

Friedrich Schmid: Untiring Missionary to Michigan

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The second Michigan Synod was formed in 1860. It may be easier to write about the History of the Michigan Synod beginning with this date. But if we did, we would find ourselves missing out on a piece of history where God's hand was guiding our beloved synod even at times when it seemed like it would fall into the hands of men. The ministry in the 30 years leading up to the forming of the Michigan Synod was dominated by Pastor Friedrich Schmid. The history of this ministry shows Pastor Schmid as an untiring minister of the Gospel. While he had issues with fellowship, his heart was always in the right place. This is evident when a closer look is given to the situations surrounding his ministry. But before we get to those situations, we will look at the history.

The year was 1833. Two days after being ordained at the Basel Mission Institute, Pastor Friedrich Schmid was sent to America, to the Wuerttenbergers living in Michigan.

But why Michigan? "This area was especially attractive to German immigrants from Switzerland and from the Rhine country, because of similar environmental factors, including geo-physical features, seasonal temperatures, and agricultural potential."<sup>1</sup> Prior to 1825 most "Michiganders" were Indians and trappers. But 1825 marks the year when people were now more easily able to move west because of the completion of the Erie Canal. Several German families moved to Michigan from Pennsylvania in 1829 and settled about 40 miles west of Detroit, near Ann Arbor. "They came to Ann Arbor where the rolling hill country made a strong appeal to these Wuerttenbergers."<sup>2</sup> One of these families in particular was the family of Jonathan Henry Mann.

It wasn't until 1832 that there were enough families gathered in Ann Arbor to send a request for a German pastor. Mr. Mann had connections to the Basel Missionary Institute and

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<sup>1</sup> Korthals, James F. *Michigan District History 1833-2000*. Michigan District, 2002, pg. 14.

<sup>2</sup> Menzel, T. W. *Friedrich Schmid: Pioneer Missionary to the Germans in Michigan*. 1954, pg. 2.

took it upon himself to send a letter, requesting “a virile young pastor to work among the 200 or so Germans who could be interested in forming a congregation.”<sup>3</sup> And so the assignment was given to Friedrich Schmid.

Schmid was twenty five when he finished Basel’s 5-year program. In order to understand his theological background it would be worthwhile to briefly look at what the Basel Mission Institute was all about.

The WLS webpage defines its focus as, “To train men for the pastoral ministry.” Its primary goal is to train pastors, not tutors, not professors, and not missionaries. The Seminary education is focused on God’s word, or theology.

The Basel Mission Institute had a different focus. Their focus was on making missionaries.

This was the course envisioned by Blumhardt. Blumhardt was a practical-minded missionary at heart. He wanted the students to be missionaries, not trained theologians. This helps to explain courses such as medicine, English, map and geography, all of which would be of value in a mission situation. And from this course description the picture of a “Bible college” is well-justified.<sup>4</sup>

Basel was more focussed on training the practical than the theological pastor. This meant that their pastors would be more practical and less confessional. Their line of thinking went like this, “Vom Studien besonderer Bekenntnisschriften ist nicht die Rede; die Bible selbst ist die große, maßgebende Bekenntnisschrift.”<sup>5</sup> “As long as they had the Bible, what need was there for the confessions?”

It’s obvious that the Germans made a distinction between pastors and missionaries. The pastors who expected to stay in the country had a higher standard of learning. Those who were

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid., pg. 2.

<sup>4</sup> Knapp, Bradford, T. *Was Basel all that bad?* WLS Essay file # 1717, 1972, pg. 4.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., pg. 5.

going to be missionaries were viewed as not needing the same education. This got Basel in trouble with other countries who began sending their would be missionaries elsewhere. It wasn't until Hoffman took charge at Basel that the curriculum slowly began to change, but this was in 1839, 8 years after Schmid graduated.

Schmid graduated from Basel in 1831, and the effects of his overly practical training can be seen throughout his ministry. But despite his lessened view of the confessions, God was still with him as he boarded a ship to America.

After almost 7 weeks aboard the "Florida," Pastor Schmid stepped onto American soil. Along the way to Michigan he was able to do a little sightseeing.

After a few hours we arrived at the waterfall. With amazement we looked at this wonder. The great St. Lawrence River, nearly two English miles wide, tumbles in front of a half-moon nearly two hundred feet down in a single fall. One can hear its noise and see the mist arise from a distance of 3 miles.<sup>6</sup>

Pastor Schmid is obviously talking about Niagara Falls. From New York he went by way of the Erie Canal, and from Buffalo to Detroit he crossed Lake Erie. Schmid conducted his first service in Detroit, in a carpenter shop, to the tears and cries of many Germans for whom it had been years since they had heard a sermon preached in their own language. This group of Germans would later form St. John's Church. Pastor Schmid tried to return to this group every five weeks.

From Detroit Schmid began the last leg of his long journey to Ann Arbor. "So far he had been able to travel by water the whole way from New York to Detroit, but now he began a ministry on foot which continued for many years."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Schmid, Friedrich.. *The Schmid Letters*. Emerson E. Hutzler, 1953, pg. 7

<sup>7</sup> Menzel, Pg. 3

In a log cabin on Sunday August 25<sup>th</sup>, 1833, Pastor Schmid performed his first service in his new congregation. This congregation would be officially formed on September 20<sup>th</sup> in Scio, Mi., under the name “Salem.” This was the first of many congregations started by Pastor Schmid.

After Salem congregation was formed and established, Pastor Schmid found time and received permission to keep his promise to visit the Germans in Detroit. And so he began his first preaching circuit.

He made this circuit of over a hundred miles every five weeks over rutted roads and forest paths. It is about forty-five miles to Detroit as the crow flies and his trip on foot was much longer because of the many detours which he made to other communities along the way. He reported later that this circuit took him about seventeen hours of fast walking.<sup>8</sup>

Schmid was called to be the pastor in Ann Arbor. The time that he spent finding new people, and then continually visiting them is a tribute to his missionary heart, and to the missionary spirit. The fact that he walked to these places, 50 miles one way, is a tribute to his love for souls and commitment to his work. In fact, he didn’t receive a horse until 1839 – 6 years after his arrival. And one would think that having a horse would make things easier for him. Now he could spend more time at his congregation and make faster trips to places like Monroe or Detroit. But that’s not how Schmid viewed it. Having a horse was a way to reach even more people, to start even more congregations farther away.

A mark of the true Michigan “mission spirit” in this pioneer was the fact that the acquisition of the horse did not cause him to take things more easily for himself, but provided the opportunity and means for expanding his preaching circuit to a much greater area, roughly 120 by 150 miles, including Saginaw, Lansing, Marshall, and other smaller settlements!<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Hoenecke, Edgar, H. “The Michigan Spirit.” *Michigan Memories: Things Our Fathers Have Told Us*. Michigan District. 1985, pg. 275.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 275.

The “mission spirit” was truly evident in Pastor Schmid. He was very energetic. The acquisition of a horse in 1839 made it possible for Schmid’s mission work to really take off. Apart from his congregation in Detroit, he also started congregations in Monroe, south of Detroit. On these journeys to his congregations in the east, he would often stop and meet with the Indians, an area of mission work which he often wrote back to Basel about. He saw the Indians as an incredible opportunity for outreach and took much interest in the “heathens.” He hoped that someday he could learn their language and have better discussions with them.

In 1840 Bethel Church was founded in Freedom Township. A church in Waterloo was founded in 1841, and in 1842 a second church was founded in Freedom Township called Thomas Church.

It was in the early 40s that Schmid, joined by Pastors Metzger and Kronenwett, formed the first Michigan Synod. This synod was formed so that they could train and ordain their own pastors, of which the need was great. Another purpose of the synod was to take the Gospel to the heathen Indians. This is where this first synod got the name, “The Mission Synod of the West.”

This synod was formed on the basis that no pastor would be accepted who didn’t commit themselves to the teachings of the Bible and the Book of Concord. This commitment to God’s Word and the confessions attracted the attention of Pastor Loehe, who in turn sent four of his pastors to Schmid, to be assigned to the Indian mission work. These pastors were, Craemer in Frankenmuth, Lochner in Toledo, Trautmann in Adrian, and Hattstaedt in Monroe. Things were looking up for this little synod in Michigan. But it wasn’t long before these “Loehe men” realized that the confessional practices Schmid had written on paper were not being practiced in the synod. Pastor Dumser, who was sent over from Basel, did not hold to the confessions.

Schmid knew this, and despite the protest of the “Loeche men,” accepted him into the synod and sent him to the Indians. Professor Korthals writes,

Pastor Schmid’s love for his Lord and his love for souls cannot be questioned. He did, however, have a problem. He wanted to be a Lutheran, but he didn’t know how to be a confessional one. He understood the importance of a solid Lutheran confession in sectarian America, but his experience was in the “mild Lutheranism” of his homeland and his training was at the feet of the unionistic mission society at Basel. As Professor John Brenner notes, “Like Muehlhaeuser (the first president of the Wisconsin Synod) he did not like doctrinal controversy because he thought it hindered mission work.”<sup>10</sup>

Pastor Schmid was so opposed to controversy that when he received a man who was an “old-Lutheran,” he did not appreciate this quality. Instead he said,

I received as co-worker a brother from the Dresden Mission Institution this fall, who took over for me my distant congregation in Monroe. Actually, he was sent there from Columbus. Inwardly he is stiffly Lutheran, which is not desirable for effective work in a community of Lutheran and Reformed Germans, most of whom do not know the meaning of Lutheran or Reformed. For the precious Gospel embraces all, and there is but one savior for all, and we preachers will not find it necessary to concern ourselves with questions, judgments, etc.; we need only to stand firm and teach in the conviction of the Lutheran Symbolical Scriptures, without asking whether this person is Lutheran or Reformed.<sup>11</sup>

While he says that he believes the synod should hold to the “Lutheran Symbolical Scriptures,” Schmid skirts the issue by not asking too many questions of his brothers in the ministry. He makes it clear that as long as the confessions aren’t mentioned, then no one will be judged a non-confessional.

Schmid also wrote,

As far as the Old-Lutherans are concerned, with whom I have come in contact without learning to know them, I respect their sound teachings, but these people are mostly lacking in living faith, and for that reason there is so little love and so much harshness toward others...I find no good fruit here, and despite the fact that a great deal is said about church, church-life and church activity suffer.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Korthals, James F. pg. 16.

<sup>11</sup> Schmid, pg. 73

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., pg. 78.

It sounds as if Schmid is all for sound doctrine, that is until it slows down the rate of growth of the church, or is too harsh for erring pastors. At this point he is willing to bend the rules, or over look minor differences in order to be united. And this just goes back to his training at Basel, which was very unionistic, and growth centered.

When this became clear to the “Loeche men,” they quickly removed themselves from the Michigan Synod and became founding members of the Missouri Synod. The first Michigan Synod came to an end shortly thereafter.

Schmid remained an independent pastor for some time after this, though he joined the Ohio Synod for a short time. It wasn't until 1860 when Basel sent him two pastors, Eberhardt and Klingmann, that talk began about a second Michigan Synod. Eberhardt and Klingmann were just the foundation Schmid needed to build a truly confessional Synod. Throughout Schmid's presidency which ended when he retired in 1867, the Michigan synod remained confessional.

One can't help but wonder what would have happened if Basel's curriculum had not changed. Would Eberhardt and Klingmann have been like Schmid, opposed to staunch confessionalism? Would the Michigan District of the WELS exist as it does today if Schmid would have allowed his synod to be over run by Lutheran/Reformed doctrine? It's doubtful, but can history really be that hard on Pastor Schmid?

History may be harsh, but let's not be so quick to burn him as a heretic. Recall what Professor Korthals wrote,

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Brenner notes, "Like Muehlhaeuser (the first president of the Wisconsin Synod) he did not like doctrinal controversy because he thought it hindered mission work."<sup>13</sup>

Pastor Schmid loved souls; he had a zeal for ministry that one would be hard pressed to match. Reading history about Friedrich Schmid leaves a person asking questions like, "How could he have been so two sided? How could he have been so confessional and yet, so not confessional?" These are questions that we can't help but ask when reading the history books and the essays. But we find answers to these questions in Friedrich Schmid's own personal letters to the Basel Mission Society. And if we are unable to find answers, at least we will see the amazing circumstances surrounding the situations he was in, and see that he was just a man, doing his best with what God gave him, and winning souls to the glory of God.

As a Seminary Senior reading Pastor Schmid's letters, it was very easy to put myself in his shoes. He was a young man, twentyfive years old. Having just graduated from Basel, he was the first of 288 men who would be sent to America from Basel over the years.<sup>14</sup> It was easy to imagine his feelings, his excitement, and his fear. "Where am I going? How will I get there? What kind of people will I serve?" are questions he no doubt thought about.

The people he would serve were Germans, mostly from Wuerttemberg, who had been without a pastor for at least four years. About entering Detroit for the first time Schmid writes,

Sunday arrived and you should have seen how the forsaken and spiritually perplexed sheep come to the gathering from distances up to five and six miles; and how eager they were to hear the Gospel... A lady came to me with tears in her eyes after she had heard the hymn outside of the building, and after the sermon she arose from among the others and said with many tears, "Now I have experienced something that I so much wanted to experience, namely to hear a sermon and have the privilege of taking communion; I will now die happily. Much weeping was observed during the service. One can truthfully say, "They are harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd."<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Korthals, pg. 16.

<sup>14</sup> Menzel, pg. 2

<sup>15</sup> Schmid, pg. 8

Later he goes on to describe the many children that needed to be baptized or confirmed. He baptized many and promised to return in 5 weeks to continue instruction. The picture comes to mind of a person carrying food into a village full of starving people. They couldn't get enough of Pastor Schmid and begged him to stay. He stayed a couple days, but how hard it must have been to carry on to Ann Arbor, leaving the poor, starving people behind. Perhaps thinking, "What did I get myself into? Can I possibly handle this ministry by myself?"

Ann Arbor was the same picture. When he arrived there were twenty children needing to be baptized. He writes,

There is plenty of work here. There are some twenty children that are not yet baptized. A few of them are more than a year old... A man of some fifty years, a right decent sort of a man, who moved here from the state of Pennsylvania is neither baptized or confirmed, neither can he read or write, nor has he partaken of the Lord's Supper. He wishes to be baptized and receive instruction and would also like to take communion. He is the father of nine living children, the youngest is five years of age and not baptized yet; three other fine young children wish to be confirmed. These people are all very happy that they are going to be able to receive instructions in the Word of God.<sup>16</sup>

Pastor Schmid had his hands full. Not only was he overwhelmingly busy in his own congregation, but everywhere he looked he saw opportunities to spread the Gospel to more people. "When I observed how the Indians go about in such a needy manner, and how they often are thankful for a single piece of bread, and how in particular they know nothing about our Savior, who also became their Savior, I am often desirous of bringing the Gospel to them." But he would make it a point to first tend to his flock of Germans, who are "Spiritually confused, and the uncultured, and ignorant youth whom I must instruct in salvation."<sup>17</sup>

As time went on, his congregation spread wider and wider.

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., pg. 10.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., pg. 11.

“This congregation is scattered over an area from ten to thirteen miles wide, which takes me several days to visit all the members; it is constantly growing and the area of my work is constantly widening. Up to now I preached twice every Sunday, and during the week I have had a lot of things to put in order and many visits to make, so much so that all my time has been taken.”<sup>18</sup>

It’s beginning to be more than just one pastor can handle. Schmid is overwhelmed with pastoral duties and teaching duties. Most of the students are illiterate and unconfirmed, and they are 18 to 20 years old.

Even without the school the task is large and expanded, but I shall do what I can, and even if my strength is exhausted, it is consumed in His service; the Lord is helping and will continue to help. Yet, my dear Elders, how could I sit still and confine my work to this congregation while hundreds of poor sinners are deprived of the Word of Life which they request from you and from me, that we proclaim to them the Gospel in their German mother tongue. Yet there is no other German preacher in this state, which is larger than Switzerland, an area in which the Germans are scattered here and there without temple and altar. I would gladly travel hundreds of miles and hunt up the poor people if I only had time. But should I leave my work here and go to other places? I cannot do that either.<sup>19</sup>

It isn’t that Schmid just doesn’t want to do the walking, it’s more than that. These weren’t just preaching stations he was walking to, these were congregation who desperately needed a fulltime pastor. The problem wasn’t getting to the people, it was that when he go to them, he didn’t have time to give them the amount instruction they needed. On his second visit to Detroit in 1833, he writes,

Numerous children came to me to ask to be confirmed. I gave some thought whether I should do this since they had not had any instruction. But what should or could I do differently, for they told me that they were working and would never have time to take full instruction. Waiting longer would not accomplish anything as there were a number who wished to get married. I permitted them to come to me several hours during the evening and went over the religious instructions with them I a brief and simple manner, but I found, to my amazement, how illiterate they were, and into what ignorance most of them had sunk;<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., pg 16.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., pg. 17.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., pg. 18.

He decided he would have to spend at least a week at a time when he visited Detroit. It was really turning into a one-man show in Michigan. Schmid was being stretched to the limit, but always found new areas of ministry. In just about every letter he wrote to Basel, he requested another pastor to help with the workload. By 1836 he was desperate for help. He wrote:

Dear Loving Elders: Now I come to you in the name of our Lord whom I serve and for whom I live, with a pressing request to you; please help, for the harvest is ripe; send, send; soon, soon; for this an important and highly interesting place for a competent brother – one who seeks not his own but that of the Lord. Elders, this time there must be no postponement, I am convinced. I see it with my eyes. The Lord has so directed it. There is already a large congregation here in this large city, that longly awaits the bread of life; and, oh, as soon as you receive this letter, do not delay in doing what the Lord wishes, for I, your humble brother, would succumb to the labor here if a brother-in-arms does not come soon to help me, insofar as I have to preach here every two or three weeks on Sundays; have to make a journey of twenty miles over a very poor road, in addition to caring for the scattered congregation in Ann Arbor and the one in Monroe. Day and night I have to travel and work, but thanks to God it is not for naught.<sup>21</sup>

Why was Schmid seemingly two sided when it came to being confessional? Pastor Schmid was a missionary. He was born to be a missionary. This is what he loved doing. He was put in a place where the harvest was so ripe that one man could not do the job, but he would gather souls any way he could. He was desperate for help. He knew that if he didn't get the help soon, souls would be lost. There was an urgency to his letters.

The scattered German groups, of which there are many, particularly in Ohio, are not in a position to hire a preacher; in another year, of course, things will be better than they are now, but during a year there may be a soul called into eternity which could otherwise have been saved., Therefore I could do nothing other than respond to an inner and outer call and decide to bring the Gospel to another German church forty miles from here, every five weeks.<sup>22</sup>

Schmid's letters show the seriousness and the urgency of the situation he was in as an independent Pastor in Michigan. He was desperate for help. He wrote to Basel in just about

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., pg. 47.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., pg. 18.

every letter a plea for help. When help finally came, how could he send away the pastor who wouldn't subscribe to the confessions? Could he have waited and waited for an Eberhardt or Klingmann? He was drowning in a sea of unchurched people. What a dilemma.

Despite this dilemma and the way that he handled it, God accomplished amazing things through the work of Friedrich Schmid. Through it all Pastor Schmid was an untiring minister of the Gospel. He may have had issues with fellowship, but his heart was always in the right place. He formed over 20 congregations in Michigan, many of which are still around today, 10 of which are WELS congregations.

Ann Arbor, Bethlehem and \*Salem Churches  
\*Monroe, St. Paul's  
Freedom, Bethel  
Waterloo, Jackson County  
Rogers Corner, Thomas Congregation  
\*Sebewaing, New Salem  
\*Saginaw, St. Paul's  
Bridgewater, St. John's  
\*Lansing, Emmanuel  
Marshall, Zion  
Chelsea, St. Paul's  
\*Northfield, St. John's  
\*Saline, Trinity  
Ypsilanti,  
\*Plymouth, St. Peter's  
Jackson  
Genova  
Wayne  
\*Dorr, St. Peter's  
\*Grass Lake, St. Jacob

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