He held this position until 1945—becoming a personification of Northwestern Publishing House.³⁸

In 1913, Northwestern Publishing House built its own place on 4th Street with rooms for a bookstore, office, and print shop. The stockroom was located in the basement next to the boiler. Employees were in near-constant fear that a fire would break out in the close quarters among the flammable materials. Nevertheless, the publishing house continued operations on 4th Street until the city enacted eminent domain to build a sports arena in 1947.³⁹

To serve its laity, pastors, and scholars, the Wisconsin Synod locally produced various printed materials in the German language to meet its high theological standards. Northwestern Publishing House quickly began to fill the needs of the synod for educational, devotional, and worship materials. In addition to taking on the hymnal and the *Gemeinde-Blatt*, it reprinted popular materials, such as the 18th century devotional *Tägliches Hand-Buch* by Johann Friedrich Stark. However, NPH most often printed various materials authored by Wisconsin Synod professors and pastors. For example textbooks like, *Die biblische Geschichte für christliche Schulen* by Northwestern College president August Ernst and *Christenfragen Aus Gottes Wort beantwortet* by Indian missionary Carl Manthey-Zorn.; special worship programs like *Liturgische Weihnachtsfeier für Kinder* by future synod president John O. W. Brenner; an edition of Luther's Small Catechism with additional questions

by synodical leader and pastor Carl Gausewitz; and devotionals like *Biblische Hausandachten* by seminary professor August Pieper. In 1911, after decades of borrowing from other synods, the NPH published *Agende* for use in all Wisconsin Synod congregations.

By the turn of the 20th century, the Wisconsin Synod had become a serious producer of Lutheran materials, of all kinds in the German language. It not only had become all but self-sufficient in supplying its own needs but sought to contribute to the Synodical Conference—the largest association of Lutherans in North America. Indeed, some groups like the neighboring Minnesota and Michigan synods made frequent use of Wisconsin Synod materials such as the *Gemeinde-Blatt*. The influence of these materials contributed to their merger into the Wisconsin Synod in 1917.⁴⁰ Wisconsin Synod leaders also recognized that as the synod faced new challenges and opportunities in its American and immigrant context, it must also apply theological principles in ways that precluded simplistic repristination of the 16th-century Reformation. The resulting “Wauwatosa Theology” (named after the location of the seminary from 1892-1929) came to life in the German publications of the synod.

This distinct school of thought within the confessional Lutheran tradition led to the expansion of the Wisconsin Synod printing serious academic materials. Adolf Hoenecke’s *Ev.-Luth. Dogmatik* was among the first complete and original works of Lutheran systematic theology in North America. Furthermore, in 1904, the seminary professors began an academic journal, the *Theologische Quartalschrift*, and produced scholarly articles covering the four traditional branches of theology: exegetical, historical, systematic, and practical.⁴¹ Even the synods’ first full-length history, *Geschichte der Allgemeinden Evangelisch-Luthersichen Synode von Wisconsin und anderen Staaten*, by professor John Philipp Koehler, stands out as an analytic and source-based work, in contrast to the often hagiographic style of church histories of that era.

The Linguistic Crossroad

In 1911, the number of subscribers for the *Gemeinde-Blatt* rose to 13,000. Near the eve of WWI, this would prove to be the high watermark of the Wisconsin Synod’s German printing endeavors. At the same time, the Wisconsin Synod began printing in English for the first time. By 1911, Northwestern Publishing House had produced two English hymnals, a *Book of Hymns* and a *Church Hymnal for Lutheran Services*. In 1914, the synod approved an English periodical *The Northwestern Lutheran*, to supplement the *Gemeinde-Blatt*. The *Northwestern*’s first number explained that the demand

for English was already high in the synod that was almost entirely composed of German immigrants and their descendants:

Even now our children are daily growing less familiar with the German language, and many of our young people use the English almost exclusively, conversing and thinking in this only, so that if anyone wishes to make himself perfectly understood by them, he must convey his thoughts to them in English.⁴²

However, the end of German in the Wisconsin Synod was still nearly 50 years off.

Like other German-American institutions, the Wisconsin Synod faced a major inflection point in the 1910s. Would it find its identity tied to the German language and shrink with the language's decline, or would the meaning of German in the Wisconsin Synod be transformed by a higher sense of purpose? Unsurprisingly, German did not disappear from the Wisconsin Synod without difficulty. WWI was not the sole cause of this decline, but it proved to be a catalyst as it forced Wisconsin Synod laity and leaders to critically analyze the role of language in personal faith and publicly proclaimed theology.

Initially, many voices in the Wisconsin Synod took a defensive stance in the early years of the war. The *Gemeinde-Blatt* joined with secular German papers in the United States to attempt to balance the perceived one-sidedness of information about the war. It went as far as twice publishing dispatches issued under the name of the Kaiser.⁴³ It repeatedly questioned the exaggerated Allied propaganda in the general American press.⁴⁴

It also consistently considered WWI as an evil that should lead Christians to repent and pray. While Brenner, editor of the English-language *Northwestern Lutheran*, believed that some in the Wisconsin Synod may have crossed the line of being concerned with the matters of state rather than the church,⁴⁵ the *Gemeinde-Blatt* was often critical of war-profiteering and considered its vocal criticism as simply boldly expressing the truth that was both patriotic and Christian justice.⁴⁶ In his thesis, Stephen Gurgel notes that as late as April 1917, the *Gemeinde-Blatt* advertised pro-Germany books. For example, it gave a positive endorsement for one novel celebrating the journey of a U-Boat captain who brought food through the British blockade to the starving German populace.⁴⁷

After the US declaration of war, the *Gemeinde-Blatt* refrained from the crusade-like language of other Christian groups calling for a literal holy war,⁴⁸ but instead expressed its patriotism in more concrete and practical ways,

such as urging food conservation.⁴⁹ The *Gemeinde-Blatt* and *Northwestern Lutheran* alike, sought to deflect criticism by taking the call to fight for freedom and pointing to the freedom of speech and expression as one that included language itself.⁵⁰ Much could be said about the effects of the Espionage and Sedition acts, but thankfully for the Wisconsin Synod, the *Gemeinde-Blatt* did not face the censorship and banning that other papers, such as the *Milwaukee Leader*, faced.⁵¹

Like millions of other German Americans, Wisconsin Synod Lutherans faced external pressure to drop not only German print, but everything German. The *Quartalschrift* printed in full an editorial in Wisconsin which called for German Americans to “repent” of and “renounce Germanism.” The writer continued, “Let us make it as easy as may be for them and their children to forget that they are Germans.”⁵² The writer added, “By eliminating the German language, discouraging the marriage of Germans with Germans and permitting the transmission of family names through non-German mothers, we may in one generation wipe out Germanism in America, *kultur* will disappear, and the Germans will be exterminated by thoroughly humane methods. They will simply lose their identity.” The only editorial comment was, “And this is neither in Prussia, nor in Russia, but in the most enlightened country in the world.”⁵³

At the end of 1918, Professor August Pieper addressed a looming turning point in a series of articles in the *Quartalschrift*. German was both a precious part of what it meant to be a Wisconsin Synod Lutheran and, at the same time, that very thing, beloved by many, was quickly becoming a liability. Pieper noted that most American-born members were using English for everything apart from worship and religious instruction. “However, when they talk to God they use the language of their mother and their heart.” “For most of our Lutheran people today German is still the language of religion and the church.”⁵⁴

At first, it seems as if Pieper was directly fighting the sentiments expressed in the first lines of the *Northwestern Lutheran* in 1914.

There certainly are exceptional adults who understand the sermon, prayer, hymns, and congregational gatherings better in English than in German. The overwhelming majority of our members, however, are German in their religion and want to live in German and die in German. As long as this group makes up the majority of our members, we dare not give up the German worship service.⁵⁵

He went as far to say that for many, “English puts a damper on their faith and makes everything all too incomprehensible and unpalatable to them.”⁵⁶

Pieper observed that while most speak broken and passable German, the current youths “will never learn to speak it.” As a seminary professor, he noted that only in class did the students speak German and in writing, while their English was good, “they fight an ongoing battle with German grammar.”⁵⁷ This seemingly inevitable and irreversible trend adds significant nuance to the understanding that while WWI had a severe negative impact on German America, it was already significantly weakening and declining in many ways.

Pieper noted a crossroads and a trying tension in the Wisconsin Synod. While the older, immigrant generations were almost completely “German,” the youngest ones were nearing the point of becoming entirely “English.” This was a serious challenge to the unity and cohesion of the Wisconsin Synod. Few institutions engage, gather, and interact with people of all ages in settings where it is necessary for everyone to be able to effectively speak and listen with one another other than the Church—especially in corporate worship.

Pieper noted that many pastors were incapable of preaching and catechizing in English. The Koch diary documents this as well.

While we would not want to try to prevent the transition into English, we must with all our strength strive to retain the blessings that have come down to us in German. The sources of our spiritual life all lie in German, not one in English. The literature of Lutheranism is German; its catechism, its hymns, its Bible are German, and no one can make them English without damaging them.⁵⁸

Yet, despite all the cautions and warnings, Pieper was ultimately a realist and did not deny that the Lutheran Church could learn to use English effectively as a vehicle for sharing the gospel—the ultimate mission and purpose of the Church. “As long as we preach only in German, these people cannot hear the (Lutheran) gospel, because they cannot understand German.”⁵⁹

The change was rapid after WWI.⁶⁰ The synodical proceedings, perhaps, carry the most weight as an official recognition of language. Until 1923, the synodical proceedings were entirely in German. In 1927 there was a motion to make English the official language, which was rejected. However, that same year, it was resolved to publish the proceedings in both English and German. Rather than fighting for one language over the other, the initial consensus was to print in both English and German. Yet, German was rapidly diminishing. Already in 1935, the proceedings were published only in English in full, with a summary in German.⁶¹ Quickly, the use of German became a matter of nostalgia rather than a serious vehicle for carrying out the work of the church.

In 1948, Pastor Theophil Hoffmann shared anecdotal evidence that when travelers asked locals for directions to the local Wisconsin Synod Lutheran church, they would often have no idea, but when asking for the “German church,” they inevitably got the right directions. He reflected, “There was a time when our church was in reality a German church,” noting that worship, private school, confirmations, and mission work were done in German among German speakers. Hoffmann noted the shift to English as well as the influx of non-German speakers with last names like “Hill, Norton, O’Leary” and others.⁶² Still, Hoffmann was confident that “The nickname German Church for some time to come will stick!”⁶³ Perhaps Hoffmann was surprised to see that over the next 20 years German all but disappeared in the Wisconsin Synod.

Decline of German

The Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod required German materials for well over a century—despite the erosion of a German-speaking demographic accelerated by two world wars. Nevertheless, in the post-war years, the synod experienced an irreversible transition from needing German materials to holding on to them for personal comfort. Still, the synod continued to print officially in German regularly until 1970.

While the Wisconsin Synod’s German-language academic output had reached new heights in the first two decades of the 20th century, it proved to be a short-lived and unsustainable achievement. A major challenge appeared in the source and quality of the German language utilized among the younger generation of pastors who served as the personnel pool to fill professorships. While a handful of American-born Wisconsin Synod seminary graduates attended graduate school in Germany, most entered the parish ministry or attended American institutions.⁶⁴ The result was a growing deficiency in the German language in the synod.

By the mid-20th century, the Wisconsin Synod’s pastors and theologians discovered that their German inherited from their parents and grandparents had not kept pace with developments in European German. Ernst Wendland, a Wisconsin Synod seminarian studying in 1930s Berlin, recalled, “Getting along in German was my biggest chore to begin with.” He explained, “My Luther-Deutsch from America, the German of the Bible, had to become the German of the present-day communication in radio and newspaper.” While Wendland eventually became comfortable conversing on the bus or train, people would inevitably ask “what part of Germany” he came from since his language still sounded strange.⁶⁵

Henry A. Koch, the seminarian diarist cited above, was one of the rare Wisconsin Synod pastors who earned a Ph.D. from a German university

(Leipzig). After nearly 25 years in Germany, he returned to the United States and served in the Missouri and Wisconsin synods.⁶⁶ In a letter to George Hoyer, a board member of St. John's College in Winfield, Kansas, he explained the language problem, "The German spoken here [in both the Wisconsin and Missouri Synods]...is rather weak to put it mildly." When suggesting a fellow German-American who had spent years in Germany for a professorship, he valued his language ability, saying, "I do not want to belittle any candidate, but this knowledge of the living German language is very rare in our midst."⁶⁷

If anything, WWII only decreased the desire to be publicly known as a "German Church."⁶⁸ Already the dominant paper in the Wisconsin Synod flipped from the German *Gemeinde-Blatt* to the English *Northwestern* between 1936 and 1939. In 1946, Northwestern Publishing House advertised a closing-out sale of all German hymnals. In part, this was no doubt in response to the high demand for the popular *The Lutheran Hymnal* produced in 1941, which remained in widespread use into the 1990s. Yet no thought was given to producing a new German hymnal—the demand for printed German materials was quickly disappearing. In 1947 the *Theologische Quartalschrift's* name was changed to *Quartalschrift: Theological Quarterly*. Its last, brief, German article was in 1952. In 1960, the name of the *Quarterly* was finally changed to *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*. By 1961, the *Gemeinde-Blatt* had 1,176 subscribers to the *Northwestern's* 19,400.⁶⁹

The *Gemeinde-Blatt* held on to see its 100th anniversary in 1965. Editor and seminary professor Heinrich Vogel noted that while the readership was shrinking each year, he saw continued purpose in the United States by providing, "newly immigrated German-speaking Lutherans with information about our Synod, both in the United States and in Canada." Vogel also shared the words of the synod's president, Oscar Naumann, "We are firmly convinced that the *Gemeinde-Blatt* remains an important part of our proclamation of the written Word. It places broader opportunities and responsibilities before us among immigrants from Germany and other countries."⁷⁰ Despite the optimism, when *Gemeinde-Blatt* editor Henry A. Koch retired in 1969 at the age of 80, the synod discontinued the paper.

Conclusion

The history of the Wisconsin Synod's printing in German for over 100 years of its 175-year history likely has many parallels with other German American experiences and institutions. From one angle, it may seem almost tragic that the synod developed the institutions and structure to produce high-quality German-language products after decades of development, but

the demand for German would rapidly diminish and disappear. However, it is remarkable that an institution so thoroughly identified with German (being in the first version of its very name) has not only survived but grown since it retired its mother tongue.

The history of Wisconsin Synod's German printing illustrates more than linguistic evolution; it exemplifies a profound negotiation between heritage and integration, identity and adaptation. While the institutional shift from German to English marked a loss of a linguistic heritage and threatened nuanced theological expression, it ultimately underscored the synod's resilience, adaptability, and deeper sense of purpose. The synod's transition, hastened by the world wars yet rooted in generational change, reflects broader patterns in immigrant communities across America. Future research may expand on this interplay between language and identity in other immigrant churches, revealing the broader implications for cultural assimilation and preservation, or it may take existing scholarship and apply it to the Wisconsin Synod's experiences. More specifically, one could investigate the parallel patterns of Americanization in both the Wisconsin and Missouri synods to see if different approaches to the transition from German, such as participation in the uniformed chaplaincy, contributed to their split in 1961. Furthermore, one could take Pieper's fears and anticipations, build on Ziebell's work on the Wisconsin Synod's higher education systems, and analyze how the language transition affected the Wisconsin Synod's academic culture and structure.

It is noteworthy that everything published by Northwestern Publishing House following WWII in German was still in the old Fraktur font through the 1960s. Apart from giving a rapidly dated look, this choice signified two things. First, a purchase of a contemporary font with German characters must have surely seemed like a poor investment. Secondly, the old font signified a time gone by. The use of German by Wisconsin Synod members was practically unnecessary after WWII—almost all had been born in the United States or had been in the country for decades, long enough for everyone to function in English.

As Northwestern Publishing House continued to print in the old Fraktur typeface in the mid-twentieth century, this was less an aesthetic choice than a revealing cultural artifact. Fraktur signaled that German publishing in the Wisconsin Synod had shifted from expansion to preservation. The physical form of the printed page mirrored the sociolinguistic reality of the church: German remained legible, but no longer vital.

For more than a century, however, German printing had been central to the synod's institutional consolidation and identity formation. Through hymnals, agendas, catechisms, newspapers, academic journals, and

theological monographs, Wisconsin Lutherans did not merely communicate in German—they standardized worship, clarified doctrine, trained clergy, and forged intergenerational cohesion. Print functioned as an infrastructure. It stabilized a population drawn from disparate German states, disciplined theological boundaries in a competitive religious arena, and connected scattered congregations across a growing Midwestern frontier.

The shift to English, accelerated by the world wars but already underway through generational change, therefore represented more than a pragmatic adjustment. It marked the transformation of a German immigrant church into an American religious institution. Yet the mechanics of that transformation are striking. Rather than dissolving under linguistic pressure, the synod redirected its publishing apparatus. English-language hymnals, periodicals, and theological works took the place of their German predecessors, while striving to inherit their theology. The presses continued to run. Editorial structures remained intact. Distribution networks persisted.

In this sense, the Wisconsin Synod's printing history offers a case study in immigrant adaptation through media. Language loss did not entail institutional collapse—the synod's purpose went far beyond ethnic identity and culture. The synod relinquished the descriptor "German" in practice long before it disappeared from memory, yet it retained the organizational habits formed during its German century: centralized publishing, doctrinal editorial oversight, and a robust commitment to printed theological discourse and materials for the people it served.

Despite the opportunities for regular language use and printed materials, the intergenerational transmission of the German language broke down. From a Christian perspective, this is not surprising. The Church is not about conserving a particular linguistic-cultural identity. While the Church is certainly social (as it is made up of social creatures), its key purpose and focus is on the gospel. While the German identity may have been "exterminated" in the Wisconsin Synod, the once "German Church" found it fairly easy within one generation's time to shed one cultural aspect of its identity and exchange one language for another in which to do its work. Today, the Wisconsin Synod and NPH continue to produce the same sort of materials they did at their high point of German printing a little more than a century ago.

As it celebrates its 175th anniversary, the Wisconsin Synod would say that it has indeed heeded the call of the *Gemeinde-Blatt* "Halte was du hast"—even if its members could not pronounce or translate that phrase. Yet the irony is instructive. What was "held" was not ultimately a language, typeface, or ethnic label, but the higher sense of purpose and calling, whatever language proved necessary. The history of Wisconsin Synod printing in German, then, is not merely a study in linguistic change. It is a case study in how

an immigrant church negotiated the tension between heritage and mission, culture and confession, memory and mandate. It demonstrates that language can powerfully shape faith—and that faith, when properly ordered around the gospel, can survive the loss of its native tongue.

Notes

1. While the synod has experienced a few mergers, minor splits, and structural reorganizations, it is recognizable as a continuation of the body formed in 1850. Only the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod (LCMS), founded in 1847, is older by a few years. Most other current Lutheran bodies, while being able to trace their roots to synods older than Wisconsin, have gone through various mergers and splits that have blurred any sense of a single, continuous, institutional identity. The Wisconsin Synod (as I will refer to WELS throughout this article) was made up of immigrants from the German Lutheran churches in Europe and so is only one step removed from the Reformation-era ecclesiastical reorganizations. See Braun, John and Joel Otto. 2025. *Christ Through Us: A Pictorial History of the Wisconsin Synod 1850-2025*. Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House.

2. He had been trained by the Langenberg Mission Society in Germany before coming to New York in 1837. He heeded the call for ministers among German immigrants in Wisconsin in 1848. He was a “mild” Lutheran in contrast to the zealously conservative “Old Lutherans” and the more ecumenically-minded “New Lutherans.”

3. For example, see Pettegree, Andrew. 2015. *Brand Luther: 1517, Printing, and the Making of the Reformation*. New York: Penguin Books.

4. For example, hymnals from Bremen-Verden within the Kingdom of Hanover which had its own hymnal for the rest of the kingdom.

5. Otto, Joel. 2025. 175 Years of Change in WELS Worship. Podcast episode, *The Lutheran History Podcast* hosted by Benjamin Phelps.

6. Procuring bibles was not as much of an issue in the early years since there were many Luther Bibles being published both domestically and in Germany. Still, both Brumder and NPH would produce or distribute Luther-Bibles of their own.

7. Lehmann, Arnold O. 1998. “Wisconsin Synod Hymnals and Agendas.” *WELS Historical Institute Journal* 3-37. 5.

8. Lehmann, 5.

9. Lehmann, 6-9.

10. Referenced as “Gemeinde-Blatt” in this article. WELS historians often reference it as “Gemeindeblatt.”

11. I have dealt with other Lutheran papers in two additional articles: Phelps, Benjamin. 2023. “Lutheran Identity in the Early American Republic.” *Journal of the Lutheran Historical Conference* 152-166.

Phelps, Benjamin. 2019. “Newspaper War: The Lutheran Observer and the *Lutherische Kirchenzeitung*.” *Journal of the Lutheran Historical Conference* 22-38.

12. „Halte, was du hast, daß niemand deine Krone nehme.“ (Revelation 3:11)

13. Vogel, Heinrich J. 1965. “Das Ev.-Luth. Gemeinde-Blatt feiert seinen hundersten Geburtstag.” *Evangelisch-Lutherisches Gemeinde-Blatt*, August: 140-142. 140.

14. Brumder, Herbert P. 1960. *The Life Story of George and Henriette Brumder*. Milwaukee: The North American Press.ix.

15. Brumder, xi.

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16. Brumder, 36. Herbert Brumder noted that initially nearly all of George Brumder's work was for the Lutheran Church.
17. Brumder, 4.
18. Brumder, 9.
19. Brumder, 14.
20. Brumder, 32. "On other Sundays no one could leave the breakfast table before Grandmother had read a chapter from the Bible, and she insisted that grace be spoken before every meal. The Grandparents sent their children to the German parochial school conducted by the Grace Lutheran Church, which carried them through the sixth grade. All subjects were taught in the German."
21. Brumder, 32.
22. Brumder, 32.
23. Such was the case with synod president Philipp von Rohr of Winona, Minnesota. His son, Hugo von Rohr, became one of Brumder's employees. Brumder, 28.
24. Lehmann, 15.
25. Lehman, 19.
26. Lehmann, 21.
27. Lehmann, 22.
28. Brumder, 38.
29. Brumder, 53.
30. Gurgel, Stephen S. 2012. *The War to End All Germans: Wisconsin Synod Lutherans and the First World War*. Master's Thesis, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2.
31. Gurgel, 3.
32. Brumder, 56.
33. See Jensen, Nathaniel S. 2018. "C. F. W. Walther on Dancing and the Theater." *Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly* 33-43.
34. Brumder, 22.
35. Lehmann, 19.
36. This was the congregation founded by Muehlhaeuser.
37. Phelps, Benjamin, translator and editor. *Wauwatosa Diary: Henry A. Koch (1910–1912)*. Lulu.com, 2025.. 46.
38. *The Northwestern Lutheran*. 1949. "History of Northwestern Publishing House." June 19: 196-203. 196
39. *Ibid*, 197-198.
40. *Christ Through Us*, 72.
41. This journal continues today as the *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*.
42. J.J. 1914. "Introductory." *The Northwestern Lutheran*, January 7: 1-2. 1.
43. Gurgel, 22.
44. Gurgel, 25.
45. Gurgel, 31.
46. Gurgel, 67-68.
47. Gurgel, 39.
48. Gurgel, 86.
49. Gurgel, 175.
50. Gurgel, 181.
51. Gurgel, 45.
52. Gillan, S. Y. 1918. "What Shall We Do With the Germans?" *Theologische Quartalschrift* 299-300. .299
53. Gillan, 300.

54. Pieper, August. 1918;1919. "Unser Ubergang ins Englische." *Theologische Quartalschrift* 233-259;43-66, 121-138, 179-187, 257-276. 236.
55. Pieper, 237.
56. Pieper, 254. He further elaborated that Luther had "Germanized" the original languages of Scripture (Hebrew and Greek) so well, that the Bible, the word of God, was more effectively communicated in German (a language that many recognize as being shaped by Luther), than other languages.
57. Pieper, 236.
58. Pieper, 266.
59. Pieper, 271.
60. See Ziebell, Thomas Irvin. 1994. "Establishing an educational subculture: The 19th-century German Gymnasium arrangement of Northwestern College in Watertown, Wisconsin to 1915." unpublished dissertation presented to the University of Wisconsin-Madison. This dissertation, while not directly addressing the topic of print media, makes a strong case that the highly academic German education system at Northwestern College underwent a fundamental shift at the same time English became dominant.
61. Reichel, David. 1986. "The WELS Change from German to English: The When and Why." *essays.wls.edu*. May 19. Accessed April 2025. <http://essays.wls.edu:8080/handle/123456789/3972>. 22.
62. I would add my own, "Phelps." No doubt, many of these English-only speakers came into the former German synod, like my grandfather, through marriage to a thoroughly American Wisconsin Lutheran woman.
63. Hoffmann, Theophil. 1948. "German Church." *Northwestern Lutheran*, February 1: 45.
64. See Ziebell.
65. Wendland, Ernst H. 1998. *Which Way Lord?* Self-published. 34.
66. Koch served in the Lutheran Saxon Free Church from 1914 to 1936. While he had become integrated into German culture and society, he maintained his American citizenship. Koch felt conflicted about his desire to speak out against Nazism, and he feared the consequences of such an action would be severe for both the small Free Church and his family, so he returned to the United States in 1936 with his wife and children.
67. Koch letter, dated March 24, 1938. Private collection.
68. Any hopes within the Wisconsin Synod of maintaining the "German Church" moniker through post-WWII immigration went largely unrealized. For example, the writer's grandfather took a call to be a pastor in Ontario where there was supposedly a German population he could serve with his fluent German, but with little result.
69. Reichel, 35.
70. Vogel, 142.