

THE PERSONALITIES AND FACTORS  
INVOLVED  
IN THE WELS DECISION TO  
ENTER AFRICA  
IN  
1951

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Church History

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The story is an interesting one. In fact, it is unique. Never before had the Synod made an attempt to begin a truly foreign mission on its own. The decision to carry out this venture was, of course, not a 'snap' judgment. It represented years of debate, committee meetings, preparation and thousands of man-hours of exploration and research. It will be the purpose of this paper to retell the story as factually and objectively as possible.

The seeds for this WELS foreign mission venture were sown many years before there were men and money to carry it out. Already back in the '20's in the Wawatosa seminary classroom of Prof. August Pieper the seeds for foreign mission/work were sown. His fiery lectures on Isaiah left more than one student eager to carry out the Lord's command to bring the life-giving gospel to the heathen world. Prof. Pieper made an earnest effort to keep the WELS from falling asleep when it came to foreign mission/work. His fiery essay at the 1919 synod convention is just one example of his determination to arouse 'mission awareness' in the synod.

Among those stimulated by Prof. Pieper were too young men -- Arthur Wacker and Edgar Hoenecke. They were by no means the only mission-minded men to come out of the Wawatosa seminary. They were, however, two men who played an important part in getting the ball rolling for the first foreign mission.

You might say these men were disillusioned at first as they began shepherding their own flocks. 'Missions' was a word which was seldom

heard in congregations except for mission festival time. Expansion in missions was not even considered. The WELS list of missions was short-- counting only the Apache mission and a mission in Poland. We did help support the joint synodical mission in Nigeria and in the South, but we had no desire to take on the responsibility of a full-fledged mission venture alone. In the early '30's a few like-minded pastors, who were blessed with the same mission zeal as Prof. Pieper, found themselves together in the Southeastern conference of the Michigan district. They were determined to do something about the 'sleepy dog attitude' toward missions which seemed prevalent about the Synod.

Early in the 1930's Pastor Edgar Hoenecke had a idea for stimulating the churches of the Southeastern conference of Michigan and making them aware of the full impact of the Savior's great commission. He produced bulletins with cartoons on them for distribution throughout the conference. Some of the cartoons were not complimentary, showing pastors sitting in the shade sleeping while the world went by them. The idea soon caught on. It was well received in the Michigan district and played an important part in making people aware of the Synodical debt and the work which the Lord had placed before them. It was called the "Michigan Plan". In 1933, Pres. John Brenner picked up some of these "Michigan Plan" bulletins and liked what he saw. Soon Pastor Hoenecke was writing monthly bulletins for distribution throughout Synod.

Much could be written about the Southeastern conference of the Michigan district. Throughout these difficult years they played an important role in getting the Synod out the hole and directing her attention to her job of sowing the gospel on foreign soil. They were

behind the mission effort 100%. There was something about this conference which made it stand out from the rest of the conferences of synod. Perhaps it was the close unity and friendship which existed among its members. Perhaps it was the active and energetic ministry of its pastors or their down-to-earth practicality and expertise in getting things done. At any rate, because of their mission-mindedness this area of synod was also very much Synod-minded. It played an extremely large role in this foreign mission project.

But despite the efforts of the Southeastern conference and the efforts of other places as well the Synod was in financial trouble. In the spring of 1932 the Synodical debt reached an all time low--\$752,649.69. Even an every member canvass from '32-'34 only managed to reduce the debt by \$150,000. By 1933 Pres. Brenner reported that salary cuts had to be made since '31. In '31 Synod payed 80¢-90¢ on every dollar owed to its workers. In '32 that figure dropped to 64¢-72¢ on a dollar! At that same convention Pres. Brenner reported that under such conditions no new mission fields could be opened--even though a majority of the seminary and New Ulm graduates of that year still had no calls! Things certainly looked dismal. Here is where the Synod learned to "pinch pennies"--a factor one must take into account when a mission expansion program is discussed 12 years later.

By convention time in 1935 the debt was back to \$638,000. The Board of Trustees had to report that only once during the past 2 years had the salaries been paid to date. The convention proceeded as usual. Its spirit somewhat dampened by a over half a million dollar debt. On the last day of the convention however, a surprising motion was made. Pastor Hoenecke moved that "we pay off the debt which is hampering our synod in its work in all departments, especially missions." The motion

must have sounded rather ridiculous to the convention. Pres. Brenner expressed his appreciation for Pastor Hoenecke's enthusiasm and enterprise, but added that it simply was too late to do anything about it at this convention. One man on the convention floor, however, did not think that the motion was ridiculous. In the rear of the New Ulm auditorium Mr. Fred Rätzlaff, an old respected resident of New Ulm, rose to his feet and said, "I like what that young man has proposed; and I second the motion." The motion was called and it passed with a good majority. The result was a committee was appointed to set up a plan for retiring the debt.

It was the same place--New Ulm -- 10 years later when Pres. Brenner opened his report with the words, "During the past biennium the offerings of our Christians increased to such an extent that our books today show a sizable surplus." The report of the Board of Trustees, usually appearing early in the convention to set a conservative mood, appeared no. 41 in the list of reports. The debt no longer stood in the way. It is easy to see why this convention was called the "happy convention of '45". The Board of Trustees could boast that the Reserve fund amounted to \$350,000.

But that wasn't the only reason why this was a happy convention. On the last day of the convention the news came that the war was over! That meant that the men and women serving in armed forces would be returning home soon! Happy and grateful to the Lord for the blessings which He had showered on them during the past biennium, the '45 delegates were determined to show their gratitude to the Lord by continuing to carry out His work. The delegates did not let the warnings of Pres. Brenner dampen their enthusiasm, "At this convention let us be conservative in our think-

ing and planning, neglecting no real need in our work, but avoiding the enthusiasm characteristic of our days; lest we in an abnormal time create obligations for ourselves that will prove too great when normalcy returns." Pres. Brenner was not about to let the Synod sink into debt again so quickly. One can understand why he spoke these words of caution. It's not much fun being president when the Synod is overcome by debt.

The man who reminded the Synod of the great purpose behind retiring the debt was the same man who made that bold motion back in '35--Pastor Hoenecke. As one of the members of the Executive Committee for the Apache Indian Mission, Pastor Hoenecke gave the delegates an emotional appeal for a truly independent foreign mission in his committee report to the convention. Here are a few excerpts from the report which was based on Is. 49:6:

"With unusual force the present-day fulfillment of prophecy concerning the signs of the last time must stir up in our hearts and consciences the remembrance of the Word of our Lord Jesus, "Ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth!" Jesus was clearly speaking geographically\*. Our duty does not consist only in "raising up the tribes of Jacob and the restoration of the preserved of Israel",--our call and our duty are world wide!"

"The vastly increased opportunities resulting in so many ways from the present war--these are our opportunities; the grave responsibilities, not of mere reconstruction, but of regeneration of the hearts and lives of literally hundreds of millions by the gospel, --these are our responsibilities in the Wisconsin Synod!"

"We cannot shirk these issues much longer with impunity; we have had the precious gospel preserved to us for one hundred years; we have become well established with all the means for carrying out a full program of work, as our Lord has outlined it; and we will have world wide opportunities in profusion, especially if the Lord should give to the arms of our nation the victory for which we pray."

"As your committee in charge of the only heathen mission, and that

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\* "geographically"-- Pastor Hoenecke placed special emphasis on this word in his report because there was the prevailing opinion among our leaders that mission expansion must be

within our borders!, which our Synod conducts independantly , we earnestly urge this session of our Wisconsin Synod to take thought and action in the matter of mission work among those who have no opportunity to hear the sound of the saving gospel! Because there are still vast stretches of Asia, Africa, South America, and on the islands of the seven seas where this sound has not been heard in our day and because communications and transportation improvements will presumably bring these areas within our easier reach after the war, and because world time is becoming short, we plead that consideration of a wider mission program be undertaken with despatch." (Proceedings, 1945, p. 31-32)

Pres. Brenner's immediate response to this moving report by Pastor Hoenecke was, "You're out of order!" The rest of the delegates, however, didn't feel that he was out of order. All over the convention floor, men, especially the delegates and visitors from the Southeastern conference, quickly responded to Pastor Hoenecke's report with speeches. The spontaneity of the speeches (because they were, by and large, from the Southeastern conference) gave rise to suspicions that the whole proposal was a planned concerted political move. But that was not the case. It was simply the response of thankful Christians.

A resolution formed from Hoenecke's proposal passed by a large majority despite the efforts of the Board of Trustees who questioned the advisability of spending some of the reserve fund at this time. The resolution read:

"Resolved that the President appoint a committee to gather information regarding foreign fields that might offer opportunity for mission work by our synod. When ready, this committee shall report the results of its study, first to the General Mission Board, and then to the synod." (Proceedings, 1945, p. 34)

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undertaken only from the center to the next contiguous field after the work had been established in the center. In other words, it was not Scriptural to jump over the nearer fields to begin work in a remote field. In their opinion, all mission expansion was to be undertaken only when the Church had received a clear "Macedonian Call" from a field.

The committee which was formed was called the Committee on Foreign Missions. One of the members of this committee was Pastor Art Wacker. It should be noted that between the years '45-'48 this pastor from Scio, Michigan carried the ball almost alone. Together with another member of the GMB, H. C. (Charlie) Nitz, he saw the whole project through from beginning to end. He demonstrated a great deal of courage at meetings. There was a great deal of opposition to this "mad plan" to carry out the intention of the convention of '45 among the leaders of the Synod. Wacker, Nitz, and Hoenecke and others pushed this plan in synod so that it weathered the convention of '47, where it easily might have died, and carried it through until the actual exploration in '49.

This committee reported to the 1947 convention that several foreign mission openings had been found, "two in the orient, two in Africa, and one in the islands of the South Pacific." The convention thereupon resolved,

"that the Synod authorize the expansion of our mission work in foreign heathen fields, and that the General Mission Board be instructed to continue its investigation and explore the most promising heathen fields and report to the General Synodical Committee for further instructions." (Proceedings, '47, P. 51)

The Committee on Foreign Missions was dismissed.

The General Mission Board now took over the matter of determining the field which it was instructed to submit to the General Synodical Committee for joint action. The mission Board interpreted its instructions from the synod as a mandate prescribing an on-the-spot investigation of the field to be recommended to the Synodical Committee. It also reached the conclusion on the basis of preliminary studies that Africa offered the best opportunity for mission work.



The next job was finding explorers. The GMB was looking for two pastors with sound judgment and good health to undertake this rugged trek into a new mission field. A year and a half went by -- still no one had been found. It was already 1948 and it looked as though the project would have to be scrapped for lack of volunteers. Then, Pastor Wacker from São, a member of both Mission Boards, volunteered for the task. Rather than have any more delay and run the risk of losing the project he consented to undertake this venture even though he had lost his wife only 18 months before this and still had five children at home! Pastor Wacker, enthusiastically behind this project from the outset, was determined to see it completed despite the inconvenience and problems it presented for himself, his family and his congregation.

Still, He needed a companion on this venture. The GMB twice approached Pastor Hoenecke, the one who had gotten the ball rolling for this project, if he would accompany Pastor Wacker. Both times he declined. He declined, however, with good reason. Pastor Hoenecke and his congregation at Plymouth were in the midst of an extensive relocation and building project. As shepherd of his flock, his presence was essential to the success of the project.

But Pastor Wacker would not take no for an answer. He realized how much of an asset Pastor Hoenecke would be on this journey. Hoenecke was intensely interested in foreign mission work, he had mission experience, he was acquainted with movie cameras ( a motion picture record of the journey was desired by the GMB to help in arriving at a decision.) Time was running out for Wacker in his search for a teammate. Finally in the first week in January Wacker succeeded in talking Hoenecke into it.

The final decision, however, was up to the congregation at Plymouth. On January 11th, Pastor <sup>Wacker</sup> made his plea before the voter's assembly of St. Peter's congregation to grant Pastor Hoenecke a leave of absence for the trip. His plea was an eloquent one. The vote was 45-5 to grant the leave. The voters made it clear that he must be back no later than September 1st.

Since the report of the exploration committee was to be made to the August convention, the journey had to begin right after Easter. That left 15 weeks to prepare for the trip and no decision had even been made as to what part of Africa was to be explored! The factors which had brought about the decision to choose Africa had been : its peaceful atmosphere at this time, its largely untouched population and its huge size. Another factor entered in when a decision had to be made as to what part of Africa was to be explored--language. It was decided that the southern part of Africa would receive the attention of the explorers because of the prevalence of the English language. Chiefly two areas would receive their attention. The first was the area just north of the Union of South Africa, the other was the Upper Volta region, north of Ghana. These regions were 2,400 miles apart--separated by heavy jungle and virtually without connecting roads.

It might seem at this point that the whole project lacked adequate organization. To some degree that was true. Time just didn't allow for adequate organization. If one were to look around for someone to blame for the costly time losses, the lack of adequate assistance in the preparation for the trip and the expensive outfitting

the blame would have to fall on the whole Synod. Many people talked a good line on foreign missions, but were not willing to put their money where their mouth was. Encouragement for the project was abundant, but when it came to the question whether they would be willing to go or not, they backed down very quickly with all sorts of excuses.

This helter-skelter planning was simply the only way considering the circumstances. Both pastors during this fifteen week preparation had their normal family, congregational (it was the Lenten season) and synodical duties to perform. It is a wonder that they were prepared at all to face Africa! Passports and visas for 10 countries were obtained only shortly before departure. The specially designed truck was ready only days before they were to leave. Because they were basically Mid-western pastors and not experienced Africa guides, mistakes and problems were bound to occur. Take, for instance, their vehicle. The securing of this vehicle took up a good share of the preparation time. Turning down an offer of a safari-wagon previously owned by Clark Gable because the \$7,500 price tag for this fully equipped truck seem to be a bit too high, they sat down with two trailer companies to design their own. Fruehauf built the living quarters and insisted on using steel plates throughout. The living quarters included: two bunks, extra water and fuel tanks, an Onan generator, refrigerator, stove, table and chairs. Claiming that they had already lost money on the deal Fruehauf turned the building of the cab over to Remke trailer Company who also used steel plate throughout. The result was that the Dodge Power wagon chassis, rated at one ton, with single rear wheels, was carrying 10,630 lbs.!

In other words, the truck was about 4 tons over its limit. One isn't surprised to hear of their numerous breakdowns.

Just before the two were due to start their long trek, the Southeastern conference once again showed that they were behind them as one solid individual. Throughout the project they had contributed a great deal of money, much encouragement, enthusiasm and interest. But shortly before they were set to sail the conference held a special service as a send off. They held a regular service; the pastors' chorus sang and various speeches were made--all this was tape recorded for encouragement while they were in Africa. In addition to this they brought a great collection of trinkets, supplies and all sorts of things--among them a gross of switch blades and mouth organs for distribution among the natives to obtain their good will. The Michigan district and in particular, the Southeastern conference, was indeed an essential factor in the success of this project.

Something should be mentioned about the two personalities which were instrumental to this whole project. Arthur Wacker was a man who was highly concerned about the fact that the synod had not engaged in any true foreign mission expansion program. Hence, he was involved in mission work throughout his ministry. He was very active in the home mission program as well as foreign missions. As a member of two mission committees he was often outspoken on the subject of missions. He was not afraid to speak his mind even when it meant criticizing those who seemed to be dragging their feet. He loved the outdoors and was avid sportsman. He had that carefree, evangelical attitude which

seemed to be a part of many of his colleagues in the Michigan district. Some might have called him a bit reckless--the type who would crawl under a five ton truck which was perched precariously on a pile of rocks in order to kick off a wheel. His mechanical inclination and his ability to 'rough it' proved to be an asset on the journey. Most important of all these, however, was his God-given dedication to the spread of the gospel which persuaded him to leave his five motherless children for four months to do a job that no one else wanted to do.

Pastor Hoenecke had a very similar dedication, but his personality was as different from Wacker's as night is from day. Hoenecke was no outdoorsman, no mechanic and probably without the strong constitution of his counterpart. Yet, he was a man who commanded respect wherever he went. His eloquence and heart-stirring language played an important role in this story. Like Wacker, Hoenecke had the reputation as a man who could handle extra responsibility. He was placed on the Executive Committee for the Apache Indian Mission. His dedication to the gospel ministry prompted him to tackle a job which endangered his health\* and took him away from a family and congregation who needed him.

It wasn't personal glory which spurred these men to take on this responsibility. It was dedication to their Savior who had given them the commission to bring His gospel to the uttermost part of the earth.

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\* Pastor Hoenecke was turned down when he applied for insurance before the trip because of kidney stones. This problem disappeared while he was on the journey.

Much would be said about the exploration itself. The hardships and problems, joys and anecdotes could fill a volume by itself. That, however, is not the purpose of this paper. The whole exploration boiled down to this question, "Where can we find the best place to start a foreign mission?" It should be noted that finding a totally virgin mission field in Africa in 1949 was a difficult task. Many denominations had already set up shop across the continent. Basically, there were two areas which were explored which seemed to be good spots to begin work. The first was in Angola. It was a triangular area formed by the Kunene and Cubango rivers enclosing about 70,000 square miles and about 200,000 natives. The only other church which had a foothold there was the Roman church, but it was a very small area in which they were doing work. The drawbacks in choosing this area were the Portuguese language, prevalence of malaria, and the migration of many of the inhabitants to other areas.

The second area, the one finally recommended, was located between Broken Hill and Lusaka, Northern Rhodesia, where the Kafui river makes a sort of "hook". The area covered about 40,000 square miles and contained about 100,000 inhabitants. Because of the government work there the expected population in a few years was 300,000. It had never been evangelized. The climate was healthful and pleasant. The land was good for growing just about anything. Because it was a British colony English was the medium of communication. Besides these favorable features the British were beginning a program to develop the obvious assets of N. Rhodesia. The recent loss of other colonies had led Britain to develop N. Rhodesia rather than exploit it. A big factor which carried a great deal of weight

with the GMB was the favorable atmosphere of the government toward missions. The Secretary for Native Development, Mr. John Moffat, encouraged the WELS to start work there. He said that WELS was the type of conservative church the British were looking for to start work in N. Rhodesia. He called the coming of this pair of explorers a 'God-send'. The positive attitude of the government was a big factor in swinging the decision to this area.

But the favorable governmental conditions wasn't the only factor. The surrounding denominations also encouraged the WELS to begin work there. Among them were Rev. Grey and Rev. Temple, both seasoned Methodist missionaries. The situation of the detribalized natives of this area who had migrated to the cities to find work in the mines was described as pitiful. Because these natives had been uprooted from their home restraints and mores they were in danger of becoming confirmed agnostics. In short, the 'hook of the Kafui' was an ideal spot to begin a mission. The two explorers had little trouble convincing the GMB that this was the best place.

Because of weather conditions and limited time the pair were forced to abandon hope of exploring the upper Volta region. Instead they returned home by air (the departure time of the freighter had been changed 3 times). They did not, however, return home in time to give their report to the synod. Because of an unusual incident aboard their plane they were quarantined for 4 weeks after they returned home. Their trip had been a success. But this was not the end of their story.

The total expenditures for the trip came to close to \$14,000.

This figure upset some people and raised a few eyebrows on others. However, this amount was more than offset by the \$15,000 in offerings gathered in the many showings of the film, "Africa Still Calls" which was made from the footage taken during the 7,500 mile journey. The film was a great factor in drawing support for this project. The film had quite a billing. It boasted of scenes of "bushmen" and the "proud Ovambos, whose country is verboten to tourists" and was booked solid for months. The 94 minute film was quite professionally done. It had a soundtrack which included native music, trained mission chorus, the 'living' voice of Mr. John Moffatt along with a running narrative. The film was a valuable tool in selling the Synod on African mission work.

On November 11, 1949, a Special Committee on Foreign Mission Report was held at the Northwestern Publishing House. It was there that Wacker and Hoenecke's full report and recommendations were read. It is interesting to note that the Committee chose to delete and rewrite certain phrases and sentences of the report which tended to criticize the WELS mission record and its sluggishness in foreign missions. Obviously they were not all of the same opinion about that. The Committee resolved to edit the film for production. The Committee also outlined the information to be taken up at the next Foreign Missions Committee meeting.

On December 8, 1949, the Foreign Missions' Committee met to debrief the exploration committee and study their recommendations. Very little seems to have been accomplished at this meeting. Most of their resolutions dealt with the showing of the film, "Africa Still Calls". An interesting discussion took place, however, at the end of the meeting. The discussion revolved around the question, "Are we delinquent if we attend



only to those who are at our door?" The question of Synodical finances was also brought up. It seems at this point there were still those who did not like the "open door" policy, but who rather preferred to respond only to those who call for our help. Some of the Committee still felt that Synod would be guilty of not "counting the cost" if she would begin an African Mission.

However, at the Synodical convention in 1951 the following resolution was adopted,

- 1) That our Synod enter into foreign, heathen mission work in Northern Rhodesia field in Africa.
- 2) That the General Mission Board be authorized to call and send two missionaries to this field.
- 3) That the first year's cost (estimated \$35,000) be taken from the Exporation Fund in the Budget.

(Report, '52, p. 32)

The film and the "Schwaermer", as the zealous advocates for this foreign mission were sometimes called, had done their work. The report of the two won immediate support among laypeople and clergy. The "hook of the Kafui" became a sort of catch word. People who previously did not pay much attention to this project began to repeat this strange sounding phrase. So, even the name of this soon-to-be evangelized area proved to be a clever device in winning support for the venture.

Today the Lutheran Church of Central Africa is living proof that the Lord was behind this "mad" venture of our Synod. The story of this unique portion of our Synod's history proves that the Lord does move in mysterious ways. May the lessons we have learned during the years '35-'51 ever remind us of our task, "Go ye, therefore, and make disciples of all nations."

Biographical Note:

Much of the information and resource material for this paper came from correspondence, both written and taped, with Pastor Edgar Hoenecke, Executive Secretary for World Missions. Other information was gathered from the 1949 reports of the Exploration Committee; minutes of the Foreign Missions Committee meetings in 1949 and other documents; Synodical Proceedings from the years '35, '45, '47, '49 and '51 and the Northwestern Lutheran Vol. 61, nos. 25-26 (Dec. 15th+29th, '74)