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THE EARLY ACTIVITY OF THE WISCONSIN LUTHERAN
SYNOD IN ALASKA, WITH SPECIAL EMPHASIS ON THE
SOUTHEASTERN REGION

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Alaska can very easily conjure up thoughts of frozen wasteland, tundra, Eskimos and polar bears. The idea that "regular" people live up there doesn't seem to register in our minds. Maybe we have seen too many episodes of Sgt. Preston and his dog King. The climate may differ as well as the culture, but basically we all have the same joys and desires. Yet another thing that we have in common is sin. Alaska is no different, there are as many people who are sinners in the north as in the south. God has commanded the church to spread the saving message of the Gospel. He has also commanded us to serve and encourage each other in that saving faith. This is the responsibility of every Christian.

We now live in an era of migration. People leave the old home place and move on to different region, lifestyles, and vocations. The home church is left behind. Many times the new area offers a continuation of the same spiritual care, othertimes one is only offered a watered down version. When the true word is not available and when fellowship principles do not permit joining in worship, the request comes to Synod to share the Word. It is not just a selfish request that will satisfy their own appetite, but a plea to share the Gospel with those who do not yet know of God's love. These concerns brought the Wisconsin Lutheran Synod into Alaska. It is a young, but growing field.

The late President O. J. Naumann was very much aware that our members were in need of spiritual care in Alaska. There was continual correspondence with those who had moved

to this new state of the Union. President wrote these words to a woman in Valdez,

Our Savior knows each of His elect. He watches over them, has compassion on them; and will keep them by the power of His holy Word and Sacrament in the true faith unto everlasting life. We know, of course, how you and others who have established their homes far away from their home congregations and their Synod, must long for the regular services in God's house and for the privilege of receiving the Sacrament regularly, also. Let us, therefore, pray the Lord of the Church to give us wisdom, zeal, men, and means to extend the borders of His kingdom and to reach the souls for whom Christ died also in the more distant parts of our country and the world.

The first northern journey our synod officials made was on October 31, 1966. Pastor Lee Sabrowsky, who was chairman of the Mission Board for the Pacific Northwest District, and Pastor R.L. Wiechmann, who was the Executive Secretary of Home Missions flew to Anchorage and then on to Fairbanks. Their mission was to meet with those members who had sent their names into the synod office or made them known to the PNW Mission Board. The meetings were not as well attended as hoped. This may have been due to the quick planning of the trip and the short notice given to those involved. Never the less the chamber of commerce was contacted as well as radio stations to see what kind of area the synod would be dealing with and the best means to serve it. On this same trip there was also thought of going down to Ketchikan and Juneau, but the winter flight schedule would not permit it.

Following this initial visit, many more questions came to mind concerning the service to these WELS members.

How could the Synod best use its resources of both money and manpower? What means would be the most effective to serve the kingdom of God? How will this different way of life effect our efforts? These are just some of the questions that came up. Later Pastor Sabrowsky jotted down the following remarks.

Because of the sever climate and rugged terrain, the high cost of living, the unfavorable employment situation, the loneliness of the long winters, most people don't stay in Alaska very long. We found that many of the names put on our list during the last year or so as moving to Alaska were already gone. We do feel obligated to the people who belong to us up here, but it will probably take a good deal of study on the part of our Mission Boards before we can decide how we can best serve them.

This was the first physical contact that was made with our members. It was a start which began our efforts to a new and interesting mission field. The report that Pastor Sabrowsky made contained many pros and cons, but he was enthused. Pastor R.N. Baur commented on that initial trip and the benefits it reaped.

It is said that Wiechmann was enthused about starting in Alaska whereas Sabrowsky was more cautious. After the trip, attitudes reversed. I think Wiechmann cooled off because noone attended the meetings either in Anchorage or Fairbanks, except the people at whose homes they met. At any rate, after this visit things began to move. The District Mission Board out here began calling. Lee Sabrowsky was the first one called, but declined. Finally Zietlow was called. He has done excellent work. He will always be remembered for his outreach into Alaska.

This initial outreach has produced much for upper Alaska. The Church continues to grow. Yet the influence of WELS in South east Alaska came about in another way.

This influence was not the result of that first visit or was it an expansion of the Fairbanks congregation. This narrow 400 mile stretch of coastal islands and inner passages tells a continuation of WELS in Alaska. The first correspondence from Southeast Alaska came in May of 1960. Mr. Begalka, a forester employed by the Ketchikan Pulp Co. wrote a very unique letter to Pastor Sabrowsky. In that letter was also a unique request. Mr. Begalka stated that he was a member of the Wisconsin Synod, his membership however still remained in Clear Lake, South Dakota. He would not transfer his membership to churches in the area because of confessional reasons. Mr. Begalka asked Pastor Lee Sabrowsky to marry him and his fiancée', stating that they would fly down to Portland, Or. Included in this letter was also the hope and prayer, "I am still confident the day will arrive when God's Word in all its truth and purity will be preached in Alaska. Needless to say Pastor L. Sabrowsky wrote back and gladly agreed to do the honors. This was the first of much correspondence and help from the Begalka family.

Mr. Begalka gladly offered his help and services in any way for the spread of the Gospel. Two years after the original correspondence Pastor Sabrowsky wrote for more information for the Mission Board. Questions were asked whether he considered the coastal strip from Ketchikan to Skagway as being good for exploration by a general missionary. Mr. Begalka answered, "Yes, I would, since geographically it is divided from the rest of Alaska and with the exception of

Anchorage and Fairbanks contain a greater concentration of the larger cities in Alaska." Another question dealt with which towns would be most ideal. It was thought that the major population centers were Ketchikan, Sitka, Juneau Petersburg and Wrangel. From these towns one could branch out to the smaller communities when the time came. There was another fact that had to be taken into consideration. That was transportation. To us in the States, such a fact is not a problem. In SE Alaska one must either fly or sail from town to town. At this time the Alaska ferry system was not yet running. Begalka wrote:

The only scheduled boat traffic for passenger is via Canadian steamships which ply these waters from about the end of May until the middle of September. With the approaching ferry system soon to be inaugurated we may find year round water transportation. I'm not sure. Airplane travel is constant all year with weather quite a factor especially in winter months. It is not uncommon to leave two or three days late and be the same on return. It has been even longer at times so that a traveling missionary would get through, but would have a difficult time staying ← on a schedule.

This was just some of the many helps that Mr. Begalka gave to the Synod. Each letter ended with the prayer that the Lord would guide the efforts to bring the Gospel to Alaska. Yet just because an established WELS congregation was lacking in Ketchikan didn't stop the Begalkas from growing in the Word. This man was instructed his wife in the doctrines of the Bible and then had her confirmed at the home church in South Dakota. He was also being served by tapes from his home congregation. Every Sunday they would set aside a

certain time for "church". This may sound easy, but putting it into practice takes a conscious effort not to let life's distractions get in the way. How little we appreciate our regular time and place of worship, how easy to take it all for granted. Yet this family continued to serve and worship the Lord, refusing to join the area church for doctrinal reasons. This was the Mission Board's first association with a member in SE Alaska.

The second contact with Southeast Alaska came through the Arnie Johnson family. They had moved from Billings, Montana to Sitka. This small town is located on Baranof Island facing the Gulf. Since no WELS church was in the area, much less Southeast Alaska, they transferred their membership to Salem Lutheran Church in Edmonds, Washington. This was in May of 1973. Pastor R.N. Baur of Salem talked about an incident that happened when he first began serving the family through taped services.

They received tapes from us here at Salem. We almost had a snafu because another Johnson lived in Sitka who was getting the tapes; by mistake. He just kept them. Since no tapes ever came back, I finally assumed our Johnsons were not interested. Fortunately this was discovered.

At this point there was a start in Ketchikan with the Begalka family and a start in Sitka with the Johnson family. Yet with only one family in each place, separated by land and water, the Mission Board did not give serious consideration to begin in Southeastern Alaska.

The entire complexion of the situation in Southeast and the attitude of the Mission Board would change with

a phone call in January of 1977. A small group of concerned Lutherans were having trouble accepting the doctrinal stance of the LCA church in Sitka. The group met at the home of Gary and ~~Coke~~ Oines and after agreeing that there could be no doctrinal fellowship with the LCA, called Pastor RN Baur. Pastor Baur was in Edmonds, Washington serving Salem Lutheran as well as being Chairman of the Mission Board for the Pacific Northwest District. Mr. Oines stated that several families had left their church because of doctrinal reasons and asked for information about the Wisconsin Synod. The group asked about the Wisconsin/Synod because the Don Seesz family had recently talked to Pastor Roger Vomhof of St. John's Lutheran Church in Fairfax Minnesota. Vomhof gave them WELS literature and Sunday School material. Needless to say the phone call was a surprise, but a very heart warming one. Pastor Baur related the incidents that followed.

I told him (Mr. Oines) about the Johnsons and the tape I was sending and also that I would be up to see them. [The Oines's immediately contacted the Johnsons and that group together with the Johnsons met at the Johnson home every Sunday for services. I guess it turned out to be pretty much of an all day affair. They were so happy to find each other. Up to this time the Johnsons did not know the group or the group the Johnsons.

This initial group consisted of Mr. and Mrs. Jerry Goldschmidt and family, Todd, Eric and Anne; Mr. and Mrs. Gary Oines and Leif, Mr. and Mrs. Don Seesz and Maria, Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Minnick, and Mrs. Herbert/Brandner.

As promised, two weeks later Pa⁵tor Baur came up to Sitka to meet with the group. At this initial meeting

no "live" service was held, but the time was spent to hold an evening class. The entire group was to take the instruction course. Pastor Baur remarked that it was a very enthusiastic and appreciative group. Monthly meetings were arranged from then on. And after three months the Godschmidts and Mrs Brandner were taken into fellowship. The last night of the instructions ended in a communion service. All attended the service except the Oines family who had a question about doctrine. It is interesting to note how the group increased as more and more friends were invited to join in the Monday night taped services.

By the grace of God the group continued to grow until they had to find a larger place to assemble. On September 4th, 1977 the group began to worship at the "Totem Club". This was an old Naval officers club located on Japonski Island. The island was connected to the mainland by a bridge. They were able to use this as a small but efficient sanctuary. The room could be divided up for classes. There was also a kitchen which was used frequently for potlucks and other forms of fellowship. The members also made furniture which consisted of an altar shelf, railing and lectern, as well as a large cross of yellow cedar and inlaid steel with matching candlesticks. Through private donations they were also able to purchase a carpet, kneeling pad and also invested in folding chairs and hymnals.

At a meeting of the General Board for Home Missions the Sitka group was given exploratory status. As of Jan. 18, 1978 the first "live" service was held. Pastor Baur preached

at this service with 26 souls present. It was from this point on that various pastors flew in once a month. The group was served alternately by Pastor RN Baur, Pastor Ted Lambert, Pastor Tom Spiegleberg, Pastor David Bode, and Pastor Warren Widman. The pastor would arrive on Monday afternoon promptly met by the host family. That same evening a 7:30 worship service would be conducted. Following the service would be coffee and fellowship. After this brief intermission a Bible class was then opened to all. Every minute was put to use. The following morning there would again be an instruction class for potential members, but it was also attended by many of the ladies on a regular basis. After this morning session the pastor would be on his way by noon having shared the Word and having received the best hospitality.

It was also during these visits that the Begalka family would be served on the way home. Pastor Baur met with the family, communed them and also reviewed the catechism with the Begalka children. Mr Begalka had instructed them as he did his wife. Ketchikan was also considered a vital area for mission work and the Begalkas offered their services.

The pastors of the Pacific Northwest District were appreciated for their work with this beginning congregation. In a history of the congregation it is stated:

The importance of the Bible teachings and eagerness to spread the wonderful gospel of Jesus Christ to the far corners of the earth was certainly evident through these pastors of the Wisconsin Synod. They willingly took precious time out of their own busy

schedules and away from their families to prepare and study for soul-feeding sermons and Bible classes conducted regularly in Sitka. Their warmth, friendliness and understanding was truly appreciated and will be remembered forever. May the Lord bless them always for their faithful service.

The congregation as a whole continued to make itself known throughout the community. Mission work was done by word of mouth, inviting friends and the like. Yet probably the most efficient means was through the radio. The congregation purchased on minute "spots" on the air to present "Points to Ponder." These were short commentaries of sound and simple doctrine. To make it more advantageous, these programs were aired right before Paul Harvey. This continued ^{un}til April of 1980 when the radio station would no longer air them.

In October of 1977 the General Board for Home Missions met and gave the congregation the right to call a full-time man for the region of Southeast Alaska. Usually one must first have mission status before manpower is granted but because the field was so far from a man to serve they were given a man under exploratory status. The congregation went through the assignment committee and called a graduate from the Seminary. David Laabs was assigned to be the first resident pastor in SE Alaska.

On July 11, 1978 Pastor Laabs and his wife arrived in Sitka. Then on July 16, the big day of ordination and installation came for the new preacher and Grace Lutheran Church. Pastor Bode flew up from Tacoma, Washington and preached the sermon. Even the Begalka family came in from Ketchikan to join in worship and praise.

The congregation continues to grow in faith and in numbers. On August 28, 1979 Pastor Laabs wrote to the General Board for Home Missions. At this time there were 28 communicants and 54 souls. He wrote:

After 19 months of exploratory services in Sitka, we, the members of Grace Lutheran Church request mission status of the GBHM of WELS. We feel that the recent history of the mission, the mission activity and the growth granted by the Lord all justify this request.

In this same year the Sitka group was given mission status. The congregation went on to buy a parsonage when the rent would have come to \$1,000 per month. On April 5, 1980 a request was made to buy land, hopefully the lot next to the parsonage. This congregation and its facilities have increased greatly year by year. The families have given abundantly and unselfishly of their time and of their money. Not only do they support most of their expenses, but also give a healthy chunk to Synod. The work continues in Sitka and now expands to Ketchikan and Juneau to see if other missions may be started.

It is heartening to see a group of Christians band together for the sake of their faith and desire for the pure Word. They are an example for all of us to follow. Not only did they unselfishly give of their talents and energies to have the Word among themselves, but also to bring it to the community and outlying areas. This same spirit is passed on to the children as evidenced by Todd and Eric Goldschmidt who are now attending Northwestern College. It is their desire to prepare themselves for the preaching

ministry. God blesses a congregation and then through that congregation continues to bless others.

Southeastern Alaska is a ripe mission field, There are innumerable possibilities for extending the kingdom of God. Pastor Laabs stated that there are 8,000 people in the immediate area and 40,000 within an hours flight. Of all these people an honest conservative estimate would be that only 20% are churched. Sitka is now a solid base of operation for expansion to outlying areas. May the Lord grant us the zeal and the results in this new field He has opened up to us.