

The Early History
of the
Lutheran Pioneer Program

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The history of the Lutheran Pioneer program could start out: "Once upon a time, in a small town in Wisconsin..." It has a beginning that could be found in a storybook. A man had an idea for a boy's club for their church. It was nothing spectacular to start out with, but as time wore on the idea would catch on and spread to other churches, becoming a national organization with more than 5,000 boys and 1500 leaders.

The Lutheran Pioneer Program finds its humble beginnings in Burlington, a small town in southern Wisconsin. It started as an idea between two men, Pastor Reuben Marti and Bruce Thompson. Pastor Marti had just become the pastor at St. John's in Burlington in August of 1950. One of the first pastoral acts he had was to officiate at the marriage of Joyce Foltz, a young woman of the congregation, and Bruce Thompson, who at that time was a member of the Roman Catholic Church.

Prior to his marriage Bruce had begun an adult instruction class at St. John's, being confirmed in May of 1951. Before World War II and afterwards, Bruce had been closely associated with Scouting for 10 years. This prompted him to ask "What's wrong with Scouting?" many times during the instruction class. To help him, Pastor Marti gave Bruce a pamphlet by Paul Randolph, a layman in the Lutheran Church in America, entitled The Testimony

of a Former Scout. One of the concluding statements of Paul Randolph regarding Scouting is significant to why we should ask "Why Lutheran Pioneers?" He writes:

"We have no other choice but to cut off this growing menace (i.e. Scouting) and to develop our own Christ-centered youth program, one that is established by Lutherans, led by Lutherans, and therefore would contain only true Lutheran theology. Surely our Lutheran church has the resources for establishing such a program. May God grant us the courage and initiative for setting up our own God-pleasing, Christ-centered, truly Lutheran program."

These words continued to be on Bruce's mind. In May of 1951, Pastor Marti and Bruce were sitting in the parsonage while their wives were over in the school kitchen cleaning up following the "Mother-Daughter Banquet" of the Ladies Aid. While they were talking, the discussion eventually came around to Paul Randolph's statement that the Lutheran Church ought to develop an alternative to the Scouting program that would be distinctively Lutheran in character and theology. Bruce asked Pastor Marti, "Why doesn't St. John's develop some kind of program of its own?" Pastor Marti countered Bruce with the challenge, "Why don't YOU do something about it?"

Out of that conversation the seed was planted that would, by the grace of God, grow and flourish into the Lutheran Pioneers. The skeleton of the program and its purpose were quickly conceived so that these two men were ready to present the concept

for a boys club to the congregation at the semi-annual meeting in July of 1951. However, a name for the club, as a means of identification, was lacking. As Bruce recalls, he awoke one night with the word "Pioneer" running through his head. Unable to fall back to sleep, he looked up the word "pioneer" in a dictionary and read this definition: "A foot-soldier; one who goes before to prepare the way for others." They now had a name for this proposed boys club. Soon the ranks fell into place...Trainmaster, Wagonmaster...Wagonleader, and the Lutheran Pioneers were on paper. With very few exceptions the names, concepts and program of the Lutheran Pioneers have not changed since that evening early in June, 1951.

In July of 1951, Pastor Marti and Bruce Thompson were ready to present their idea to the voter's assembly of St. John's. The voter's assembly granted permission to try the program, on a trial basis, for one year. At the end of that time, the congregation could either continue the program or drop it.

The Lutheran Pioneer Program was designed to fulfill the need of a youth group in keeping with the teaching of God's Word. Through constant prayer and arduous work of its co-founders, this program was founded on the following points:

- 1) That it contain true Lutheran theology;
- 2) give the boys the great outdoors,
- 3) develop leadership;
- 4) build citizenship;
- 5) teach safety;
- 6) and give the boys something constructive to do.

Though the initial forming of the program was the conscientious

effort of Pastor Marti and Bruce Thompson, other laymen of St. John's soon gathered to help. The first Train Council of Train #1 at St. John's, Burlington consisted of:

Mr. Gilmore Gulbranson, Chairman
Mr. Jerome Gunderson, Secretary
Mr. Harold Koch, Treasurer
Mr. Hubert Sieker
Mr. Paul Meyer

Pastor Marti was the Train Chaplain, Bruce Thompson was the Train Master and Mr. Frank Voss and Mr. Ralph Voss were Senior Train Leaders. The first official meeting with the boys of the congregation was held in September of 1951.

Later on in the fall of 1951 Pastor Marti and Bruce Thompson were asked to present and explain the Lutheran Pioneer Program of their congregation to the other congregations of their conference. While they were driving to Friedens Lutheran Church in Kenosha, Wisconsin to attend this pastoral conference, Pastor Marti handed Bruce a piece of paper which contained the Lutheran Prayer and Hymn. He had just written it the night before.

But tragedy would strike soon. A few hours later, with Bruce standing just a few feet away from a man whom he had come to love as a father, Pastor Marti was stricken with a stroke. Later that evening the Lord called His servant to be with Him. Pastor Marti was not granted the privilege of knowing how much his Pioneer program would spread. He would not see the seed that he had planted grow to a national organization with over 500 chartered trains.

Pastor Adolph Fischer came in 1952 to fill the vacancy at St. John's. He also became the next Train Chaplain of Train #1. The first campout of the Pioneer organization was held that summer just outside of Burlington for a whole week. During 1952 a visitor from St. John's of West Bend read of the Pioneer activities in a Sunday bulletin and took the idea back home with him. Shortly thereafter a request came from the West Bend congregation for more information.

In March of 1953, the second Lutheran Pioneer Train was formed at St. John's of West Bend, Wisconsin. Because there were now two Trains it was decided to form a national organization as a governing body. The first National Convention was then held in Burlington on February 6, 1954. The first "Constitution" was then adopted at this convention and its first National Council was elected. The first officers and members of the National Council were:

Mr. Bruce Thompson, Chairman
 Mr. Roland Landdeck, Vice-Chairman
 Mr. Harold Tischer, Secretary
 Mr. Hubert Sieker, Treasurer
 Mr. Jerome Gunderson
 Mr. Frederick Schmidt
 Mr. Gilmore Gulbranson
 Mr. Harold Koch
 Mr. John Gerner

In addition to holding the position of Chairman of the National Council, Mr. Bruce Thompson was also appointed to serve as

National Commander of the Lutheran Pioneers.

The second annual convention was held at St. John's in West Bend in May, 1955. The convention established annual dues of 50¢ per boy. Mr. Don Tomack was appointed as the first District commander in the Pioneer program. It was decided that all uniforms and insignia would be handed out of Mr. Thompson's office which became the National Headquarters for the Lutheran Pioneers. Pastor Frederic Kosanke of Altura, Minnesota was appointed as the first National Chaplain for the Lutheran Pioneers. During 1955 committees worked on the first printed "Handbook for Boys" and Articles of Incorporation and By-Laws.

In 1956 work was begun on a slide program that could be used to tell the Lutheran Pioneer story to new interested congregations. It was also suggested that at this time the Pioneers come out with a newsletter of some kind. The first printed edition of the Lutheran Pioneer Handbook for boys came out in December of 1956.

The girls were not to be left out of the Pioneer program. A similar program for girls was started by Mrs. W.J. Masewicz. In 1956 she asked for permission to use the Lutheran Pioneer name in organizing a program for girls. Mrs. Masewicz then presented a program called Lutheran Girl Pioneers to the third annual convention, which was held at Mt. Calvary in La Crosse, Wisconsin.

By 1957 the Lutheran Pioneers adopted the use of swiss-embroidery Train numerals. The first Program notebook was produced this year. A monthly expense allowance was granted

to the National Commander of \$35 during its annual convention, this time held at Epiphany in Racine, Wisconsin. The first Adult Leader's Training Clinic was later held in Kenosha, Wisconsin at Bethany Lutheran Church. During 1957 an "overseas" style cap and belt were added to the uniform. White leggings were added as optional uniform for parade use. Music to the Lutheran Pioneer Song was also distributed to all Trains.

In 1957 some members within our Synod voiced concern that the Lutheran Pioneers was an organization which was trying too hard to be a subtle substitute for the Boy Scouts of America. As a result of this, the W.E.L.S. convention instructed the Synod president to appoint a five man committee to study the Lutheran Pioneer Program. President Oscar J. Naumann asked this committee, with Rev. Robert Voss as its chairman, to study the "Lutheran Pioneer movement and its place in the life of Synod."

This committee was ready with its report at the next convention, which was held August 5-12, 1959. The full report is found in the 1959 Synod Proceedings, pages 299-305. Here are some of the significant statements and recommendations from that report:

While the Pioneer movement has enjoyed steady growth among congregations of our Synod, it has never received any kind of official, synodical sanction. Tacit approval has been given by those of our Synod involved in it, as well as by the Conference of Presidents. In January of 1956, the Presidents invited the National Commander and the pastor of the Burlington congregation to explain the work of the Pioneers. "The conclusion of the Conference of Presidents was that they found nothing objectionable in the program. Many members were personally well pleased with it, but the Conference made no report or recommendation to Synod at the time." (President's Report, Proceedings 1957, P. 15.) At the suggestion of President Naumann, the Pioneer Committee was authorized by Synod to study the place of the Pioneers in the life of our Synod and report its findings to the 1959 convention. This committee suggests that, with synodical sanction, the Pioneer movement continue as it has in the past in its relation to the Church, namely, that it be an organization within the Synod but not of the Synod. We feel that it can well exist within the Synod. We recognize that it differs from organizations within the local congregation (Ladies' Aid, Men's Club, etc.) in that it is bound together with similar groups of other congregations to form a wider, a national organization. We suggest therefore that Synod sanction and approve the operation of the national organization within our congregations.

The purpose of any organization within the Church must remain subservient to the purpose of the Church itself. We find this organization does that, and that there is no conflict with the Church's real purpose.

The real purpose of the Church, of course, is to preach the Gospel, to make disciples of all nations by teaching all things commanded by Christ and by administering the sacraments in conformity with His Word. The Church preaches the Gospel in a world where those who have been brought to faith in Christ must constantly be guided and encouraged in Christian living. Such guidance and encouragement are given in the Word and through the Sacraments. God has given us the means with which the Church fulfills its purpose. No organizations of the Church are essential to the fulfillment of this purpose.

Nevertheless, organizations of the Church with God-pleasing objectives may operate within the realm of Christian sanctification, Christian living. It is in this realm of Christian sanctification that the Pioneer program operates, and so it can serve a useful purpose. Its purpose is to teach good citizenship, appreciation of God's wonderful creation, First Aid, and many other useful skills. There is as much justification for the Church teaching such things through the agency of the Pioneers as there is for teaching secular subjects in our Christian schools.

The concluding paragraphs of this committee are very important:

We would endorse the Pioneer movement because we find it to be edifying, educational, and useful for our young boys. We believe that the congregations of our Synod will be able to use this program to advantage among the youth.

We would endorse it, furthermore, because, with its many benefits, we find nothing objectionable like unscriptural oaths, moral righteousness, omission of Christ, unionistic prayers. The movement with its program is truly Lutheran.

Therefore, we recommend that the Lutheran Pioneers be given synodical approval and sanction, with the prayer that all who use it would use it wisely, even as this applies to all organizations within the Church. In recommending such synodical sanction, we would caution against judging those congregations and pastors who choose not to use it, as though they were not fulfilling their obligation over against their youth. Let us ever remember our first obligation — to preach the Gospel. The Lutheran Pioneers are not essential to fulfill that obligation. But again, the Pioneers may well be used, and if we choose to use the program, let us know why and what we hope to accomplish. Then this organization may be a blessing for our youth, in whose hands the future of our Synod under God lies.

Floor Committee No. 20 then considered this recommendation of the Committee on Lutheran Pioneers and the following two resolutions were adopted by the Synod Convention:

Resolution No. 1

Subject: Lutheran Pioneers

WHEREAS, It is not the policy of the Synod to give official sanction to organizations within the congregations of the Synod; and

WHEREAS, Many congregations of the Synod have no need for the program of the Lutheran Pioneers; and

WHEREAS, An official sanction of the Lutheran Pioneers could give the impression that those who choose not to use it are remiss in fulfilling their obligation over against their youth; therefore be it

Resolved, That we, as a Synod, refrain from giving official sanction to the Lutheran Pioneers.

Resolution No. 2

WHEREAS, The real purpose of the Church is to preach the Gospel; and

WHEREAS, It is the primary concern of church organizations to further this purpose; therefore be it

Resolved, That we encourage those organizations and pastors who choose to use this program to utilize the opportunities it offers to emphasize spiritual matters in keeping with the real purpose of the Church.

In 1960 the Lutheran Pioneers became incorporated without stock and not for profit in the State of Wisconsin. By this time, the fourth edition of the Handbook for boys became available to all Trains. It contained 17 chapters and 100 pages. Also in 1960 a program for younger boys (age 6-9) was officially started. This new program, called the Buckaroos, was begun under the leadership of Mrs. William Krueger of St. Paul's in Tomahawk, Wisconsin. There were seven units organized. An additional rank was also added so that the ranks became: Recruit, Pioneer, Camp (new) and Frontiersman. Certificates for those new ranks were made available to be used with or in the place of rank emblems.

A new game book "99 Games to Try" was presented at the annual convention in 1961, which was held at St. Paul's in Tess Corners, Wisconsin. The official statement at this time showed the Lutheran Pioneers, Inc. with a net worth of \$8,404.43.

At the 1963 convention, which was held in Burlington, the By-Laws were changed so that future conventions would be held every two years. The term of elected councilman was changed to four years. The council was increased from nine to ten members. The membership policy was ratified at this

convention. This being: A program for Churches of the W.E.L.S. or of Lutheran Churches in Doctrinal Fellowship with the Wisconsin Synod.

Training Aid filmstrips were introduced in 1963 with over 100 being used during the first 3 months of the program. A Leader's Handbook was produced and distributed during 1963. National dues were increased from 50¢ per boy to \$1 per boy. A 10th Anniversary Booklet was also presented by booklet Chairman during 1963.

The idea of an annual Voyageur Canoe trip in Canada was adopted in 1963. This trip would be for older boys who had passed their Frontiersman requirements. The first Voyageur Canoe trip was completed in 1964. It was voted to make this an annual affair.

In 1965 at the annual convention in Stillwater, Minnesota there were a few changes in the By-Laws. They were changed to allow the National Council to grant Charters so that a Train would not have to wait two years between conventions to have official ratification. The position of Treasurer was then made ^{an} ex-officio office and appointed rather than elected.

Train Council Clinics were held in 11 districts during the fall of 1965 on the subjects: The Train Council, Engine or Caboose, Enthusiastic Leadership and Publicity - Who, Why What, When and How. The clinics did much to promote the national organization and to help keep Trains and Train Councils active.

Several changes to the Pioneer uniform also came in 1965.

The metal Pioneer emblem was replaced by a swiss-embroidery emblem. The red wool leader's jacket was introduced. The 5 year attendance star was introduced along with a Voyageur emblem and red beret. A silver lapel pin was also introduced for use as a Councilman's pin for service.

During 1966, the 2nd Leader's Training Clinin was held at Camp MacLean - Burlington with a full attendance of 120 men plus staff. A new handbook for boys written by Bruce Thompson along with Rod Lange doing most of the artwork and writing the chapter on Nature was introduced. It was announced then that Members of the Aid Association for Lutherans would present the Lutheran Pioneers with a grant to cover equipment for slide/tape presentations and training programs. At this time Bruce Thompson, the National Commander, expanded his home in order to accomodate the growing Pioneer program. A 10'x 26' addition was put on the home. The basement portion was used for Pioneers and an outside entrance to the Pioneer are was opened.

A number of recommendations came before the National Council at the annual Convention in Wayne, Michigan in 1967. It was first reported that the first edition of the Buckaroo Bulletin had been published in January of that year. It was announced that a study should be conducted into the job and duties of the National Commander to possibly make that job full time or hire a full time secretary. They later approved a part-time secretary for the National Commander.

A study committee on the job of the National Commander

became a "Blue Ribbon" Committee which made a study of the entire Lutheran Pioneer organization. One important change which came out of this study was the appointment of Assistant National Commanders. Six were appointed with special areas of work. They were:

Rod Lange-Handicraft & Recreation
Frank Voss-Training
Randy Suter-District Commanders
Harold Schanzenbach-Old Boy Programs
Tom Palubecki-Buckaroos
Carl Meitner-Program Planning

The six Assistant National Commanders along with the National Commander, the National Chaplain, the Public Relations Director and the Chairman of the National Council would form an Executive Committee which would meet once a year at the national headquarters for a planning meeting.

The "Blue Ribbon" Committee also recommended that a closer relationship of the Lutheran Pioneers and the Lutheran Girl Pioneers be encouraged and that the Lutheran Pioneers invite the Lutheran Girl Pioneer representatives to sit in on the National Council Meetings and the National Conventions. The committee also recommended that the coming 'Preaching and Prayers for Pioneers' be a joint effort by the Lutheran Pioneers and the Lutheran Girl Pioneers.

Several new insertions came to the Lutheran Pioneer program in 1968. A blue blazer was introduced to be used by leaders when representing the Lutheran Pioneers at more formal affairs. Preaching and Prayers for Pioneers was

introduced by its editor, Rev. D. Ponath. The "Command Post," a monthly newsletter for District Commanders, was started by Randy Suter. A yearly guideline for Program Planning was presented and the format was set for a Project Book. A new/revised slide/tape program, "The Lutheran Pioneer Story," was also introduced in 1968. Ascots were then approved for wear by the Lutheran Pioneer Voyageurs. The ascot was also approved for wear by Frontiersmen.

At the 1969 Convention the Pioneer Projects - Book #1 was presented. It was also noted that the Lutheran Pioneer name and address would appear in the Northwestern Yearbook. Through a grant from AAL, a special bulletin cover with the insignia of both the Lutheran Pioneers and the Lutheran Girl Pioneers was made available in 1970. The National Council also moved in 1970 to allow groups that only had younger boys to start a Buckaroo Unit with^{out} starting a Train. In future years then when a Train was started, they would use the Train number given to the Buckaroo Unit.

It was in 1971 that the first W.E.L.S. Synod' Convention display for the Lutheran Pioneers was authorized. Rev. Ponath, the Public Relations director, represented the Lutheran Pioneers at the convention. In 1971 the position of Director of Special Projects and Programs was established. Rev. Larry Zessin was appointed to that position. The National Commander at that time was also authorized to issue Charters to Trains as they joined the Pioneer organization. Such Charters

would then be ratified by the National Council and then by the Convention. A second set of devotions for Preaching and Prayers for Pioneers was begun in 1971 under a materials grant from AAL. The Lutheran Brotherhood provided a grant to conduct the 2nd District Commander's Conference.

Several new additions came in 1972. At the Leader's Training Clinic, which was held in Burlington, the National Council went along with a suggestion that two leaders per train be organized, because one person did not want to make the trip alone. Cost per leader for this event was \$25. One hundred eighty eight leaders, representing 94 Trains, were in attendance at this clinic.

New inserts for the Preaching and Prayers for Pioneers were written and published in 1972. A booklet of "Correlated Studies in the Word of God" was written by Rev. Wayne Mueller and distributed to each train in 1972. Another booklet called "Sermonettes 2", which was an expansion of booklet one, was written by Rev. Larry Zessin. It was in the summer of 1972 that the Lutheran Pioneers began to offer the Alumacraft canoe to its members at nearly cost. The response to this offer was overwhelming.

Another grant ^{from} for the Lutheran Brotherhood Insurance Company came in 1972. This grant included money to establish a Pioneer Story slide/tape presentation on the Pioneer age boy level. The final show was called "What's it all about." This was used by the leaders throughout the country to show to younger boy groups at the beginning of the Pioneer year

to assist them in becoming acquainted with the Lutheran Pioneer program.

During the summer of 1972 a committee met in Burlington to discuss the "Older Boys Program," then known as the Frontiersmen. The result of this meeting was presented to the National Council in September. The end result is what is now called the "Trooper Program" for all boys above the confirmed age. Many areas have had successful results with the Trooper Program.

At the time of the 1973 convention there were 3,649 Pioneers and 786 Buckaroos for a total of 4,435 boys in the Lutheran Pioneer organization. There were 19 districts organized throughout the nation with 32 men serving as either District Commanders or Assistant District Commanders. This was the year that "Nature Talks" was added to the train libraries. At this time the new Buckaroo Leader's Handbook was also introduced. The new emblem for Troopers and Trooper Bush Hat received approval of the 1973 convention.

It was in the spring of 1973 that the Voyageur booklet was published. This booklet was filled with information on the annual Canadian trip, eliminating the necessity of writing a host of individual letters to applicants for the trip each year.

1973 was also the first year when trains of the western states, under the direction of the District Commander Zeke Jarcik, began their bi-annual trip of back-packing into various areas of the western mountains. On the first trip into Pario

Canyon, 26 leaders and Frontiersmen of the Lutheran Pioneers, enjoyed a five day journey. The name "Lutheran Rangers" was given to this group.

In 1974 the national headquarter found it necessary to turn ^{to} the use of swiss embroidery for attendance stars, trainmaster's keys, adult leader's keys, the honor camper and the honor wagon emblems. The items were less expensive and easier for members to keep because they were sown on the uniform.

In 1975 Trains #353 - 391 were welcomed to the association. Train # 380 was from Hong Kong. A special contest was begun for boys and adults to design an emblem for the 25th Anniversary of the Pioneer program in 1976 which would coincide with our country's 200th Anniversary. The winning design entry came from Ken Schmit of Train # 320 of Beaver Dam, Wisconsin. The 1975 convention also voted a membership fee increase of 50¢, bringing the membership fee for Lutheran Pioneers to \$2.50 and for Buckaroos to \$1.

Early in 1976 the Expansion Program began its Building Fund Drive with a one week trip through the midwest. During the third week of February three members of the National Council, Rev. Ulhorn, Rev. Zessin and Carl Meitner, spoke to the various districts concerning the Expansion Program which would be held during 1976. The object was to raise \$60,000 for land, building and furnishings for the new Lutheran Pioneer office. By August \$30,000 of this had been raised. The dedication of the new building was held on

September 19, 1976 with a cornerstone laying that included a sealed box of many momentos from the Lutheran Pioneer program. The new building is located just outside of Burlington, Wisconsin.

A special Thanks Service was held at the Milwaukee Auditorium on September 18, 1976 to express thanks to our Lord for the many blessings given to the Lutheran Pioneers during the previous 25 years. The main speaker was Rev. Oscar J. Naumann, the President of the W.E.L.S.

The Lord has continued to bless both the Lutheran Pioneer and the Lutheran Girl Pioneer programs with continued growth and participation by the many churches of the Wisconsin Synod. May we ever be thankful that in the Lutheran Pioneers we have our own Christ-centered youth program, one that has been established by Lutherans, developed by Lutherans, led by Lutherans and therefore containing only true biblical theology. To God alone be the glory.