

Trinity Lutheran Church
Enderlin, North Dakota

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Many humble beginnings are looked upon as having only sentimental value. This is true for most of us who haven't been blessed or privileged to experience such beginnings. For many of us then, that which counts is only those blessings which we see in brick and mortar and can count sitting in the pew. As sinners we're often tempted to think, if only inwardly, that big is better. Though our human nature would boast of what we have done, it is still those humble beginnings the Lord blessed us to have that we remember the best.

Every church has its beginnings, but perhaps no where have there been as many humble beginnings as there were in the Dakota's from the 1870's until the turn of the century. Though this paper will deal with only one congregation in this new developing territory, it is typical of the many that started during this time.

The history of Trinity Lutheran Church in Enderlin, North Dakota need not be as uninteresting as the flat treeless landscape some would make the Dakota's to be. It certainly would be so if all that was said about it was that it was started by the Iowa Synod. They were of course a mission minded synod that not only sent preachers to the North Central United States, but to the Pacific West Coast as well as foreign mission fields. But here we have a church body intent on bringing the Word to, at many times, only a handful of people and not giving up even if the lack of money and the weather would have made it easy to pull out. To summarize, my paper will deal with the history of the Dakota's, the missionary efforts there and focus in on

the congregation at Enderlin, North Dakota.

The Dakota's didn't actually become settled until 1873. Up to this time there had been squatters along the Missouri River in what is now South Dakota. Instead of farming they ~~w~~ owned large herds of cattle. The federal government also kept some military posts along the Missouri in order to keep in check the warlike desires of the Indians who controlled the land. So the squatters and the Soldiers were up to that time the only whites in the area. It wasn't until 1870 when the first railroad criss-crossed the Dakota's that settlement of the area actually began.

It was the spring of 1873 when the first real immigrants arrived. They called themselves Russians but were actually Germans whose ancestors settled in Russia from 1763 to 1859. They prided themselves in their German heritage which they were able to retain because of special privileges given to them, allowing them to establish their own schools, churches, and local administration, all in the German language. When the Russian government in 1871 decreed the abolition of these privileges, including exemption of the draft, thousands of these Germans decided to emigrate to North America. They sent out emissaries to America to investigate. They are said to have traveled throughout the country without finding what they were looking for until they reached the flatlands of the Dakota territories. They are said to have cried, "This is a real Russian steppe; it is good to be here; let us erect our huts here!"¹ Following this news the migration from Russia began. They settled mostly in the eastern portions of the Dakota's while Germans from Germany settled in the western

counties up to the Missouri River. These were people who had first settled the eastern United States and belonged to Lutheran churches of various synods before coming to the Dakota's. All these people were prime mission prospects for the Lutheran church in the Dakota's. Growth in these areas was astounding. As early as 1885 cities such as Siouz Falls, Mitchell, Aberdeen and Watertown were of equal size to the cities in eastern states.

Lutheran chruches sprang up almost as quickly as the Germans became settled. Missionaries from various Lutheran synods were sent to start congregations. The Iowa Synod's involvement happened by chance. In 1876 a Lutheran congregation with no synodical affiliation built a new church building in the settlement of Odessa, eight miles south of Scotland, South Dakota. The church was so expensive that it threatened to break the young congregation financially. They then decided to send a few men east to obtain collections to pay off their debt. As they went through Iowa they came across Pastor Luz in Dubuque who was of the Iowa Synod. At the insistance of these men Pastor Luz went to the Dakota's on several occasions. The Dakota teritories didn't get any real help until Pastor Bischoff went in 1879 and stayed through the fall. Because of the many Germans there he was soon able to establish eight to ten congregations. His congregations composed of the German-Russians were all clumped into one parish. This was common during those early days that one pastor would sometimes serve more than 20 congregations, visiting each maybe three or four times a year. The rest of the year the local teacher would hold services, perform baptisms and sometimes even

funerals. The German-Russians didn't mind--it was more than they had in Russia. At least they had a pastor nearby.²

In 1881 a group of Germans 30 miles north of where Pastor Bischoff was working, asked for his services. He was more than happy to supply Lutheran worship services for them and after the first church service a congregation was founded. They did not however want to be served three or four times a year but wanted their own pastor, even threatening Bischoff of turning to other synods if a pastor could not be obtained. So in November of 1882 a student from the Seminary in Iowa by the name of Holter interrupted his studies to serve this congregation. Though he was there only two years he founded yet another congregation of Germans. By the end of 1882 there were only three Iowa Synod pastors in the Dakota territory: Bischoff, Holter, and Wiederaenders who was serving the congregation in Scotland and Odessa.³

In these early years of the Iowa Synod there was no Mission Board let alone a Dakota District. Until now every pastor in this area was a missionary. Each would find a congregation in his area and follow up on leads and invitations of others. This is what Bischoff and Holter had done. However it became obvious to the synod officials that something more had to be done. So in 1882 a Mission committee was founded, in which they would describe the situations of the missions and their needs. Their course of action was to send traveling preachers though the Dakota's to gather congregations. Then young pastors would be sent to continue the work started by the traveling preachers. Unfortunately, the synod didn't have any permanent traveling preachers nor did they have young

pastors to continue the work started!

In the summer of 1884 the Mission committee instructed Pastor Lebahn, who came to the Dakota's in 1883 and was serving several congregations in now northern South Dakota, to go north from Aberdeen with his wagon to the Red River Valley north of Fargo and the area along the Northern Pacific Railroad. This region was fairly well settled, especially along the railroad. In spots there were congregations of other synods, namely the Norwegian and Missouri Synods, that were prospering quite nicely. It would seem Lebahn would have little or no luck at establishing congregations here. In Casselton, 20 miles west of Fargo, he found a congregation quarreling with its pastor. They came to Lebahn for help but he thought it best not get involved because after all they did already have a pastor, whose ministry he did not want to interfere with and he knew the synod's money and men could be better used elsewhere. It was later learned that the pastor of this congregation was more doctor and lawyer than preacher so Pastor Holter who was called to the area came to hold services for them shortly after his arrival.⁴

Southwest of Casselton, Lebahn found three~~x~~ more congregations near Sheldon, which was near the area of what would become Enderlin, which was also having problems with their pastor. He heard about the appeal some of the pioneers in this community sent back to Wisconsin (Ripon). Though Lebahn was unsuccessful at organizing a congregation there, Pastor Holter, who accepted a call to Sheldon in the fall of 1884, had no problem doing so upon his arrival.⁵

Holter found two congregations there, Sheldon and Watson,

both in the area that now takes in the Enderlin congregations. The Sheldon congregation was split, half of the members lived north of town and the other half lived to the south. Watson on the other hand was a rural post office about 18 miles north-east of Sheldon. The prospects for growth were good since many settlers came to the area from older states. They were mostly all low Germans whose confidence Holter quickly was able to win so that within three years the Watson congregation became independent. In the Sheldon congregation the settlers to the north held their worship services in a school four miles northwest of town and the others in a school six miles southwest of town. An early member recalls Pastor Holter, "with a shawl wrapped about him to protect him from the wind and cold walking or riding from farm to farm, holding services in various places to interest people in the new church."⁶

In 1885 Pastor Holter married and the north and south congregations jointly purchased a parsonage in Sheldon. Because of this enormous debt and a costly budget this young congregation had a difficult time paying its debts. In the secretary's records it is told that each family was asked to pay two dollars, or if they could not pay cash, then two sacks of oats and $\frac{1}{2}$ ton of hay to feed the pastor's horse.

Pastor Holter's salary was \$400.00 a year but there were many months when he went unpaid.⁷

After six years Pastor Holter felt he had to resign. His reasons it must be said were good ones. The hard pioneer work had ruined his health, and he was drawn to the East in order to perfect his English. The idea of learning English among the Iowa men in the Dakota's was looked down upon as it

was among conservative Lutheran bodies during that time. English was fine if one was going to speak politics, but when it came to religion, then it had to be German. But as time passed and more Easterners moved to the Dakota's, more Iowa men realized that whether they liked it or not English would have to be used if the Gospel was to be preached. Pastor Eisenberg's mission efforts in Fargo failed because of his only using English. Pastor Holter sensed this change and should be commended for wanting to improve his English.⁸

In April of 1891, Pastor E. Melchert from Jackson, Minn. was called and served until 1894. Unfortunately he couldn't take the severe North Dakota weather and ill health forced his resignation.

In 1895, Pastor H. Dieter took over the leadership of the congregation. With the coming of the new town of Enderlin, Trinity North was rapidly growing in membership and began to feel capable of building and maintaining a church. Land was purchased for a cemetery and a church site, and the building was dedicated in 1895. A few years later the people realized that the parsonage should be located next to the church because attending church services was complicated for the pastor's large family. Since there were no services in town. So the old parsonage in Sheldon was sold and the money was split between the two congregations. The northern group in 1899 then built a two-story parsonage next to the church.

The southern group had always held their worship services in the school, but since they almost had as many members as the northern group, they always wanted to build a church. Now with the profit from the parsonage and the strong desire

to become independent, they built a house whose first floor could serve as a residence and the second floor could serve as a place for school and worship services. After five years however there was no longer anyone who thought they should become independent. When they got a favorable opportunity to sell, they took advantage of it, built a church nearby, calling it the Anselm Church. The main thing was that the people were happy and satisfied with the service they got from the pastor of the northern group.

During these years Pastor Dieter started a preaching station in Lucca, a small town on the Soo Railroad ten miles northwest of the parsonage. Here, too, worship services were held in the school. There is an interesting story concerning this congregation--one day the entire town packed up and left! When the Northern Pacific Railroad laid its track from Casselton to Marion and crossed the Soo line only one mile from Lucca, a few businessmen considered the crossing of the two railroads the right place for their town and moved their businesses there over night. Only one restaurant was left behind which this young congregation was able to obtain at a low price. This did have its disadvantages. During the weeks that followed there were men, who traveled the roads frequently, that entered this church, thinking it still to be a restaurant, and made themselves at home for a day or so. When the people arrived for Sunday service, they often had to clean up first! In spite of this they held their services here for seven years.⁹

Pastor Dieter resigned in 1901 and was replaced by Pastor Henry Elster who would serve these congregations for 37 years.

He followed up the work begun by Dieter in Lucca, organizing Immanuel Lutheran Church. In the early 1920's when more German Lutherans moved to the city of Enderlin, he also organized the St. Luke's Congregation, which purchased the property of a former Presbyterian congregation.

At about this time Pastor Elster was named President of the Dakota District. With four churches in his parish the work load became too heavy. So Lucca and Trinity South voted to form a separate parish and call their own pastor. A parsonage was purchased in Lucca and until 1938 these churches were served by Pastors C. Haferman, Donald Meyer and Walter Hummel.¹⁰

In 1938, because of failing health, Pastor Elster resigned, and passed away in August. It was then that Pastor Schaible began his work, once again consisting of the four congregations. By this time though many changes had taken place in the community. More and more of the young people were going to school in Enderlin, automobiles had shortened distances and the city was becoming a social center. Fewer of the young people understood German which was still predominant at North Trinity. America entering the war in 1941 solved the language problem. The first Sunday after we entered the war all four congregations voted to eliminate German services.

Sensing the changing times, Trinity Church purchased a parsonage in Enderlin. As the three congregations became closer in their activities, it was time for them to merge into one congregation under one roof. In 1946, Trinity North, St. Luke's and Lucca voted to merge into a single congregation and built a new church on the property owned by St. Luke's in

Enderlin. The merger and building was accomplished smoothly and the new church was dedicated in 1949. The steady growth of the congregation soon made the education facilities obsolete, so that in 1965 a new education wing was dedicated, adding 16 new classrooms and office space.

The partnership between Trinity North and South still continues. Trinity South with a baptized membership of 128 and a confirmed membership of 102 maintains its own church, sharing a pastor with North Trinity. Activities and confirmation are also jointly shared. Trinity North has a present membership of 886 and 603 confirmed members, and with its modern facilities it seems far removed from the days when the struggling congregation asked its few members to pay \$2.00 a family, or a sack of oats and $\frac{1}{2}$ ton of hay to meet the deficit of the pastor's salary. Though these congregations are prospering they will be hard put to equal the devotion of those pioneers who nursed it through its early days in the new state of North Dakota.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ C.G. Eisenberg, History of the First Dakota-District of the Evangelical-Lutheran Synod of Iowa and Other States, (Washington DC, 1982), 11.
- ² Ibid., pp. 12-13.
- ³ Ibid., p. 13.
- ⁴ Ibid., p. 16.
- ⁵ Trinity 75 Year Anniversay Booklet.
- ⁶ Ibid.
- ⁷ Ibid.
- ⁸ loc. cit., pp. 49-51.
- ⁹ Ibid., p. 128.
- ¹⁰ Enderlin North Dakota Diamond Jubilee., p. 51.

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