

PASTOR WARREN WIDMANN:
GOD'S TOOL IN THE PACIFIC-NORTHWEST DISTRICT

An Oral History

Interviewer: Eric Miller
Senior Church History Project, 1996

There is something calming about the sound of countless rows of waves washing ashore on the beach. Even more calming to the sinner whose fate is the fires of hell is the good news that Jesus' saving work has paid for all sins, giving all who trust in him the sure hope of eternal life in heaven. God, in his love, continues to send messengers to proclaim the comforting message of Jesus' saving work to believers and to the world. On April 3, 1996 I had the privilege of interviewing one of these faithful proclaimers of the Gospel--Pastor Warren Widmann, at his house near the seashore of the Pacific Ocean in Seaside, Oregon. For thirty-three years and counting God has used Pastor Widmann to proclaim the Gospel in the Pacific-Northwest District of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod.

Before the interview I had some familiarity with Pastor Widmann and his ministry from the time I spent with him as his Vicar in 1994-95. I enjoyed the opportunity this interview gave to learn more about Pastor Widmann's ministry.

I grouped the questions that I asked Pastor Widmann into six sections:

<u>SECTIONS</u>	<u>POSITION ON THE TAPE</u>
Introduction	0:00:30 - 0:02:42
1. Childhood and education	0:02:42 - 0:09:55
2. Grace Church in Zillah, Washington	0:09:55 - 0:32:53
3. Missionary-at-large for the Pacific-Northwest District: -- Salem, Oregon -- Renton, Washington -- Kelowna, British Columbia -- Tri Cities, Washington -- Bend, Oregon -- Corvallis, Oregon (Nampa, Idaho)	0:32:53 - 1:28:25
4. Grace Church in Portland, Oregon	1:28:25 - 1:45:15
5. District President of the Pacific-Northwest District	1:45:15 - 2:04:40
6. Wrap up	2:04:40 - 2:09:34
Conclusion	2:09:34 - 2:10:51

It is a blessing that God works through sinful human beings to spread the precious message that Jesus died for sin and rose again to guarantee eternal life for all believers. It is also a blessing to look at Pastor Warren Widmann's ministry and to see how the Lord has used him as a tool in the Pacific Northwest District.

When I was given the assignment to review the history of the Pacific Northwest District and search for lessons that we might learn from the District's history, the thought was that a critical review with the focus on past mistakes should be the thrust of this little effort. However, that could well make this a rather lengthy essay, which I just as soon would not want it to be, nor would you, I'm sure. From the secure position of the present one can always, in retrospect pronounce judgments on past events, and discover mistakes, however significant or insignificant they may be. So I don't intend to isolate certain events in the past history of the District and put my personal verdict of right or wrong on them. I'll just try to recount some of the events of the past which will show a few of the difficulties which the District endured and which influenced its development.

First and foremost, the fact that the Pacific Northwest District endures to this day is solely due to the amazing grace of a loving and forgiving Lord. When the District attained its 50th year milestone, Pastor William Lueckel wrote in the anniversary booklet of that event: "Reviewing the past history of the Pacific Northwest District pastors and members are imbued with a humble spirit of awe and gratitude. In the activity of the past years they see the truth of the Apostle's words (2 Cor. 4,7), We have this treasure in earthen vessels. Human frailties and weakness of the flesh are to be seen where men administered the Holy Gospel. Mistakes were made and opportunities were neglected. At times the very existence of the District organization was threatened with dissolution. Also in the Pacific Northwest the Lord of all grace has been true to His promise and made His strength perfect in weakness (2 Cor.12,9). In spite of human faults and weakness He has let the Holy Ghost do its work."

What was it but the Lord's unfathomable grace and His divine design for the church that brought Pastor F. Wolf to Tacoma in 1884 in response to a call from seven German speaking Lutherans? Within a week of his arrival he began worship services and Sunday school in the Swedish church on Tacoma Avenue. Very soon he was traveling through an extensive area of western Washington, even to Victoria, B.C., seeking souls who were without a shepherd. Within five years he began another congregation in Tacoma. Pastor Wolf was a hardworking missionary who literally wore himself out in his zeal to do the Lord's work.

Pastor Wolf's mission work was extensive and yet limited. Its focus was on gathering German speaking Lutherans and providing them a church home where they could worship in accordance with their cultural background and in a language with which they were familiar.

This method of gathering souls and bringing the Gospel to them was pretty much characteristic of mission work in those days among Lutherans, not only in the west, but throughout the country. Lutheran congregations were known as Swedish, Norwegian, Finnish or German. It was only natural that immigrants to this country would seek to carry on their traditions and gather in groups of the same ethnic background. Many of these immigrants never learned to speak english, and it appears that english was definitely a foreign language to Pastor Wolf.

This method of gathering souls and establishing congregations continued in the early decades of the 20th century. I recall Pastor Krug, who was pastor of Grace congregation in Yakima in 1911, telling of doing canvass work with two other pastors in Ellensburg prior to the establishment of the congregation there. He said they first would find a city directory and check out the names that

were German, and these would be the people they called on. They would likely be either Lutheran or Catholic.

Pastor Lueckel writes: In the beginning there was no definite policy or directive under which the missionaries labored. Each one had been sent to an isolated field by the Mission Board in Wisconsin and now had to learn by experience how best to fulfil his call to preach the Gospel. This sometimes posed problems for a seminary graduate. The missionary usually did what was being done in other mission fields of the Wisconsin Synod at that time. He endeavored to locate and gather former Lutherans, preferably German Lutherans. Sometimes he was surprised to find that people who had been active church members had lost all church interest when they crossed the Rockies. He also found people anxious to be served with the Gospel and the Sacraments.

Thus was the foundation for the Pacific Northwest District laid. It was Lutheran and it was German. Now, a century later we cannot fault these early missionaries for doing mission work as they did. It was the only way they knew how. Rather, we have to commend them for their zeal and tireless labors. In 1910 there were four missionaries in the Pacific Northwest and their field of labor covered a large portion of Washington State. There were established congregations in Tacoma, Yakima, Leavenworth and Mansfield, and the two men in north central Washington took care of small groups of Lutherans in Chelan, Douglas, Grant, and Okanogan Counties. Since many of the Lutherans from Germany settled in farm country, it was in smaller towns and villages where congregations were established.

Pastor Lueckel writes: "In the early years the Wisconsin Synod had a different concept of mission work than it has today. Mission opportunities in cities like Seattle and Spokane were not exploited. The first missionaries soon saw

the need and the advisability of sending a man to explore new fields in the populous communities of the state and the wisdom of providing a chapel for his work if necessary. He adds the commentary: "It took many years before the Synod saw the wisdom of such a procedure. One might concede the necessity of sending a pastor in order to do mission work among the Indians. The white heathen in cities like Seattle, Spokane and Portland did not elicit such consideration. The work of the Wisconsin Synod in the Northwest was for too many years limited to activity in smaller towns and villages. This is one reason why it is sometimes difficult to begin new missions in the larger cities where other Lutheran Synods have already been active for 75 years. Today many old Wisconsin Synod Lutherans are members of other Synods and the sectarian churches because there was no Wisconsin Synod church to serve them when they came west."

In the decade from 1910-1920 the number of missionaries in the Pacific Northwest increased to 9 and mission work was begun in Portland and Joseph, Oregon, and in White Bluffs, Kennewick and Clarkston, Washington. But work was abandoned in some areas because of lack of manpower. Pastor Lueckel writes: "The Wisconsin Synod's work in the Pacific Northwest has always suffered under the handicap of a constantly changing ministry. In the first place it was difficult to get anyone but a seminary graduate to come into the western mission field. Older experienced men in the central states were reluctant to go to Washington, which some people looked upon as the 'burial ground' of the Wisconsin Synod. There was always the temptation for those who were assigned to the Pacific Northwest to accept a call to a well established congregation in the midwest."

Pastor ^{Lueckel} writes further: "The Pacific Northwest has often been criticized severely for the slow growth of its missions. Aside from the fact that the Wisconsin Synod began to do mission work at a comparatively late date and then very often in a half-hearted manner, this constant change

in personnel must be considered a contributing factor for whatever lack of progress and growth seemed to exist. In the light of what transpired in the Wisconsin Synod in the intervening years one is forced to conclude that missions and established congregations in Wisconsin e.g. could have survived a protracted vacancy in the ministry much better than the infant missions in the northwest. At one time, due to sickness, death, and removal, Pastor Soll in Yakima and Pastor Lueckel in Leavenworth were the only workers left on active duty to serve all the missions in Washington, Oregon and Idaho."

In 1918 the one independent congregation and the mission fields of the Pacific Northwest became the Pacific Northwest District of the Ev. Lutheran Joint Synod of Wisconsin and other States. This was a year after the four independent state synods which comprised ^{the} ~~to~~ Wisconsin Synod became districts of the Joint Synod. Lueckel writes: "The missions in the northwest presented a problem. They could have been combined with the Dakota-Montana missions of the Minnesota District. It was also suggested that the western missions be assigned to the Nebraska District. The old familiar proposal was also heard again: 'Turn the entire western mission field over to the Missouri Synod.' While these various plans were being considered, someone made the suggestion that the western missions become a district synod. It was an astounding suggestion and missionaries and churches in the west will be forever grateful to him who made it and to the Joint Synod for adopting it. No doubt the fact that Pastor Soll was exercising a stabilizing influence in the western missions had a bearing on the adoption of that suggestion.

Pastor Soll had been called to Grace church in Yakima in 1912. He had been president of the old Jt. Synod of Wisconsin. When he accepted the call to the Pacific Northwest, officials in Wisconsin asked him to bend his efforts toward keeping the Wisconsin Synod work in the

northwest within the bounds of conservative Lutheranism. There^{were} those who were apprehensive about the spirit and pastoral practices that might gain a foothold in the isolated western mission field.

The pastors and delegates of the churches in the northwest met at Grace church in Yakima on July 18th, 1918, with the president of the new Joint Synod, Pastor G.E. Bergemann, present. and organized the Pacific Northwest District of the Ev. Lutheran Jt. Synod of Wis. a. o. States. Seven pastors and five lay delegates chose Pastor Soll as president of the new district.

When the district observed its tenth anniversary in 1928, nine pastors were serving in 17 congregations. The communicant membership of the district had increased from 447 to 628.

Pastor Lueckel records: "It was not a phenomenal growth, but President Soll pointed to the real blessing which the district status had brought to the western mission field. In his report to the District convention he asked, "Have our expectations been realized? My answer is, fully. Before 1918 we were only a number of loosely connected congregations. Working as members of our district organization we have become acquainted and bound together. Although we have had a good measure of mistakes, shortcomings and disappointments, these were part of our work and we are working in harmony that a genuinely Evangelical Lutheran church body may be built in our District. Ministers and members alike have learned to consider themselves members of one organization, being co-workers therein. Our District offers us opportunities in many ways to bring a better knowledge of synodical work to our members. Where difficulties and differences arise, Synod enables us to meet on the common ground of God's Word to remove misunderstandings, and to be welded together as a flock which Jesus has bought with a price, His blood. We ask the gracious Lord to keep us in this unity.

During the decade of the 1930's there were significant gains in communicant membership and by the end of the 40's the statistical reports list 1211 members and 30 congregations. It was during this period that the District began to explore mission opportunities in Seattle and Spokane. Pastor F. Stern was called as missionary to undertake the work in Seattle. His efforts resulted in the organization of Grace congregation. About the same time Pastor M.J. Witt, whose congregation was in Palouse, began work in Spokane. His labors brought about the organization of Trinity congregation in 1944. By this time mission work was no longer limited to seeking out German Lutherans but was focused on bringing the Word to the unchurched, wherever and wherever they might be.

Through Pastor Witt's labors congregations were organized also in the Shadle Park area of Spokane, in the Spokane valley and in south Spokane. It was also during the decade of the 40's that missions originating from Grace congregation in Yakima were organized, viz., Grace in Zillah and Redeemer in Yakima.

The 1950's showed considerable expansion in the District. By 1957 communicant membership had increase to 1602. There were 23 parishes being served by 19 pastors. New congregations had been organized in Portland and Eugene, Oregon, and in Edmonds, Washington.

The late 50's, however, were a time of crisis in the entire Wisconsin Synod. The 1957 convention of the Synod and been presented several memorials from individual members, from congregations, and from districts of the Synod calling for a cessation of fellowship with the Missouri Synod. One such memorial was presented by the Pacific Northwest District. The convention, however, did not sever fellowship and resolved only to practice a "vigorously protesting fellowship" over against the Missouri Synod. Convinced that the Wisconsin Synod ^{had} and deviated from its confessional stand on church fellowship, President Witt resigned from the Synod, followed later by his congregation,

and very shortly thereafter by the other three pastors and their congregations in the Spokane area and the pastor and congregations in Clarkston, Washington, and Orofino, Idaho. There also were losses of individual members of other congregations throughout the district. Pastor Lueckel observes: "No district felt the effects of this crisis as keenly as the Pacific Northwest District. In rapid succession this smallest synodical district had lost about a third of its pastors and the churches which they served.

Pastor Lueckel makes this comment: "This time of crisis was also a time for self-examination throughout the Wisconsin Synod. Pastors and churches had to decide whether or not they were ready to embark upon the stream of liberalism which had already engulfed so many sectarian churches and which was also beginning to erode the foundation of some Lutheran Synods. All pastors and churches which stayed with the Pacific Northwest District were determined to continue in the spirit and to build upon the sound principles which had guided the District when it was organized. The Lord of the Church did ^{not} forget His little flock in the Pacific Northwest. The work of the District prospered.

This was evident in the next decade when the number of congregations ⁱⁿ the District increased from 18 to 28 and the communicant membership rose from 1357 to 2101. Much of this growth came about because the Wisconsin Synod with its firm doctrinal stand became a haven for conservative Lutherans from other synods who could no longer tolerate the liberalism that had infected these synods. By 1980 there were 37 congregations with 3655 communicant members served by 29 pastors. It was during this period that our district was granted the privilege of having a district missionary. Pastor Widmann served that calling most capably and was instrumental in establishing congregations in Salem, Bend and Corvallis, Oregon, and Renton and Vancouver, Washington, Nampa, Idaho, and Kelowna, British Columbia. Mission work

was also begun in Alaska. Pastor David Zietlow answered the call to undertake the work in that challenging field. He began in Anchorage and established Faith congregation there, but at the same time he was exploring other areas and by 1980 our district had five congregations in Alaska. Three more were established in the ensuing year and by the end of 1993 eight pastors were serving eight congregations with over eight hundred communicant members. A very large number of the members were gained through adult confirmations. The Lord has truly blessed the labors of the missionaries there.

The efforts of our congregations to provide a Christian education for their children have also not been without blessings. Though there have been struggles and obstacles to overcome, the nine elementary schools and one high school are providing a Christ-centered education for nearly 700 of the youth of our district.

Lessons to be learned from the history of our District? Above all adherence to the pure Word of God and faithful proclamation of that Word will continue to prosper the Pacific Northwest District. Diligent labor in our calling as pastors and teachers, a sincere love for blood-bought souls and a constant focus on why the Church exists and what our mission in it is - these are the spiritual qualities that we need to learn, and re-learn over and over again - these and an unwavering trust in the Lord of the Church who despite our failures, mistakes and inadequacies will see to it that His Word will not return to Him empty, but will accomplish what He desires and achieve the purpose for which He sent it.

Lessons Learned From the History of the Pacific Northwest District.

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