



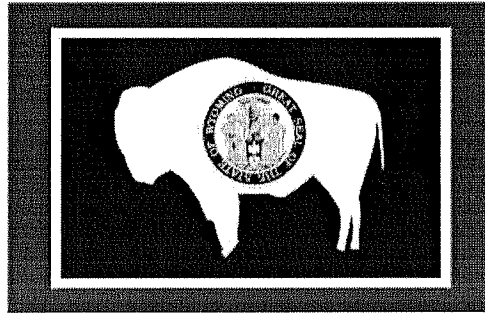
# The History of the WELS in Wyoming

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## Table of Contents

Introduction.....	2
A brief sketch of Wyoming.....	2
Early Lutherans in Wyoming.....	9
First Start in Cheyenne.....	13
Second Start in Cheyenne.....	19
Casper.....	26
Gillette.....	35
Sheridan.....	40
Laramie.....	43
Powell.....	46
Hulett and Devil's Tower.....	51
Newcastle.....	52
Sundance.....	52
Greenriver.....	52
Riverton.....	53
Conclusion.....	53
Bibliography.....	55
Appendix.....	58

## **Introduction**

The format of this paper may seem a bit confusing at first. It begins with a brief history and character sketch of Wyoming. Next is a brief discussion of other Lutherans in Wyoming. I have included several quotes from the first pastor of the Synodical Conference, because some of his observations help explain Wyoming culture. Next is the WELS first attempt in Wyoming. At the present time there are only three established congregations in the state of Wyoming and so they are covered in chronological order. Sheridan is the one church that is considered a mission congregation on the Synodical level, and so it comes after the three established churches. Any subsequent satellite churches are then covered.

## **A Brief Sketch of Wyoming**

Before discussing the history of the WELS in Wyoming it seems fitting that one must first discuss a brief history of the state of Wyoming, and the climate that shapes its living conditions.

We can guess that the early settlers of the state of Wyoming were people who were trying to escape the social pressures of society, by the fact that the original career opportunities were trades that offered isolation and individualism. The first people to make a living in the state of Wyoming were the fur trappers and traders known as mountain men. Gentleman's hats made out of beaver skin had become an exploding fashion trend in Europe, and this in turn meant an income for the mountain men who came to the uncivilized region now known as Wyoming. As mentioned before this was a fairly isolated and lonely trade. Men would spend their winters covering their chosen area checking traps that they had set. Some better known mountain men such as Kit Carson, Jim Bridger, Davey Jackson, and Jedediah Smith were among the trappers, explorers and traders to first roam the Wyoming territory.

One of the most famous stories of the rugged masculinity that this occupation required is John Colter's escape from the Black Foot Indians. Colter had been a member of the Lewis and Clark expedition, and when they went through the Rocky Mountains he realized beaver trapping would be profitable in this region. On the return trip he requested and was granted a discharge two months before his service was finished.<sup>1</sup> He headed into the Yellowstone and Grand Teton region of what is now Wyoming and Montana in 1807.<sup>2</sup>

In 1809 John Colter and his partner, John Potts, began trapping in Black Foot territory.<sup>3</sup> Inside the present day Montana border, Colter and his partner found themselves surrounded by this tribe. His partner shot one Indian, and was instantly riddled by arrows. The Indians decided to make a sport out of John Colter so they stripped him naked and gave him a head start. Early spring waters were freezing cold, but John Colter found a log jam in the river and swam underneath it. The Indians poked spears into the log jam until nightfall and figured that he had to be dead. John Colter walked naked several hundred miles to Fort LaSalle through rough country full of cactus and sage brush. He is the man given credit for being the first white man in Yellowstone, which at the time was nicknamed "Colter's Hell" due to its geysers. This nickname came from Colter's own written reports.<sup>4</sup>

As civilization in the east pushed its borders further west, more people started moving into the unsettled regions of the west. The discovery of gold in California and the pursuing gold rush sent people looking to get rich quick through Wyoming. The opportunity for rich land on

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<sup>1</sup> Karen M. Strom, "*The Lewis and Clark Expedition*. (1995-2005, accessed 7 October 2005) available from <http://www.hanksville.org/daniel/misc/John.Colter.html>; Internet.

<sup>2</sup> *State of Wyoming - Historical Dates* (accessed 7 October 2005); available from [http://wyoming.gov/state/wyoming\\_news/general/chronology.asp](http://wyoming.gov/state/wyoming_news/general/chronology.asp); Internet.

<sup>3</sup> David Neiman (Executive Producer). *Lewis and Clark - Inside the Corps- John Colter* (PBS Online, 1999 accessed October 7 2005); available from <http://www.pbs.org/lewisandclark/inside/jcolt.html>; Internet.

<sup>4</sup> *State of Wyoming - General Facts About Wyoming* (accessed 7 October 2005); available from [http://wyoming.gov/state/wyoming\\_news/general/history.asp](http://wyoming.gov/state/wyoming_news/general/history.asp); Internet.

the west coast, mainly in Oregon, sent more people across Wyoming and the path quickly became a trail, which became known as the Oregon Trail.<sup>5</sup>

Men are sinful and will take advantage of people who are carting everything they own across a fairly unsettled land. There were also threats of Indian attacks, and so the military began establishing forts to protect the Oregon Trail.

Others saw an opportunity to make a profit by re-supplying travelers as they traveled on the Oregon Trail. Jim Bridger quickly saw more money in re-supplying travelers than in the dying fur trade, and so in 1843 Fort Bridger opened its doors and became a popular stop along the way.<sup>6</sup> There are still people in Wyoming today who hold to this theory; only these little settlements out in the middle of nowhere are now called gas stations and truck stops.

Soon people also began to see an economic opportunity in agriculture. The high plains of Wyoming do not offer much for farming, but were recognized as a great place for free range cattle. Ranching sprung up along with one of the most famous job titles in Wyoming, “the Cowboy.” Agriculture does not have as large an impact on Wyoming’s economy in modern times, but it is still an important occupation. The Wyoming government web site states, “In 2001 the total value of agricultural production in Wyoming was \$898.5 million. The main agricultural commodities produced in Wyoming include livestock (beef), hay, sugar beets, grain (wheat and barley), and wool. Over 91% of land in Wyoming is classified as rural.”<sup>7</sup>

As civilization multiplied on the west coast, the need to communicate between the east and west became a necessity. The stage coach came through Wyoming, and stations were built to support it with fresh horses, feed, etc. For a brief period the Pony Express came through

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *State of Wyoming -Historical Dates.*

<sup>7</sup> *State of Wyoming -Historical Dates.*

Wyoming, which had stops every 15 miles and most of these were stagecoach stations that already existed. These were quickly replaced by the transcontinental railway.

Many towns in Wyoming owe their existence to the Union Pacific Rail Road (U.P.R.R.), as they sprung up overnight during its construction. Some of these towns were Cheyenne, Laramie, Rawlins, and Rock Springs. These towns are still used as stops and maintenance for the U.P.R.R.

In the last century there was a tremendous boom in natural resources for various kinds of power, i.e. fuel, energy, etc. The Wyoming government reports that:

Wyoming's mineral commodities include coal, natural gas, coal bed methane, crude oil, and trona. Wyoming ranks highest in mining employment in the U.S. In fiscal year 2002 Wyoming collected over \$48 million in sales taxes from the mining industry. Wyoming is the largest producer of coal in the United States, producing 373.2 million short tons of coal in 2002. Wyoming possesses a reserve of 68.7 billion tons of coal. Wyoming is the 5<sup>th</sup> largest producer of natural gas, in 2002 its natural gas production was 1,746.2 billion cubic feet. Wyoming is 7<sup>th</sup> place in the production of crude oil, in 2002 with 54.7 million barrels. Men who work the oil rigs are known as "roughnecks." Trona is used in the manufacture of glass, paper, soaps, baking soda, water softeners, and pharmaceuticals. Wyoming has the largest known reserve of trona in the world.<sup>8</sup>

Later in this paper uranium mining will be mentioned, but this industry has busted in the state due to its harmful effects to the environment.

In modern times natural resources are Wyoming's largest source of income, and the second largest has become tourism.<sup>9</sup> The Wyoming government reports, "In 2002 over six million people visited Wyoming's national parks and monuments. The key tourist attractions in Wyoming include Grand Teton National Park, Yellowstone National Park, Devil's Tower

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

National Monument, and Fossil Butte National Monument. Each year Yellowstone National Park receives three million visitors.”<sup>10</sup>

The land of wide open spaces still has an effect on its culture in modern times. When Wyoming was established the Federal Government had determined to use a checkerboard pattern for land ownership. This means that every other parcel of land was Federal owned land. This pattern is still prevalent as 50% of all Wyoming’s land is owned by the Federal Government, while 6% of Wyoming’s land is controlled by the state.<sup>11</sup> This means that the land is open to the public and used in a variety of ways. Outdoor recreation such as hunting, camping, fishing, and four-wheeling play a big roll in Wyoming’s culture. It also means that most of the people who love the Wyoming lifestyle do not enjoy being in highly populated areas. A popular bumper sticker in Wyoming reads, “Keep Wyoming beautiful, visit, but don’t move here!” This tends to offend tourists.

Natural resources, railroads, and ranching, and the industries that support these often require manual labor. At times of boom the population swells. Those who move to the state for economic gain, quickly move to a milder climate when their employment comes to an end. The Wyoming government reports, “Wyoming’s unemployment rate for 2002 was approximately 4.2%, which was significantly lower than the national average of 5.8%.”<sup>12</sup>

We cannot discuss Wyoming without discussing the climate. Wyoming is especially known for its wind. Along the Rocky Mountains winter winds can remain constant at 30 to 40 miles per hour. It is the wind gusts that tend to chase the faint-hearted away, as it is not

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

uncommon to have gusts that average from 50 or 60 miles per hour.<sup>13</sup> Since the Rocky Mountains run through Wyoming it has a mean elevation of 6,700 feet above sea level, Colorado is the only state with a higher mean elevation. Wyoming's highest point is 13,804 feet above sea level and this is at the top of Gannett Peak, which is part of the Wind River Range. The lowest point in Wyoming is 3,099 feet above sea level where the Belle Fourche River crosses into South Dakota. Higher elevations mean cooler temperatures. The highest temperature recorded in Wyoming occurred in Basin on July 12, 1900 at 114° Fahrenheit. The lowest temperature was recorded on February 9, 1933 at Moran with a temperature of -63° Fahrenheit (F). For most of the state, mean maximum temperatures in July range between 85° F and 95° F. With increasing elevation, average values drop rapidly. A few places in the mountains at about the 9,000 foot level have average maximums in July close to 70° F. Summer nights are almost invariably cool, even though daytime readings may be quite high at times. For most places away from the mountains, the mean minimum temperature in July ranges from 50° F to 60° F. Of course, the mountains and high valleys are much cooler with average lows in the middle of the summer in the 30s and 40s with occasional drops below freezing. In January, generally the coldest month of the year, mean minimum temperatures range mostly from 5° F to 10° F. In the western valleys mean values go down to about 5° below zero.<sup>14</sup>

In 1990 the state population was 453,588. Ninety four percent of Wyoming's population is white. Wyoming has a large Hispanic community with 25,751 reported in 1990. I estimate this number to be higher as the census reports 10,636 in the "other" category, and many people with Hispanic and white backgrounds may check this box. The Hispanic population is especially

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<sup>13</sup> Western Regional Climate Center, *Climate of Wyoming*. (Accessed 7 October 2005) available from <http://www.wrcc.dri.edu/narratives/WYOMING.htm>; Internet.

<sup>14</sup> Western Regional Climate Center, *Climate of Wyoming*. (Accessed 7 October 2005) available from <http://www.wrcc.dri.edu/narratives/WYOMING.htm>; Internet.



noticeable in southern Wyoming, where even those classified as “white” often demonstrate some cultural influences of the Hispanic community. Wyoming has 9,479 Native Americans, and this population is mostly centered in the northwestern part of the state. Wyoming also has a population of 3,606 African-Americans and 2,806 Asians.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Wyoming Department of A & I, Division of Economic Analysis. *Population By Race and Hispanic Origin By County: 1990*. (State of Wyoming, 1995 to 2001, Last Modified: Thursday, 13-Feb-01, Accessed 7 October 2005); available from [http://eadiv.state.wy.us/demog\\_data/cntyrace\\_8090.htm](http://eadiv.state.wy.us/demog_data/cntyrace_8090.htm); Internet.

### Early Lutherans in Wyoming

The WELS was not the first Lutheran church body to enter the state of Wyoming. The first Lutheran outreach in Wyoming came in the spring 1861 when the Iowa Synod sent Christian Kessler, Karl Krebs, and George Flachenecker to do mission work among the Cheyenne Indians. Their home base was about 100 miles west of Fort Laramie. The Indian uprising of 1864 caused the missionaries to abandon their station. In 1867 the synod terminated this mission.<sup>16</sup>

In the late 1890's and early 1900's the Finish Evangelical Lutheran Church had congregations in Carbon (now a ghost town), Cumberland, Frontier (joined in 1903), Hanna (joined in 1903), Oakley, and Rock Springs. All of these churches were closed before 1949.<sup>17</sup>

As far as the Synodical Conference is concerned, outreach to Wyoming began with the Reverend John D. Schroeder (January 1, 1872 – March 1963), who was an immigrant from Westburg, Germany. He graduated from Concordia Theological Seminary in Springfield, Illinois in 1892. He was called by the Mission Board to serve in northwestern Nebraska.<sup>18</sup> As he states, "My mission call was to locate as many settlers as I could who were German and Lutheran and help them establish churches."<sup>19</sup> His home base was in Hemingford, Nebraska, but using the railroads and his two horses he quickly picked up preaching stations in southwest South Dakota, northeast Wyoming, and parts of Montana. Although many of the places he preached remain unnamed, some Wyoming towns that are mentioned include: Newcastle, Gillette, Buffalo, Sheridan (where he met Buffalo Bill), and he also took the stage coach from Sheridan to a town

<sup>16</sup> Clifford E. Nelson (Editor), *The Lutherans in North America*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980, p. 200.

<sup>17</sup> *Finnish Churches in North America – Wyoming* (Last modified 12/9/2000, Accessed 10 October 2005); available from <http://www.genealogia.fi/church/churchwye.htm>; Internet.

<sup>18</sup> Reverend John D. Schroeder, *Cowboy Preacher – The Old West Journals of the Rev. J.D. Schroeder* (1989), Forward.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, 25.

that is believed to be Casper. In 1894 while he was staying in Sheridan the natural fortress used by the "Hole in the Wall Gang" was discovered.<sup>20</sup> This gang at one time had some famous members including Butch Cassidy, the Sundance Kid, and Calamity Jane. Pastor Schroeder served the scattered Germans in this area until 1895. He kept a journal and has some interesting comments on the treatment of Indians, the culture, and historical items of that time.

Pastor Schroeder gives an example of the harsher side of the climate:

Traveling during the winter months when the terrible blizzards howl across the prairie, is less than pleasant. These storms break forth with such great suddenness that one seldom has time to get to safety. They often occur when the day starts out to be beautiful, mild, and even warm. Days like these frequently occur out in the west. Suddenly, dark clouds climb out of the northwest skies, and the thermometer plummets. Then a bracing wind begins to howl and the awesome blizzard is there.<sup>21</sup>

The last March that I lived in Wyoming I remember a warm day that I was pulling an engine out of a car, wearing a t-shirt. I had an afternoon class at the University of Wyoming and had to leave. When I returned one hour later I was wearing a winter coat and the car was covered by several inches of snow. Another example of the rapid temperature change occurred over my Christmas break from Martin Luther Collage. I was working in Laramie at my old job, and my boss and I went out to get some dinner. When we left the shop we noted that the outdoor thermometer read -22° Fahrenheit. When we came back an hour later that same thermometer read -2° Fahrenheit.

During a conversation with a member Pastor Schroeder expressed concern about how German Lutherans, who had been brought up so strongly in Scriptures, could be lost to Mormonism. The member explained to him:

Well. Pastor you can't believe how pious and kindly these people can talk, and because no one else could be bothered about the salvation of the settlers here, they

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, 109.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, 56.

had every opportunity to entice them away from their religion. When there is no shepherd, then the sheep will pay a price to the wolf. That's why it's so important for a missionary to be sent to our people, and that regular church services be held.<sup>22</sup>

These words of explanation serve as a warning for modern pastors to keep up with their delinquents, and not to abandon Lutherans living in towns without an established orthodox Lutheran congregation.

As to the Wyoming culture a friend of Pastor Schroeder's one time said, "The people out there in the west seem to be very out spoken." Pastor Schroeder replied:

Yes, that is true. But I have learned that it can be an admirable character trait. When they spoke what was on their minds, I got along very well with them. I always knew where I stood. I'd a thousand times rather have it like that than have someone be friendly to my face when inside he's thinking otherwise. I've known such hypocrites among so-called Christians, and have had bitter experiences with them. It's no wonder that many people trust no one anymore. In the west it was otherwise. The people mostly spoke their minds, and didn't worry about whether it pleased you or not.<sup>23</sup>

This observation has been made about westerners even in present times. Pastor Schroeder's words are very helpful to a mid-westerner as they were addressed to a mid-westerner. In connection with this it is interesting to note that Pastor Schroeder retired from active ministry in 1948 in Grafton, Wisconsin.<sup>24</sup>

Thanks to Pastor Schroeder's mission efforts in Wyoming a church body belonging to the Synodical Conference was able to get a foot hold in the state. The Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod (LCMS) had reached Wyoming first and it was growing. Any WELS members who might have moved to Wyoming would find themselves at home in one of these congregations, and so the little synod of the WELS left this mission filed to its sister synod, the LCMS. It was not until

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<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, 45.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, 52-53.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, Forward.

questions began to arise from controversies in the LCMS that we began to see WELS people wanting their own WELS churches in Wyoming.

Many WELS people will still settle into a LCMS church in Wyoming, because they are so conservative. At the same time every one of our established WELS churches has gained former LCMS members who are concerned about the lack of confessional unity in this synod. The members in the Wyoming District of the LCMS tend to think in terms of liberal and conservative theology. I can not quote a source on this; I am speaking from my own past experience as a former LCMS member and from my own observation of family and friends. Now I must add a cautionary note to the understanding of these terms. To the LCMS way of thinking the Wyoming District is one of the most conservative districts in the LCMS, but the terms conservative and liberal are not necessarily synonymous for orthodox and heterodox. Many of the WELS liturgical practices could be labeled as liberal by some LCMS standards. The point is that these terms are subjective and the point of comparison must not be assumed to be the interpretation of the Word of God, for it can also be based on tradition, liturgy, evangelism, etc. Several former LCMS members come to the WELS because we are more “conservative” and have a hard time shaking off this bad terminology. It is confusing at best. We must try to teach the use of terms like orthodox and false teacher so that we are not mislabeling evangelical practices.

### First Start in Cheyenne

A few of the WELS people that had moved into the state by in the late 1930's had requested help. The most populated city in Wyoming is Cheyenne and that is the first area where WELS transplants united and sought pastoral care from their synod. These people found a shepherd in Pastor Victor Tiefel, who was serving in Greeley, Colorado. He conducted a canvass of the area and started services on March 17, 1943. This small group held its services in the Seventh Day Adventist Church at 608 Randall Avenue.<sup>25</sup> The distance between communities in Wyoming has a tremendous impact on WELS churches served by pastors from other congregations. Greeley, Colorado is 69 miles from Cheyenne on today's roads with a commute time of over an hour. Pastor Tiefel could only serve the Cheyenne area on a part-time basis, and so it became clear that they needed a full-time worker.

The first called worker to serve full-time in the state of Wyoming was Pastor Delton Tills.<sup>26</sup> He was called to serve the Cheyenne mission area and on January 1, 1944 he was ordained and installed by Pastor Victor Tiefel in a service that was assisted by Pastor V. Schultz.<sup>27</sup> During Pastor Tills' years of service the WELS set a small anchor in the state when four adjacent lots were purchased for the construction of a church building.<sup>28</sup> In December of 1948 Pastor Tills accepted a call in the east and was released from his services.<sup>29</sup>

This small group of worshipers in the Cheyenne area petitioned the Colorado Board of Missions to call another resident pastor to serve this area. In the meantime they were not left

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<sup>25</sup> Redeemer Evangelical Lutheran Church, *A History of the first 50 years*, Cheyenne Wyoming, 2002, p. 1.

<sup>26</sup> According to Redeemer Evangelical Lutheran Church's history Pastor Delton Tills was called in 1940 and left in 1942. In the basement of our seminary one can find Delton Tills' graduate photo in the Class of 1943 so 1944 is most likely the proper installation date. As Pastor Tiefel conducted a canvass of this area and later installed Pastor Tills, I assume that Tiefel was the first pastor to serve this group.

<sup>27</sup> Proceedings of the 14<sup>th</sup> Biannual Convention of the Nebraska District, Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, June 1944, p. 9.

<sup>28</sup> Redeemer Evangelical Lutheran Church, p. 1.

<sup>29</sup> Proceedings of the 17<sup>th</sup> Biannual Convention of the Nebraska District, Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, June 1950.

alone, because in February of 1949 Pastor Lloyd Hahnke of Platteville, Colorado, began serving as vacancy pastor. Services at this time were still being held at the Seventh Day Adventist Church.<sup>30</sup>

The request for a full-time pastor was granted when Pastor Winfred Schaller, Jr., who was serving in Gresham, Nebraska, accepted the call.<sup>31</sup> Pastor Schaller was installed by Pastor Lloyd Hahnke on August 14, 1949.<sup>32</sup> He became the stability that mission churches so desperately need in a pastor as he served them for 13 years.

The church now had a pastor, but it didn't have its own worship facilities. In early 1950 they had begun worshipping in the YMCA playhouse. This group recognized the importance of Christian education, and so they didn't just plan for a church, they planned for a small school, and also a parsonage. At this time they already owned land, so they just needed to build on it. In May of 1950 the Church Extension Fund loaned them \$15,000.<sup>33</sup> A special cornerstone laying service was held on July 23, 1950.<sup>34</sup>

Most of the construction was done by members, and so it was a few years before this project came to completion. They were able to have a Christmas Eve service in the classroom the same year that the cornerstone was laid. A major delay occurred when two boys caused \$2,000 worth of vandalism on July 4, 1951.<sup>35</sup>

On the morning of June 8, 1952, Rev. R. Roth from Fort Morgan, Colorado delivered the dedicatory sermon for the completed worship facility. At this time the parsonage was located in the basement, and that afternoon Rev. I. P. Frey, president of the Nebraska District, delivered the

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<sup>30</sup> Redeemer Evangelical Lutheran Church, p. 1.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> Proceedings of the 17<sup>th</sup> Biannual Convention of the Nebraska District.

<sup>33</sup> Redeemer Evangelical Lutheran Church, p. 2.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

dedicatory sermon for the parsonage. At 8:00 p.m. that evening Rev. W. Sprengeler, chairman of the Nebraska District Board of Education, delivered a dedicatory service for the school.<sup>36</sup>

June 8, 1952 must have been a marathon day because this is the day that the mission became the organized congregation of Redeemer Evangelical Lutheran Church. This same day they also called Rev. Winifred Schaller, Jr. to be their pastor, up to this time he had been called by the synod to serve as a missionary to the area. This same day the church elected O. C. Winkler as the first president, and he also served as an elder with Vernon Sprengeler and Robert Hahn. The congregational trustees were Duane Riggert, Kenneth Grinde, and Arthur Sievert.<sup>37</sup>

Redeemer Evangelical Lutheran Church officially received membership into the WELS during the Nebraska District convention of June 17-20, 1952.<sup>38</sup> By 1953 this church had 83 souls and 34 communicant members.<sup>39</sup> It is best to let Redeemer Evangelical Lutheran Church tell the next few years of its history, and the subsequent events that lead to its being a founding member in the Church of the Lutheran Confessions:

With its building operations completed, the new congregation turned to its mission task. A Vacation Bible School was conducted with 53 children in attendance, and the Sunday School enrollment increased to 34 children. Communicant membership gains were small from 1952 to 1954, due in part to a heavy turnover of transient population in the area. At the end of 1954 there were 35 communicants, 15 voters, and 101 souls.

In 1954 the congregation was granted permission by the Mission Board to open a Christian Day School, but the congregation was denied a teacher. In July 1954 Pastor Schaller was asked to organize the school and do the teaching. During August, all the necessary books and equipment were acquired, and in September the school was opened. There were 20 children in grades kindergarten through seven. Only two children were from the congregation. Although the pastor was teaching fulltime, the Lord blessed this effort – and through the school – brought many

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<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>38</sup> Proceedings of the 18<sup>th</sup> Biannual Convention of the Nebraska District, Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, June 1952.

<sup>39</sup> Proceedings of the 19<sup>th</sup> Biannual Convention of the Nebraska District, Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, June 1954.



adults into the church. By 1955, the membership had increased to 50 communicants, 21 voters and 122 souls.

In 1955, with permission from the Mission Board, Miss Sylvia Schwarting was called as the first fulltime teacher. Pastor Schaller taught part-time from 1955 through 1957. The enrollment in the parochial school reached 36 in 1956.

Miss Schwarting married Vernon Sprengeler in November of 1956, and was released from her call in June 1957. The congregation then called Mr. LeRoy Greening from Jamestown, North Dakota. He was installed in August of that year. Since the congregation was denied a second teacher by the synod officials, it became necessary to restrict the enrollment to 20 to 25 children.

Both the growth of the school, and the growth of the pastor's family made it necessary to vacate the basement parsonage in 1955. With a grant of \$13,000 from the Parsonage-Teacherage Fund, a house was purchased – a few blocks away – at 1741 East 22<sup>nd</sup> Street.

In the midst of these infant years, with its manifold difficulties and obstacles, the congregation was very concerned with the developments in the Lutheran Church in America, particularly the Synodical Conference. Of primary concern was the reluctance of the Wisconsin Synod to terminate fellowship with the Missouri Synod, although the latter had manifestly departed from scriptural paths. After the Wisconsin Synod, in 1953, had refused to separate from the Missouri Synod, the congregation gave tacit approval to a protest filed by its pastor against the unscriptural position of the Wisconsin Synod. In 1956 the congregation authorized Pastor Schaller to attend a meeting (in Mankato, Minnesota) of men who were in opposition to the policies of the synod in intersynodical matters.

In 1957 the pastor was a delegate to the New Ulm convention of the Wisconsin Synod. Here the synod rejected the recommendation of the floor committee to suspend fellowship with the Missouri Synod, and also rejected the protests of Pastor Schaller and others. Pastor Schaller was compelled by God's Word to disassociate himself from the Wisconsin Synod, because of its disobedience to God's Word, which requires separation from false teachers and their followers. This was reported to Redeemer congregation at the end of August 1957. The congregation gave careful study to the matter in the subsequent weeks, and on November 17, 1957 resolved to sever its membership with the Wisconsin Synod.

Thus concluded the first five years of the history of Redeemer Lutheran Church. The congregation had been growing and flourishing. Suddenly it found itself an orphan, without subsidy from a mother church body. Subsidy had been provided at the rate of \$550 per month for the pastor and teacher. Several families left the church, disagreeing with its position. Several more families left in subsequent years, having become discouraged with the difficulties involved in maintaining a church and a school under such trying circumstances.

Pastor Schaller and Teacher Greening supported themselves entirely over the next several years. This permitted the congregation to reduce its obligations to the Wisconsin Synod from \$30,000 to \$25,000.

In May 1958 the first Interim Conference was held at Cheyenne, attended by approximately 30 pastors and delegates. These were men who had either left the synods of the Synodical Conference, or were in the process of leaving. At this time

the Interim Conference authorized the publication of a newspaper, The Lutheran Spokesman.

In August 1959 a second worker was called to teach in the school. Candidate David Gullerud taught from September 1959 until October 1960, when he accepted a call into the ministry. Miss Shirley Wendland, Balaton, Minnesota, accepted the call as a second teacher. Miss Wendland had taught previously in the Wisconsin Synod school at Clatonia, Nebraska, but had severed her membership from the Wisconsin Synod.

By August 1960 the Interim Conference had prepared its confessional documents and constitution, and organized a new synod – The Church of the Lutheran Confession. Redeemer church became a charter member of the CLC in October 1960.

In 1961 the Mission Board of the Church of the Lutheran Confession began to subsidize the congregation in order to assist in paying the salary of the male teacher. This was approximately \$100 per month.

In January 1961 a ladies' group was organized. It was called the Ladies of Our Redeemer. The purpose of the group was to meet in Christian fellowship, to study God's Word, and to assist in maintaining the church and school facilities.

In July 1961 the members of the congregation decided to add a ninth grade to the school. Miss Wendland was asked to teach kindergarten and grades one through six, and Mr. Greening, grades seven through nine.

Pastor Schaller, the editor of The Lutheran Spokesman, was appointed again to this position in January of 1962, with the request to make it a monthly periodical (rather than bi-monthly). It became increasingly more difficult for him to carry out his work in all areas.

In January 1962 the congregation released Pastor Schaller from his pastorate, effective May 1, 1962. He served as vacancy pastor until June 3<sup>rd</sup>.<sup>40</sup>

The Nebraska District records the withdrawal of Rev. Schaller, and teacher Leroy Greening on November 26, 1957,<sup>41</sup> and with that the WELS no longer had a foothold in Wyoming. Not all the members agreed with the withdrawal and in passing years the church saw a slight decline in membership. Redeemer's history reports, "During the years of 1957-1962 the size of the congregation decreased from approximately 60 communicant members to 50. This was largely due to the offense of the position taken by the congregation, and the lack of mission

<sup>40</sup> Redeemer Evangelical Lutheran Church, p. 3-7.

<sup>41</sup> Proceedings of the 21<sup>st</sup> Biannual Convention of the Nebraska District, Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, June 1958.

activity during the years that Pastor Schaller was engaged in secular work to support his family.”<sup>42</sup>

A few tidbits of interest with this church include the fact that Rev. Paul Fleischer, Redeemer’s current pastor, is the editor of The Lutheran Spokesman. The first issue of this publication was mimeographed and assembled in Redeemer’s basement in June of 1958.<sup>43</sup> Another item of interest pertains to our own seminary library. Rev. Paul Fleischer is the grandson of North Western Collage Professor Herman Fleischer, who served in the 1930’s-1940’s. Two of Prof. Herman Fleischer’s paintings are hanging in the library. These are the painting of Luther at the podium pointing to the Scripture, and the painting of Christ and the Rich Young Man.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Redeemer Evangelical Lutheran Church, p. 7.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid* p. 17.

<sup>44</sup> Email from Rev. Paul Fleischer on Thursday July 28, 2005.

## Second Start in Cheyenne

When Redeemer Evangelical Lutheran Church broke its ties with the WELS there were some families that remained WELS. For nine years there was a long distance between Cheyenne and the nearest WELS church. One family that left Redeemer Ev. Lutheran Church would remain until the WELS next attempt at missions in Cheyenne. Mr. O. C. Winkler, who was the first president of Redeemer, and his wife Ruby remained WELS and began to gather together with a nucleus of other WELS people who were moving into the Cheyenne area.<sup>45</sup> While various forms of employment have brought people to the Cheyenne area there is one constant, stable source. F. E. Warren Air Force Base was one of the larger missile sights during the cold war, and it continues to bring WELS people into Cheyenne who are enlisted in the Air Force. This does not mean that the dominant amount of present day members are enlisted, but their presence is definitely felt.

The WELS members' desire to worship within a reasonable commute from the Cheyenne area was fulfilled in the late 1960's when mission work began in Fort Collins, Colorado. In 1971 St. Peter Evangelical Lutheran Church in Fort Collins, Colorado was assigned its first full-time pastor.<sup>46</sup> This is a 50 mile one-way drive from Cheyenne, and soon there were 11 communicant WELS members and 22 souls commuting from Cheyenne in order to worship.

Pastor Lawrence Retberg of St. Peter Evangelical Lutheran Church saw a need, and so he sought permission from the Colorado Mission Board to begin exploratory work in Cheyenne. He was given permission for a four month exploratory. Advertisements were placed in the local newspaper, in order to seek out WELS members in the area. Dick and Marg Mau, who were originally from Wisconsin, volunteered their home and hosted several exploratory meetings, and

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<sup>45</sup> Interview with Rev. Philip J. Schwerin on September 8, 2005.

<sup>46</sup> Proceedings of the 28<sup>th</sup> Biannual Convention of the Nebraska District, Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, June 1972.

by December they were hosting worship services.<sup>47</sup> Marg also taught herself to play organ for the church services, and at present she is still one of the church's organists.

In January of 1973 this group organized into a congregation which they named, "Good Shepherd Evangelical Lutheran Church." The WELS once again had a foothold in the state of Wyoming. This small congregation was able to lease the Seventh Day Adventist Church and on January 7 they had Sunday school at 6 p.m., and worship service at 7:15 p.m. with 41 people in attendance.<sup>48</sup> This congregation was also able to hold Lent services in March of 1973.<sup>49</sup>

On May 7, 1973 the congregation was granted mission and man power status. A scheduling conflict caused them to seek a new place for worship. On May 20, 1973 they began to worship at Capitol Mortuary Chapel on 1814 E. 17<sup>th</sup> Street. This facility proved to be inadequate for Sunday school, as it was a small facility. On July 1, 1973 the congregation moved its worship facility for the third time in under a year when they moved into the Senior Citizen's Center basement on Central Avenue. July 1 was membership Sunday and there were 30 communicate members present at the worship service.<sup>50</sup>

The congregation had a place to gather for worship, and a pastor who served them part-time, but a big leap occurred for them when the assignment committee granted them a candidate for full-time ministry and they rented their first parsonage at 2523 Chestnut Street. On July 8, 1973 Pastor Philip Schwerin was ordained and installed by his father, Rev. Amos Schwerin, who was serving in New London, Wisconsin.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Rev. Philip Zarling (Editor), *Good News on the Great Plains - A history of the Nebraska District*, p. 8.

<sup>48</sup> Nancy Pieper, *Good Shepard Evangelical Lutheran Church*.

<sup>49</sup> Rev. Philip Zarling (Editor), *Good News on the Great Plains - A history of the Nebraska District*, p. 8.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

Pastor Schwerin received the synodical standard monthly pay at that time which was \$500 salary, \$75 car allowance, and \$12.20 health insurance.<sup>52</sup> At this time the most effective and most utilized evangelism technique was friendship evangelism combined with diligently following up on visitors, but the largest contributor for new members was still WELS people moving into the area.<sup>53</sup> During this period the church was served by two organists: Emma Louis Weedenheft and Marg Mau.<sup>54</sup>

The Nebraska District history reports that, "By October of 1974 the congregation had grown to 46 communicant members, with an average age of 22. At that time the church was responsible for serving the entire state of Wyoming, with members in Laramie, 50 miles to the west, and three families in Casper, 180 miles to the north."<sup>55</sup> The church was growing and it became clear to the members that they needed a church home of their own. In 1974 they purchased land on what is now 4750 Mountain Road.<sup>56</sup> This is the site of the present church building. This land was originally outside of town, but Cheyenne has grown and it is now within the city limits, and since its construction one of only three shopping malls in the state of Wyoming was built in the nearby vicinity.

The members recognized the expense of renting a parsonage, and so they built the parsonage first. Members converted the garage into a worship facility, and so worship services began on the property where they intended to build a church. This small group was blessed with many members who dedicated a great deal of their free time in service to this little flock. Serving among these helpful members was Larry Cisler who worked for the Air Force base and was originally from Norfolk, Nebraska. Mr. Lindemann also worked for the Air Force base and he

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<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> Interview with Rev. Philip J. Schwerin on September 8, 2005.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> Rev. Philip Zarling (Editor), *Good News on the Great Plains - A history of the Nebraska District*, p. 8.

<sup>56</sup> Interview with Rev. Philip J. Schwerin on September 8, 2005.

and his wife eventually moved to Pine Bluffs, Wyoming, and retained membership at Good Shepherd. Dean and Sandy Williams had also moved into the area because of the Air Force base and Keith and Judy Eldred had moved out from Minnesota to begin an optometry business. This church was blessed to be a close knit family of believers who did not face very many arguments among themselves. Adult Bible study at this time averaged 18-20 people per Sunday.<sup>57</sup> By December of 1975 this church had 65 souls and 51 communicant members.<sup>58</sup>

In 1976 the church moved forward in building its present worship facility when they were granted a Church Extension Fund loan.<sup>59</sup> The church had a groundbreaking ceremony on October 16, 1976. The plans were for a modified A-frame structure, which contained a sanctuary, pastor's study, and kitchen. This structure was designed for the addition of a fellowship hall in subsequent years pending an increase in membership. On April 24, 1977 the congregation had a special service to dedicate their complete church building, which cost \$170,000, and most of the work was done by Professional Design Builders of Loveland, Colorado.<sup>60</sup>

In December of 1977 the church had 81 souls and 57 communicant members.<sup>61</sup> The next big event in this church's history was in April of 1982 when Pastor Schwerin was led by the Holy Spirit to accept a call to Edna, Texas.<sup>62</sup> Pastor Joel Jaeger of Scottsbluff, Nebraska served them as vacancy pastor.<sup>63</sup> The church once again asked the seminary to assign them a candidate. Their request was granted and Pastor Bruce Hanneman was ordained and installed on July 11,

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<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> Proceedings of the 30<sup>th</sup> Biannual Convention of the Nebraska District, Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, June 1976, p. 28.

<sup>59</sup> Rev. Philip Zarling (Editor), Good News on the Great Plains - A history of the Nebraska District, p. 8.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> Proceedings of the 31<sup>st</sup> Biannual Convention of the Nebraska District, Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, June 1978, p. 33.

<sup>62</sup> Interview with Rev. Philip J. Schwerin on September 8, 2005.

<sup>63</sup> Rev. Philip Zarling (Editor), Good News on the Great Plains - A history of the Nebraska District, p. 8.

1982 by Pastor Jaeger.<sup>64</sup> The church continued to grow and in 1988 the church had 116 souls with 77 communicant members.<sup>65</sup> In April of 1993 Pastor Hanneman was led by the Holy Spirit to accept a call to Hastings, Nebraska.<sup>66</sup> The church once again turned to the seminary for a shepherd. Until a candidate could be assigned, Pastor Robert Strawn served as vacancy pastor. Pastor Brian Goens was ordained and installed June 20, 1993 by Pastor Timothy Bauer.<sup>67</sup>

Things were getting crowded in their worship facility and more room was needed for Sunday school, adult Bible study, etc., and so plans for the fellowship wing were made. In July of 1997 the congregation voted to begin construction on the fellowship hall. Before construction had began Pastor Goens was led by the Holy Spirit to accept a call to a dual parish in Bonesteel, South Dakota and Naper, Nebraska.<sup>68</sup> The church was then served during its vacancy by Pastor David Russow from St. Peter Evangelical Lutheran Church in Fort Collins, Colorado.<sup>69</sup>

This congregation had until this time helped new pastors cut their teeth in the ministry, but this time a seminary graduate was not assigned. Pastor Jeffrey Heitsch, who had been serving in Calgary, Canada, was led by the Holy Spirit to accept a call to Good Shepherd.<sup>70</sup> On August 9, 1998 Pastor Heitsch was installed by Pastor Russow.<sup>71</sup>

Shortly after Pastor Heitsch's installation Good Shepherd celebrated its twenty-fifth anniversary on October 10-11, 1998. Former Pastors Schwerin and Hanneman returned for the special fellowship gatherings and an afternoon anniversary service.

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<sup>64</sup> Proceedings of the 33<sup>rd</sup> Biannual Convention of the Nebraska District, Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, June 1982, p. 9.

<sup>65</sup> Proceedings of the 36<sup>th</sup> Biannual Convention of the Nebraska District, Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, June 1988, p. 44.

<sup>66</sup> Rev. Philip Zarling (Editor), Good News on the Great Plains - A history of the Nebraska District, p. 8.

<sup>67</sup> Proceedings of the 39<sup>th</sup> Biannual Convention of the Nebraska District, Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, June 1994, p. 12.

<sup>68</sup> Rev. Philip Zarling (Editor), Good News on the Great Plains - A history of the Nebraska District, p. 9.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>71</sup> Proceedings of the 41<sup>st</sup> Biannual Convention of the Nebraska District, Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, June 2000, p. 9.



By this time the church had grown to the point that the worship services started to feel a bit too tight for people from the land of wide open spaces, and so they started holding two worship services in January of 1999.<sup>72</sup>

The plans to build the fellowship hall finally culminated when Builders for Christ arrived in July of 2000.<sup>73</sup> Bruce and Karol Krug volunteered their property as a campground for the Builders for Christ, and temporary water and sewer hook ups were installed. Many members along with the Builders for Christ labored throughout the summer and early fall in order to construct this wing. It is interesting to note that several of the members who swung hammers on this project were the same individuals who had helped in constructing the parsonage 25 years earlier.

The Nebraska District history reports, "The addition included five classrooms, a large kitchen and fellowship hall, Pastor's study and secretary's office. The new facility was quickly put in service when Good Shepherd hosted the Fall Pastor's Conference on Oct. 3-4, and the Fall Mission Festival on Oct. 8. District President Joel Frank preached at the Dedication Service for the new education wing on Feb. 4, 2001."<sup>74</sup>

An important step occurred in 2002 because Good Shepherd became a self-supporting church.<sup>75</sup> They continue moving forward with God's blessings as the new fellowship hall is now being used for a pre-school. Pastor Heitsch reports:

The pre-school officially began on July 13, 2003, when Miss Erin Lowrey was installed as the first Pre-school director, having been assigned to us from Martin Luther College, New Ulm, Minnesota. Planning and preliminary work was done about 18 months prior to that with the Parish Assistance team coming and giving us a lot of wonderful direction and encouragement. Mrs. Linda Eldred served as the acting director

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<sup>72</sup> Rev. Philip Zarling (Editor), Good News on the Great Plains - A history of the Nebraska District, p. 9.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>75</sup> Proceedings of the 42<sup>nd</sup> Biannual Convention of the Nebraska District, Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, June 2002, p. 21.

during that time, and volunteered as a teacher the first two years that Miss Lowrey served as director. Miss Lowrey then resigned her call to pursue a Masters Degree in Special Education. Mrs. Eldred was then called as the director - serving the pre-school on a half-time basis and fulfilling her other responsibilities as a wife and mom and assisting with the family business. We were then assigned from the 2005 graduating class of MLC, Miss Cara Biebert. She will be serving the pre-school for just this one year as she has marriage plans.

The pre-school began with 19 students. By the end of the first year, we had a total of 26 students. This year we began with a full enrollment of 56 students. We offer two pre-3 classes, two pre-4 classes, and a pre-k class. There are 5 families from the congregation that utilizes the pre-school, with 51 families coming from the community. Of those 51 - 46 list a home congregation where they appear to be rather active. So we have 5 prospect families - only two of those showing any interest in our church's ministry at this time.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> E-mail from Rev. Jeff Heitsch, received 10, November, 2005.

## Casper

Much like the Cheyenne congregation, the origin of the Casper church begins with WELS members moving to the area. Unlike Cheyenne, Casper's growth can be attributed mainly to one source, the natural resources boom. US News and World Report states, "Casper grew from a sleepy city to a major regional center for oil and gas companies and the service industries that follow them as growth accelerated in the mid – 1970's."<sup>77</sup> Many young people found employment at \$40 per hour in the uranium mines.<sup>78</sup> The oil and coal industry also offered fantastic salaries. Many younger adults packed up and moved to towns like Casper and Gillette in order to make a high salary. This industry's fluctuation between boom and bust has had an impact on the Casper church.

An attempt was made in 1974 to do mission work, but it was discontinued because the previously mentioned employment opportunities shifted and most of the members moved away, and in fact, several of them moved to Cheyenne.<sup>79</sup>

Two member families attending Good Shepherd in Cheyenne drove a lengthy distance. One family lived in a small town near Casper, Wyoming, and the other family lived in Casper and so their drive to Cheyenne was 180 miles one-way. The district history reports, "Nancy Wilson, Bob Albrecht, and Gary and Beverly Tibke approached the synod to explore the possibility of beginning a WELS church in Casper. Initial survey work was then approved by the General Board for Home Missions (GBHM) on February 9, 1979. On September 10, 1979 the GBHM granted exploratory status."<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Rev. Philip Zarling (Editor), Good News on the Great Plains - A history of the Nebraska District, p. 6.

<sup>78</sup> Interview with Rev. David Russow on August 3, 2005.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>80</sup> Rev. Philip Zarling (Editor), Good News on the Great Plains - A history of the Nebraska District, p. 6.

By October 21, 1979 Pastor Schwerin of Cheyenne and Pastor Joel Jaeger of Scottsbluff, Nebraska took turns conducting services for this group.<sup>81</sup> The first services were held at the home of Dick and Marg Mau,<sup>82</sup> and if these names sound familiar it is because their home hosted the first services in Cheyenne, Wyoming. The Casper group had worship services every first, third, and fifth Sunday of the month. When the Mau family moved yet again, this group started renting a meeting room at the Casper Hilton Inn.<sup>83</sup>

At this time there were two LCMS churches in Casper. Mount Hope was and still is considered conservative and Trinity was considered liberal. Pastor Black at Trinity was tolerating lodge membership, allowing adults to join with little or no instruction, and changing liturgies. This encouraged WELS members to stay away from the LCMS. It also bothered one member of Trinity named Victor Bauer, who as a conservative could have simply joined Mount Hope as others had. However, Victor Bauer saw hypocrisy in a synod that placed fellowship between two churches that taught contradictory doctrines in cases that were not adiaphorin. He continued writing the WELS Mission Board, and joined in with the group of existing WELS members in this area.<sup>84</sup>

In 1980 a seminary graduate was assigned to do full-time mission work to the mission fields in the Casper and Gillette areas. On July 20, 1980 Pastor David Russow was ordained and installed by his father, Pastor Howard Russow, at a service held in the Casper Hilton Inn.<sup>85</sup> There were nine people in attendance at Pastor David Russow's first service, which included his wife, himself, and his classmate Kenneth Pasch, who was on his way to serve his call as a tutor at

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<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

DMLC, leaving six others in attendance.<sup>86</sup> The church was primarily served by pianist Tina Christianson, and occasionally by Mrs. Russow, which required the help of members to baby-sit the Russow children.<sup>87</sup>

Evangelism began when Pastor Russow spent his first few months in the ministry following up on a list of former WELS members who had moved to the area. The list had been provided by the WELS Soul Conservation. Some of these names were eight years old, which meant the list was both helpful and frustrating, but it did lead to the reception of some formerly inactive WELS members. The core group reached out with friendship evangelism, and Pastor Russow would follow up on names as they were given to him. Victor Bauer had a connection with the phone company, and would provide names of new phone customers as they moved into town. Pastor Russow also began visiting the hospital clergy room, where a list of patients along with their religion was printed. When he found patients who didn't have a religion listed, he would visit their room, say who he was, and ask them if they had a church home. Three times they had travel canvass witness teams come. They also received grants to do mass media outreach which included radio stations, billboards, and newspaper advertisements.<sup>88</sup>

I often refer to Wyoming as the “back door to Mormonism” because the farther west one travels the stronger the Mormon population becomes. There are several towns in Wyoming where members of the Mormon Church have gained control of city council, and even most of the local businesses. This can mean that a group trying to start a church will find themselves struggling against a bureaucratic machine that is intentionally designed to hinder their progress. This combined with the bombardment of Mormon missionaries that show up at a non-member's doorstep several times a year led me to ask Pastor Russow if there was any opposition to the

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<sup>86</sup> Interview with Rev. David Russow on August 3, 2005.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

church, and especially how Mormon canvassing efforts affected the WELS travel canvass groups. Apparently the bombardment of Mormon missionaries did impact the reception of the WELS travel canvass teams. I will speak from my own experience to this topic. The door bell rings and there are two young men at the door, and one can't help but assume it is those relentless Mormon missionaries again. Some people become so annoyed by this persistent group that they will refuse to answer the door, pretend no one's home, or open the door and shout, "Go away!" It is not uncommon to find signs in neighborhood windows that proclaim a church membership that in truth has not been exercised in over a decade. Imagine being mistaken for one of these young Mormon missionaries.

Casper is a cowboy town, and this combined with the fluctuating work of natural resources such as the "roughneck" oilfield worker led to a transient community, and it often saw big tent revival style churches blow in and out of town.<sup>89</sup> People begin to feel used by these temporary groups, and become suspicious of any religious body that is not well established within the community. It is not uncommon to hear the stereotype that these churches stay in town just long enough to suck the wallets dry of its victims. Another sad note is that many lay people become dependant upon a pastor's charismatic personality, but when he leaves town he leaves those people emotionally and spiritual abandoned. Pastor Russow reports that the "impermanence of a mission was often an encumbrance"<sup>90</sup> for door to door ministry. Not having a permanent worship facility of their own often caused Lord of Lords to be mistaken for one of those big tent revival style churches.

Sadly when one bases the definition of orthodoxy on subjective understanding of terms like conservative and liberal, it is only a matter of time before problems arise. In this particular

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<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*

case Victor Bauer had left the LCMS because of some unscriptural practices of his pastor, but this caused him to mistakenly correlate orthodoxy with the liturgy. In January of 1981 Pastor Russow baptized his newborn son using the newly released WELS baptismal form that was preliminary to the baptismal liturgy used in the present Christian Worship Hymnal. While there was nothing doctrinally wrong with this action, Victor Bauer was concerned over the change from The Lutheran Hymnal that was presently being used, and viewed this as a sign of unorthodoxy. He felt the WELS had changed the liturgy because the confession of sins used was not the one on the top of page 16 in TLH. He was concerned that if such changes could be made then he had no assurance there would not be any further liturgy changes like he had seen at Trinity. All attempts to explain and clarify this misunderstanding proved to be unsuccessful, and sadly he isolated himself from a church home, and the church lost a member who had been a very active servant.<sup>91</sup>

Pastor Russow tells an interesting story about Victor Bauer that shows his servant attitude. When Pastor Russow first started serving this mission, Mr. Bauer wanted him to start a stewardship Bible study. Pastor Russow was unsure of this because he had such a young group that included many people who were just starting to become active, and so Pastor Russow suggested waiting until a later date. Mr. Bauer rebutted by saying, "You have to learn early, Pastor, that the Gospel like water is free, but you have got to pay for the piping." Mr. Bauer also refused to give K-Mart his business because, "nothing was open on Sunday in this town until K-Mart opened so I will never shop there, because K-Mart destroyed the Sabbath day in Casper."<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*

On February 9-10, 1981 the GBHM granted mission status to this group and the congregation became organized under a temporary charter on March 15, 1981.<sup>93</sup> This charter was a one page statement of organization stating why they existed and what they confessed, i.e. the word of God and the Lutheran Confessions. In this statement they called themselves the WELS Casper Mission. In an area where the WELS is scarcely heard of and the acronym even more rarely used, this name caused some confusion. The acronym constantly had to be explained, it couldn't be used effectively in advertisements, and so the long name it stood for had to be printed instead. Also the term "Casper Mission" often needed to be explained to the unchurched as well.<sup>94</sup>

As the group began to organize there were many names suggested for their church. Victor Bauer suggested St. Paul, but the rest of the group felt they didn't want to name the church after a saint, "Hosanna" was another suggested name, and finally the group chose "Lord of Lords Evangelical Lutheran Church," for its alliteration and the fact that this was an original name to both the WELS and the Casper area.<sup>95</sup> On August 30, 1981 Lord of Lords Evangelical Lutheran Church adopted its first constitution that was to be implemented within the next year.<sup>96</sup>

As the group grew in size they needed a larger facility for worship. The Casper Hilton Inn was more than willing to accommodate this group, but the cost would double. They started holding worship services at the Senior Citizen's Center in downtown Casper as a temporary worship facility under the agreement that "they could stay until they found another facility within reason."<sup>97</sup> This agreement lasted for four months when the Casper Woman's Clubhouse became available due to another worship group moving out. This was only two blocks away from the

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<sup>93</sup> Rev. Philip Zarling (Editor), *Good News on the Great Plains - A history of the Nebraska District*, p. 6.

<sup>94</sup> Interview with Rev. David Russow on August 3, 2005.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>96</sup> Rev. Philip Zarling (Editor), *Good News on the Great Plains - A history of the Nebraska District*, p. 6.

<sup>97</sup> Interview with Rev. David Russow on August 3, 2005.



Senior Citizen's Center. This building was originally owned by Amoco Oil Company, and was used to keep their executives in apartments when they visited the area. The building had apartments upstairs, a dining room, a drawing room, and a meeting room in the basement. Services were held in the drawing room, which sat approximately 70 people, and the church was able to use the basement meeting rooms for Sunday school. This location was near a park which was ideal for Vacation Bible School. They stayed at this facility for three and a half years before moving to their own permanent building.

Around this time Bob Miller was transferred to Casper by his employer, IBM. His wife, Doris, also served the church by playing piano, and so this small group had three people who would volunteer their services to musical ministry.<sup>98</sup> The church had some well used hymnals donated to them, and they had them rebound for around \$4 per book. They stored these hymnals in a large wooden trunk in the basement, which would have to be carried up to the drawing room for services. Many trousers were snagged in this duty, and when the church built its own facility, the men blew the storage cabinet up with a shotgun.

Lord of Lord's history reports,

On February 8, 1982 the GBHM granted Land Search Authority. On November 22, the congregation and synod closed on the present church site, a two-acre site located at 5029 Casper Mountain Road purchased for \$55,000. On February 7, 1983 planning funds were approved by the GBHM for a WEF (Worship Education Fellowship) unit. Building plans for the WEF unit were approved on September 19, 1983. A well was drilled and septic tank installed.

Pastor Russow's brother Michael from California built the church furniture. A used organ was purchased. St. Marks of Lincoln, Nebraska provided used pews for the sanctuary.<sup>99</sup>

On March 28, 1979 there was an explosion in the Three Mile Island Unit 2 (TMI-2) nuclear power plant near Middletown, Pennsylvania. The uranium market crashed, and by 1983

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<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>99</sup> Rev. Philip Zarling (Editor), Good News on the Great Plains - A history of the Nebraska District, p. 6.

the snowballing effects caused another bust in the city of Casper, combined with a bust in the oil fields. The bust led to a loss of one third of the congregation's membership, who were forced to move in order to gain employment.<sup>100</sup> In May of 1983 Pastor Russow had received a call to Trinity in Waukesha, Wisconsin, but he realized that with such a tremendous loss in the congregation a loss of pastoral leadership could be a death-blow to this church.<sup>101</sup>

This bust also presented a challenge to evangelism as one could knock on the door of a house where a few months before the husband was making \$40 per hour, but now was unemployed and his wife had become the bread winner by working at such places as K-Mart for a considerably lower wage. The depression and frustration caused by the loss of job stability often lead to substance abuse, along with child and spousal abuse.<sup>102</sup>

Lord of Lords Evangelical Lutheran Church's history reports:

On February 10, 1984 a multilevel house was purchased for a parsonage about a mile south of the church for \$76,750.00.

Groundbreaking for the 2,298 sq. ft. WEF unit was held on Easter Sunday, April 22, 1984. The building was completed in September. Dedication services were held between September 30-October 1, 1984 for the \$137,000 facility in thanksgiving to a gracious God. The final service included the Colorado Conference, which the congregation hosted.<sup>103</sup>

In the fall of 1985, Pastor Russow was led by the Holy Spirit to accept a call to St. Peter Evangelical Lutheran Church in Fort Collins, Colorado. When Pastor Russow left the church it had about 76 communicant members and roughly 100 souls. He estimates that if none of his members had moved, the church would have had 176 communicants.<sup>104</sup>

Lord of Lords Evangelical Lutheran Church's history reports:

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<sup>100</sup> Interview with Rev. David Russow on August 3, 2005.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>103</sup> Rev. Philip Zarling (Editor), Good News on the Great Plains - A history of the Nebraska District, p. 6.

<sup>104</sup> Interview with Rev. David Russow on August 3, 2005.

The resulting vacancy lasted from the fall of 1985 to July 1986, when the Lord provided seminary graduate Ricky Himm as the next shepherd of the congregation. In 1996 Pastor Himm accepted a call to California and the Lord provided the congregation with Pastor Nathan Seiltz who had been assigned two years earlier as a tutor at Nebraska Lutheran High School. The constitution was rewritten in 2000. In early 2000 the congregation said good-bye to Pastor Seiltz and his family after he accepted a world mission call to the Dominican Republic. Pastor Philip Spaude was installed on September 2, 2001 as the next pastor of the congregation.

In the last few years the congregation has been trying to reach out to the community more actively through a variety of evangelism approaches. Another goal of the congregation is to include every member in a Bible study. A building committee meets monthly with the goal, Lord willing, of future expansion. The Lord, who has provided so well for us in the past, will certainly bless our future. The congregation plans with the help of the Holy Spirit to continue to reach out to the unchurched in our community and to nurture our own people with the living and enduring Word of God.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> Rev. Philip Zarling (Editor), Good News on the Great Plains - A history of the Nebraska District, p. 7.

## Gillette

Before the natural resources boom Gillette was a small cowboy town.<sup>106</sup> Once the boom occurred, and ever since, Gillette's main industry has been strip mining for coal. At the time there were approximately thirteen major coal mines operating in the area.<sup>107</sup> The oil fields also had an impact on the economy as roughnecks began moving into the area. This was good pay and mostly attracted younger adults who were willing to relocate to earn a higher income. This meant that the average age in this congregation's infant years was 25, and most of them had moved from South Dakota.<sup>108</sup> Many members of the Schlomer family began moving into town as they were employed by the mines. They would quickly become a large group in this congregation that contained some of the key members in its infant years, because not only were they willing to put in the work needed to support a church, but they had also come from a church setting and had served as officers and board members, organists, etc. It is interesting to see how the WELS members in Wyoming refused to leave their church behind as at one time a couple, who were members of the Schlomer family, became active in the infant years of the Cheyenne congregation, and did the same when they moved to Gillette. An interesting tidbit for MLC graduates is that at one time Gary Sonnenberg, chief financial officer at MLC, was president of this congregation in its earlier years.<sup>109</sup>

Part of Pastor Russow's call was to do exploratory work in Gillette (located 120 miles north of Casper) "as soon as possible."<sup>110</sup> Pastor Russow had received a list of WELS members from the WELS Soul Conservation, and he began mailing a sermon once a week to everyone on

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<sup>106</sup> Interview with Rev. James A. Bolda on August 27, 2005.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>110</sup> Interview with Rev. David Russow on August 3, 2005.

this list. In October of 1980 Pastor Russow began traveling to Gillette.<sup>111</sup> Marco Schlomer and his wife volunteered their apartment for a meeting place.<sup>112</sup> Pastor Russow initially made this trip once a month, but by February of 1981 he was visiting twice a month.<sup>113</sup> At this time the Mission Board approached Pastor Gerhold Lemke who was serving in Sturgis, South Dakota to share in the work load, but his schedule at the time did not allow for him to assist Pastor Russow.<sup>114</sup>

On May 17, 1981 the church began having services every Sunday.<sup>115</sup> Pastor Russow was conducting services in Gillette the first, second, and third Sunday every month, and Pastor Gerhold Lemke conducted services on the fourth Sunday of every month.<sup>116</sup> The Schlomer family apartment soon became too small, and so the group moved to the Eagle's Lodge on Sunday afternoons, and from there a member lived in a trailer court that had a community center called "Foothills Community Center" that was used.<sup>117</sup>

An exploratory mission can receive a tremendous blessing when it can be served full-time by its own resident pastor, and so the seminary assigned this mission field a graduate. On July 11, 1982 Pastor James A. Bolda was installed and ordained by Pastor Russow<sup>118</sup> in a service held at Foothills Community Center.<sup>119</sup> At this point the main goal was "to proclaim the gospel with the hope of the blessing of receiving mission status."<sup>120</sup> The members of this mission were active in reaching this goal as they, along with the evangelism committee, would help canvass. This canvass usually was in the form of explaining that they were starting a new church that was

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<sup>111</sup> Rev. John A. Schroeder, Christ Our Redeemer Evangelical Lutheran Church (WELS) Gillette, WY. p. 1.

<sup>112</sup> Interview with Rev. David Russow on August 3, 2005.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>115</sup> Proceedings of the 33<sup>rd</sup> Biannual Convention of the Nebraska District, Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, June 1982, p 23.

<sup>116</sup> Rev. John A. Schroeder, Christ Our Redeemer Evangelical Lutheran Church (WELS) Gillette, WY. p. 1.

<sup>117</sup> Interview with Rev. David Russow on August 3, 2005.

<sup>118</sup> Proceedings of the 33<sup>rd</sup> Biannual Convention of the Nebraska District, Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, June 1982, p 23.

<sup>119</sup> Interview with Rev. David Russow on August 3, 2005.

<sup>120</sup> Interview with Rev. James A. Bolda on August 27, 2005.

WELS leading to an invitation to come and worship, partake in Sunday school, and an offer to baptize children. This survey culminated into two main questions: “If you were to die today are you sure that you would go to heaven?” and “If you were to die today and the Lord asked you, “Why should I let you into heaven?” what would you say?” This was followed by a sin and grace response.<sup>121</sup>

On Sunday mornings the congregation would put up a sign outside of the Foothills Community Center in order to invite others to worship, which began at 8 a.m. and Sunday school followed at 9 a.m., but it was conducted at the parsonage, which was a duplex.<sup>122</sup> The younger age of the average resident in Gillette was one of the greatest challenges this mission faced as they needed a great deal of encouragement to come to church, but the members of this mission were persistent.<sup>123</sup> After the first year, worship services were moved into the VFW Hall as it was a more central location, the group could offer a more convenient worship time, and it was a little larger than Foothills Community Center.<sup>124</sup>

Their first application for mission status was declined,<sup>125</sup> but their second attempt brought good news, because Christ Our Redeemer Evangelical Lutheran Church received mission status in February of 1983.<sup>126</sup> Often when a church reaches a major goal the members become complacent, but that did not happen as the members continued to be active in canvassing and outreach. Although there was a Mormon Church in town, its presence was not largely felt in the community, and so canvassers did not encounter opposition from people fed up of pesky

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<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>126</sup> Proceedings of the 34<sup>th</sup> Biannual Convention of the Nebraska District, Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, June 1984, p 33.

Mormon missionaries. Jehovah's Witnesses appeared to be more known for door to door visits at the time and canvassers were occasionally mistaken for this group.<sup>127</sup>

In 1985 Christ Our Redeemer Evangelical Lutheran Church purchased land for a parsonage and WEF. Ground-breaking for the parsonage was commenced on October 13, 1985.<sup>128</sup> The church building itself was dedicated in April 27, 1986.<sup>129</sup> Trying to pay off the debt for this WEF created a great struggle for this congregation. Once the WEF was built the church had met all of its major goals, and its zeal for canvassing died out, but the members remained intent that their church was there to stay and they would do all that was within their power to make it happen.<sup>130</sup>

Gillette was so distant from many of the other churches in the Colorado Conference, and was actually physically closer to churches in the Dakota-Montana District. This along with the fact that most of the members were from the Dakota-Montana District made the members deem it best to request a transfer to this district.<sup>131</sup> It is important to note that the members were very grateful to the Colorado Conference Mission Board, and all the support of the Nebraska District, and so this transfer was not political, or caused by discontent. Shortly after the WEF was completed their request was granted. The congregation faced a set back at this time due to a bust in the oil field industry and some cut backs in the mining industry, and some active members moved away.<sup>132</sup>

After seven and a half years of service the Holy Spirit led Pastor Bolda to accept a call to Sioux Falls, South Dakota in November of 1989.<sup>133</sup> Pastor Robert Weimer served from January

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<sup>127</sup> Interview with Rev. James A. Bolda on August 27, 2005.

<sup>128</sup> Rev. John A. Schroeder, Christ Our Redeemer Evangelical Lutheran Church (WELS) Gillette, WY. p. 1.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>130</sup> Interview with Rev. James A. Bolda on August 27, 2005.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*

of 1990 to April of 1992.<sup>134</sup> Pastor Alan Gumm served from June of 1992 to May of 1997.<sup>135</sup>

Pastor John A. Schroeder is the present pastor and he has been serving since July of 1997.<sup>136</sup>

The subsequent history is described in Christ Our Redeemer's (C.O.R.) history:

Over the years, this group has weathered some storms. While mushrooming growth has not occurred, it is now enjoying a period of stability and prosperity. As Dakota-Montana first Vice-president, Pastor Douglas Free of St. Paul Evangelical Lutheran Church ( Rapid City, SD) noted in his sermon on the occasion of C.O.R.'s 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary (celebrated November 23, 2003), C.O.R. congregation of relatively few members assumes a large debt (300k) . But, as Pastor Free emphasized, this is not cause for C.O.R.'s members to sigh "I can't believe we've made it twenty-years" rather it is cause to have a proper Christian's anniversary attitude to the Lord which looks back with thanksgiving and looks forward with confidence. As Pastor Free also noted even though large mushrooming type growth has not occurred at C.O.R., this is not cause for a mindset of depression, rather it is an opportunity for continued evangelistic action. The past two years have been the first time in the congregation's history that the congregation ended the year with a surplus, rather than a deficit, of funds. This blessed circumstance has enabled C.O.R. congregation not only to favorably negotiate in property and facility loan through the WELS Church Extension Fund and to meet its debt payments, but also to plan and embark on a series of phased projects to enhance the exterior appearance of its church building and grounds: new outdoor sign; new lawn (sprinkler system, turf, landscaping); siding and brick wainscoting; steeple (?). Such improvements, when completed, will definitely be a plus considering the C.O.R.'s current facility is a "boxcar" W.E.F. (Worship, Education, Fellowship) unit. Within the past five years, the congregation has also benefited from a capable electronic keyboard which has just been upgraded in the past month by a portable public-address type sound-system. Also linked to the keyboard, a computerized HymnSoft© program will also capably enhance the congregation's worship. All thanks to God who has moved the members of C.O.R. toward greater responsibility in stewardship—especially in the past three years. So another step forward is taken. Many more steps remain—especially in the areas of outreach and evangelism. But, as the steps are taken, sometimes haltingly, sometimes boldly, the members of C.O.R. can be confident our mutual Lord will provide a harvest in the measure he has so determined.<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> Rev. John A. Schroeder, Christ Our Redeemer Evangelical Lutheran Church (WELS) Gillette, WY. p. 1.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.* p. 1-2.



## Sheridan

At present Sheridan has a population of approximately 15,804 people.<sup>138</sup> It is 100 miles from Gillette, 20 miles from the Montana boarder, and in the shadow of the Big Horn Mountains. Natural resources in the form of coal mining and coal bed methane, i.e. natural gas, are a major industry in this area. There are also people moving into Sheridan to get away from big city life especially in Denver, Colorado. In 1984 Pastor Bolda of Gillette began to serve three families in Sheridan.<sup>139</sup> This mission began with services held once a month on Sunday afternoons in the home of one of the members. In its earliest years this was treated more as a preaching station than as a mission. Pastor Elroy Conrad from Billings, Montana would also mail them video tapes of his services.<sup>140</sup> Pastor Bolda took some of the husbands of WELS members in this area through adult Bible information classes.

At this time the people were served by the Gillette and Casper congregations. The Colorado Conference Mission Board extended a call to Pastor Peter Zietlow to be a mission explorer to see if there was enough growth potential to warrant mission status. The Holy Spirit led Pastor Zietlow to except the call and on September 17, 2000<sup>141</sup> he was installed as the first resident pastor and missionary to the Sheridan mission field.<sup>142</sup> His house also doubles as the church office.

At this time the group of WELS members had grown to 15 members.<sup>143</sup> The group began meeting at the Sheridan Woman's Club under the care of Pastor Schroeder of Gillette. There were two other churches meeting at this facility and so the group was given an afternoon time

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<sup>138</sup> *Sheridan, Wyoming*. (Accessed November 1, 2005); available from <http://www.city-data.com/city/Sheridan-Wyoming.html>

<sup>139</sup> Interview with Rev. James A. Bolda on August 27, 2005.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>141</sup> Rev. Philip Zarling (Editor), *Good News on the Great Plains - A history of the Nebraska District*, p. 55.

<sup>142</sup> Interview with Rev. Peter Zietlow on September 15, 2005.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*

slot. After the first few years the mission board recommended a move and so the group moved to Central Middle School's auditorium.<sup>144</sup> This allowed for morning worship until the school district sold this 65-year old building to a group who demolished it.

On June of 2005 the group moved to the Wyo Theater<sup>145</sup> (to clarify this is not a movie theater but a stage for plays, concerts, etc.). This location also allows for Sunday morning worship services, Bible study, and Sunday school.

Outreach is a major portion of the work in Sheridan. Volunteers from Wisconsin Lutheran Collage, Great Plains Lutheran High School, and Martin Luther College have canvassed, helped with Vacation Bible School, and held concerts to help with outreach. Most of the 250-300 prospects in this area have come from door to door canvassing, mailing, and phone calls.<sup>146</sup> Most of Pastor Zietlow's time is spent following up on these prospects. Outside of the Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, and the Catholic Church there are no other churches active in outreach to this area. Canvassers intentionally dressed less formal than Mormon missionaries to prevent being mistaken for them.

Mission status was granted in February of 2005 to Valley Lutheran Church.<sup>147</sup> Their mission statement is, "Valley Lutheran Church exists to glorify God, who made us, saved us, and promises to take us and all believers to heaven."<sup>148</sup> Pastor Zietlow explains, "It will glorify God by gospel outreach, spiritual growth, and member ministry. Spiritual growth is to grow in faith through God's Word and Sacraments. Member ministry is to serve one another in love with the gifts God has given each member."<sup>149</sup>

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<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*

Adult membership is now 46 communicants and 65 baptized souls.<sup>150</sup> A majority of this group is not former WELS members, but is homegrown from adult Bible information classes. These families are taking on stewardship and leadership responsibilities, while they work on spiritual growth, member ministry, and outreach. Service at Valley Lutheran includes three study committees. The first is a four member committee on organization that is working on the first draft of its constitution and by-laws. As an organized congregation they will soon extend a call to Pastor Zietlow as his present call is from the mission board. The second committee is a four member committee on finance that looks at the money they have, the money they need, and how to raise money for the church. The third committee is a six member church building committee that looks at how to use a worship facility, and whether to buy land and build or buy existing property and renovate, and this includes looking at loans that are available and what payment options the church can afford.

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<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*

### Laramie

During Pastor Schwerin's service the Cheyenne congregation began to do some part-time ministry in Laramie. One of the members Pastor Schwerin visited in Laramie was Gertrude Green, who had been a pioneer in starting Brail work within the WELS in the 1950's. The first funeral for Pastor Schwerin at Good Shepherd Lutheran Church took place in Laramie, when Pastor Schwerin's twenty-six year old sister-in-law was called to eternal glory in March of 1976. Pastor Schwerin also visited the Lang family who moved to Laramie in the early 1980's (their son is a minister in the WELS).<sup>151</sup>

In subsequent years there were WELS students who attended the University of Wyoming and also the Wyoming Technical Institute which is known throughout the United States as a good school for auto mechanics, diesel, body work, etc. In fact when the author was working in Milwaukee, several of the technicians he worked with had received their training from Wyoming Technical Institute. The members in Cheyenne had always tried to start a campus ministry, but it never really took hold until Pastor Heitsch was called. He reports on the Laramie ministries:

Upon arrival in Cheyenne back in August of 1998, Pastor Heitsch was informed by then vacancy Pastor Dave Russow, that there was a University of Wyoming student that had left the Missouri Synod and was almost done with his pre-membership course and asked if I would finish that up with him.

So I was introduced to Fred Schurman and the beginning of our first presence in Laramie. Fred was a student at UW and was willing to be the contact person for a Campus Ministry program. That first year we tried to meet at least once a month. There were a total of 6 college students that had WELS connections that first year. We floated around to a couple of different meeting places. Finally we were able to meet in the basement meeting room of the one of the dorms. We started working through a basic Bible information course with that group, since a couple of prospects had been invited and were attending.

After that first year, Fred was led to enroll at Martin Luther College in New Ulm, Minnesota to pursue the public preaching ministry. So our lead person at UW in Laramie was lost. We did have the Schlomer brothers from Gillette and

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<sup>151</sup> Interview with Rev. Philip J. Schwerin on September 8, 2005.

a few other WELS contacts. But sadly the year began rather tough when the older Schlomer student's wife suddenly passed away due to an infection that attacked her heart. The meetings in Laramie dwindled as the Schlomer's returned back to Gillette for the rest of that year.

That very same fall though we were contacted by Gerry and Gloria Maas. They had just moved from Phoenix, Arizona back to Laramie. They had lived in Laramie a number of years before and had attended the ELCA Church. When they moved to Phoenix, thanks to Gerry's uncle they started attending the WELS church in Tempe. The Maas' went through the classes and became members of the WELS congregation in Arizona. When their plans included moving back to Laramie, they mentioned that they would probably just end up joining their old church in Laramie—the ELCA Church. Their WELS pastors in Tempe, Arizona encouraged them to “test the spirits” and to get in contact with the Cheyenne congregation. Well after the Maas family returned and checked out their former church and also the two Missouri Synod churches, they realized that doctrinally things had also changed in these congregations in the time that they were gone and so they contacted the WELS congregation in Cheyenne. So Gerry and Gloria Maas began attending Good Shepherd over in Cheyenne and started encouraging the pastor to consider doing some ministry over in Laramie once again - offering their newly built home as a location for gathering and themselves as the contact people.

A few weeks after the Maas' had contacted us we were also contacted by another family that had moved from McIntosh, South Dakota to Laramie. They had been members of our WELS congregation in Isabel, South Dakota and were told that the pastor in Cheyenne had begun his ministry in Isabel and they should contact him. And so the Tim and Stacy Hoffer family with their two young sons, Landon and Colton, entered into the Laramie ministry.

We also had a young family that had been long time friends with Fred Schurman living in Laramie. They had not been connected to any church for quite some time and finally Fred's encouragement and witnessing produced results and the couple went through the Bible information course. At the completion of that course, the mother and 3 daughters were all baptized.

Along with these families another WELS member who had been the organist for years at our church in Ft. Morgan, Colorado moved into Laramie. She had been a widow for a short time and had just married a long time friend who lived in Laramie.

So with this small core of WELS members transplanted in Laramie and this one young family and a few WELS college students a group became organized to the point of offering two meetings a month in Laramie. Those meetings usually consisted of an opening devotion followed by Bible study. A couple, friends of the Maas', also started joining the group on a regular basis and so we began to use a Bible information course for our group Bible study.

In the fall of 2002 the Colorado Mission Board chairman met with the Cheyenne Pastor and the Maas family in Laramie to discuss future development and support. The Mission Board chairman offered the support and help he could, but with the Synod beginning to face some tough financial situations, and the fact

the population of Laramie was under 25,000, no specific man power funding could be offered. So the Laramie ministry would be reliant on a partnership and support from the WELS congregation in Cheyenne.

In February of 2003 our first Sunday evening worship service was held. We had a total of 21 people in attendance for that Sunday service that was held in the basement of the Maas' home just south of the town of Laramie. For the next year we would hold our meetings there. During that time we would have as many as 16 in attendance at our evening meetings and as few as 3. To try and encourage more of the college kids to attend, we decided to move our meeting place to a Laramie public school building about three blocks from the University of Wyoming. We are still meeting there, or when that facility is not available we have met at the Public Library.

The members in Laramie continue to encourage and invite prospects to join them for our devotions and Bible studies. As the other Lutheran churches in that area continue to move farther and farther away from the truth of God's Word and our members continue to let their light of faith shine in their day to day lives, God will continue to bless our ministry efforts in Laramie, Wyoming.<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>152</sup> Email from Rev. Jeffrey Heitsch, received November 26, 2005.

## Powell

WELS members living in towns in this area of Wyoming picked Powell as a meeting place since it was a hub for the surrounding towns. In the history of this church it had drawn people from Cody, Worland, Basin, Greybull, Thermopolis, Lovell, Cowley, Deaver, Frannie, and even Belfry, Montana. The postmaster in Powell was one of the more active members, along with a gentleman who owned an appliance store in Powell. An active family came from Thermopolis, which is located half-way between Casper and Powell. One of the more active members in this group came from Lovell, Wyoming. They knew Lovell was not a good town for a WELS church because the town population is over 65% Mormon. Members of the Mormon Church have infiltrated the city council and most of the local businesses so that it would be very difficult to open a church in Lovell.

In the late 1980s Pastor Jonathan Schultz, joined by another Pastor in Colorado, helped the church get started.<sup>153</sup> Rev. Ricky Himm, who was serving in Casper, began serving the small group of WELS members in Powell.<sup>154</sup> Services were held in the basement of a discount appliance center that was owned by a member. At this time there were about 15 members attending. In 1992 the Nebraska District had projected to open a mission field here in 1995<sup>155</sup> and by 1994 they had postponed opening a mission field until 1998.<sup>156</sup> This would never happen, for various reasons most of the members moved away, and the group disbanded.<sup>157</sup> The Nebraska District's efforts at mission work in this area ended as well.

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<sup>153</sup> Interview with Terry Peters on November 19, 2005.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>155</sup> Proceedings of the 38<sup>th</sup> Biannual Convention of the Nebraska District, Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, June 1992.

<sup>156</sup> Proceedings of the 38<sup>th</sup> Biannual Convention of the Nebraska District, Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, June 1992.

<sup>157</sup> Interview with Terry Peters on November 19, 2005.

There were still a couple of WELS people left in the area, and they began to be joined by disgruntled LCMS members. This group called themselves “Resurrection Evangelical Lutheran Church” and they felt this title was a witness against the work righteousness in this predominantly Mormon area.<sup>158</sup> Within a few years after the first efforts in Powell had ended, efforts were started again when Pastor Al Gumm from Gillette began to serve this group,<sup>159</sup> and so the Dakota-Montana District became involved. The traveling conditions that are presented by the Big Horn Mountains made it more practical to find help from the western side of this mountain range.<sup>160</sup>

Rev. Kenneth Nelson from Livingston, Montana and Rev. Paul Metzger from Billings, Montana began a team ministry to this group.<sup>161</sup> The members of the Powell church were always able to pay for the pastor’s mileage, and members were willing to host them during their overnight stay. These pastors conducted some canvasses in Powell, and Mrs. Peters started a telephone canvass and worked approximately a quarter of the way through the Powell phone book. Resurrection also put flyers in the area motels and gas stations. Advertisements were also placed in the newspapers of the surrounding area. Even after Resurrection was left with only two members, Terrie and Elsie Peters continued to run advertisements in these papers. Timothy Poetter had a summer vicarage and canvassed in Powell, and preached with the Peters family hosting him in Lovell. A year or two later another summer vicar came to help canvass in the Powell area.

Rev. Nelson and Metzger came to Powell as often as possible. At times services were held once a month, while at other times services were held almost every Sunday. Worship

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<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*



services were held in the chapel of the Powell Nursing Home. Services were held on Sunday evenings at 6 p.m. Pastors Nelson and Metzger had to travel long distances and so church couldn't be held until late afternoon. The Mormon Church took up the time before dinner was served in the retirement home, and so 6 p.m. was chosen as it was shortly after dinner and would allow residents of the nursing home to attend the service. After 7 p.m. the nursing home residents would go to bed. Pastor Nelson would sit outside the chapel and play the mandolin before services. The group called him "the Pied Pieper," because his music seemed to draw the residents of the nursing home into the services.

Apostles Evangelical Lutheran Church in Billings, Montana felt that its own needs were increasing and so they decided that they could no longer spare Pastor Metzger for the Powell ministries. Pastor Nelson had to shoulder outreach to this area on his own. This meant that the church could not be served as often as they had been with the united effort. The difficulty this congregation faced is that there are no congregations near by in the Nebraska District, or in the Dakota-Montana District.

Most of Resurrection's growth came from disgruntled LCMS members, in fact in the peak of its existence the majority of its members were disgruntled LCMS. As mentioned earlier in this paper the people from the LCMS think in terms of liberal and conservative, and many of the members that came to this church didn't necessarily come for doctrinal reasons. For example, one couple came to Resurrection due to personality clashes in their LCMS church. They returned to this church one year later.

One of the families that had come from the LCMS because they saw false doctrine ended up returning because their children were not receiving consistent catechism lessons at

Resurrection. Although they felt the LCMS as a whole was tolerating false doctrine, they also felt that consistent catechism training was more important.

Having more conservative LCMS congregations in the area created a challenge for Resurrection, because it is very tempting to return to a conservative church in the LCMS than to be served once a month in the WELS. One must also bear in mind that a person leaving the LCMS usually thinks in terms of liberal verses conservative theology and without thorough Scriptural teaching they will not come to see that these terms only allow for toleration of false doctrine. To use a western adage, unless they are taught otherwise they will not see that they should call "an ace an ace and a spade a spade." Therefore false teaching should not be labeled "liberal" or "conservative" but should be called what it is, false teaching. The same applies for adiaphora. Resurrection could not supply the regular teaching and reinforcement that this would involve, because its solid members often came from surrounding towns, and the pastor's full-time call plus the distance he had to travel limited the frequency of his trips.

Rev. Nelson served this group for a long period of time, and traveled approximately 178 miles one-way to serve this group. This is approximately a three hour drive. His faithful efforts kept this group together even after its contributing members had left. His congregation in Livingston had to be very supportive of this effort because whenever he served in Powell he would be gone for a full day. Many of the people who came to the worship services lived in the retirement home and came from other churches, and also from the Mormon Church. God only knows how many of those Mormons were saved because they came to this church service. While this Powell congregation no longer exists, the fact that several Mormons from that retirement home attended Resurrection's worship services near the end of their life shows that it wasn't a futile existence.

The Powell church had declined in membership, and the demands of the ministry and also of being a husband and father eventually forced Pastor Nelson to end his service in Powell. Resurrection slowly disbanded because it could not afford a full-time pastor, and they were unable to find a pastor whose ministry allowed him to travel the distance and serve them. As some of the members grew past retirement age the night time drive to Powell proved to be a challenge. The couple from Thermopolis, which is located between Powell and Casper, started attending services in Casper, because they were held in the daylight hours. Many members returned to the LCMS. The last remaining couple was the Peters. At the time of this interview they were in the process of moving to Sheridan so that they could have a regular church home without having to drive long distances.

Resurrection Evangelical Lutheran Church owned a nice cabinet for housing communion wine, chalice, paten, church permanents, hymnals, Sunday school materials, etc. This has been donated to the Sheridan church along with the hymnals. Half of the savings account has also been donated to the Sheridan church. The other half has been given to the Livingston Church in Montana as a thank you for its support of the ministry through Pastor Nelson's faithful efforts. All that is left is a hope that someday the WELS will see the need and be enabled to send a full-time missionary to this area.

### Hulett and Devil's Tower

Hulett is located in the northeast corner of Wyoming with a population of 408.<sup>162</sup> Pastor

Lloyd Lemke of Hope in Spearfish, South Dakota reports:

Our preaching station in Hulett, Wyoming, began September 18, 1994 with 14 in attendance and continued until May 20, 2001. During this time we worshiped at the "Neighborhood Bible Church" rented for \$17 per service from a small Pentecostal group. Our little congregation worshiped the third Sunday of the month at 4 p.m., a communion service followed by an always generous potluck and Bible class. My wife or oldest son played a keyboard which we brought from Sturgis, South Dakota. Our highest attendance was 27 in the early years but could be as low as six (five of those in attendance was always my own family). The congregation was never incorporated. Those who were communicant members held membership through Hope-Spearfish. The members came from Hulett and Devil's Tower. A canvass of the community brought nothing. It was the consensus of the group--all had pitched in to canvass the village of 419 people--that our members were perceived as from the upper class, those who had arrived in Hulett society: the widow of a former Devil's Tower National Memorial park manager, the bank president and his family, the second grade teacher and her husband, retired agriculture teacher and respected rancher and one of the co-owners of the town's largest employers, Devil's Tower Wood Products & Neiman Sawmill. This presented an interesting problem for outreach. We were always compensated generously with a wonderful potluck and mileage. The scenery was also part of the compensation. From the very beginning I chose to have the honorarium directed to Hope-Spearfish rather than go to my own pocket. We could have used the standard honorarium, but I was concerned that this ministry with limited growth prospects might be perceived wrongly by others as somehow for my profit rather than outreach. The honorarium went a long way in helping to pay off the CEF debt of Hope by making regular payments rather than the sporadic late payments which had been the practice for some time.

What finally brought Christ-Rock of Ages to an end was the call to serve the semi-permanent vacancy at Custer. After three years of serving a four point parish of Sturgis/Spearfish, Hulett, and then also Custer, the Hope council recommended that Hulett close. The banker had moved away. The Stultses (teacher/rancher couple) came to Hope on the Sundays I didn't go to Hulett. The others might be in Spearfish earlier on Sunday but would rush back to Hulett for church. And as I said earlier five of the attendance was always my family. It was with sadness that it closed but stewardship of our time and energy became an issue. Tom and Marilyn Stults are WELS Kingdom Workers who canvass all over the country. They were core members at Hulett and have continued to be very active at Hope-Spearfish in spite of the distance of 56 miles from their ranch to

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<sup>162</sup> *Hulett, Wyoming*. (Accessed November 1, 2005); available from <http://www.city-data.com/city/Hulett-Wyoming.html>; Internet.

Spearfish without a direct route. It should probably be added that the name of the preaching station was a carry-over from an LCMS effort out of Sundance which ended a year or two before we started in Hulett. The LCMS pastor took a call elsewhere and their preaching station closed. We did pick up one or two from them. But WELS was "too conservative" for most of the remnant of the LCMS. In choosing our name we compromised by retaining the old name and adding Rock of Ages from a list of possible names I had provided.<sup>163</sup>

### **Newcastle**

A WELS couple retired here from Wisconsin because there is no state income tax in Wyoming. They no longer live in Newcastle. There is a young couple who have one child that makes the 40 mile one-way trip to Custer, South Dakota to worship at Shepherd of the Hills. Matt is an elementary school physical education teacher. They previously worshiped at the preaching station in Hulett until it was closed.<sup>164</sup>

### **Sundance**

A WELS couple retired here because there is no state income tax. They are presently worshipping at Hope in Spearfish, South Dakota.<sup>165</sup>

### **Green River**

Rev. Russow and his youngest brother, Rick, who was serving a summer vicarage in the Colorado Conference, conducted a sample canvass in Green River, because some WELS members had moved there during the energy boom.<sup>166</sup> The canvass revealed several Lutherans who were not happy with the existing Lutheran churches in the area, but nothing else came of this canvass.

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<sup>163</sup> Email from Rev. Lloyd Lemke received October 6, 2005.

<sup>164</sup> Email from Rev. Lloyd Lemke received October 6, 2005.

<sup>165</sup> Email from Rev. Lloyd Lemke received October 6, 2005.

<sup>166</sup> Interview with Rev. David Russow on August 3, 2005.

### **Riverton**

During Rev. Russow's years of service in Casper, the LCMS congregation in Riverton had contacted him about joining the WELS.<sup>167</sup> At present day they are still LCMS.

### **Conclusion**

Since the churches in Wyoming are either recently off mission status or are still in one form or another mission congregations, they tend to be less bound to the mores of traditionalism in regard to worship formalities. If one were to draw four longitudinal lines across Wyoming they would see that the WELS really only exists in the eastern quarter, Sheridan being the exception. The further west one goes, the deeper one enters into Mormonism. Therefore the further west one goes the more mission work would require a full-time trained worker.

Due to the seclusion and isolation of cities in Wyoming one cannot disregard pleas for help in being fed the Word of our Lord, because none of these residents can drive a short distance to a nearby WELS church. It is also a hardship on a pastor to come to them.

There has been a pattern of outreach in the state of Wyoming where one congregation's pastor conducts exploratory work in another city, and hence there is congregational development. This pattern was started when the Fort Collins, Colorado church reached out to Cheyenne. When a resident pastor was called to serve Good Shepherd in Cheyenne, they began reaching out to the Casper area. From Casper outreach was conducted into Gillette. Gillette has done outreach to Sheridan. Christ Our Redeemer Evangelical Lutheran Church's history gives a very nice summary of this:

According to the WELS 2002 Statistical Report, the three organized congregations in Wyoming have a combined total of 390 baptized and 274 communicant members (slightly larger than the totals of the WELS congregations in the more populous

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<sup>167</sup> Interview with Rev. David Russow on August 3, 2005.

states of Alabama, Connecticut, Massachusetts, New Jersey, Vermont). Interesting is the fact that of all the fifty states, Wyoming is the least populated (approximately 300k).<sup>168</sup>

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<sup>168</sup> Rev. John A. Schroeder, Christ Our Redeemer Evangelical Lutheran Church (WELS) Gillette, WY. p. 1.

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Appendix

