

WHAT IS THE WISCONSIN SYNOD DOING IN MISSOURI?

The Past, Present and Future of the Missouri Circuit
of the Southern Conference in the Minnesota District

Church History Paper
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The life and livelihood of the Wisconsin Synod in Missouri would seem to most to be a difficult task to pursue. Why would we have churches in an area that is the "heartland" of Missouri Synod Lutheranism. When Jesus gave his the disciples the Great Commission, he did not put up state, denominational or any other type of boundary in the spreading of the Gospel. He told his disciple, "Go, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:19-20a). He also gave his beloved followers confidence that he would make their work bear fruit when he said, "And surely I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20b). With this command, along with his comforting promise, the Wisconsin Synod has been a part of the Missouri landscape since the break between the Wisconsin and Missouri synods. It is interesting to note that in the 1990 census taken in St. Charles County, Missouri (the county just west of St. Louis), only 5.3% of the population are members of the LCMS. Nearly one-half are Catholic and 45% remain unchurched.¹ The Lord has seen fit to open many hearts to the Gospel among the six congregations that make up the Missouri circuit of the Southern Conference in the Minnesota District of our synod. The places and the names have changed in the 25 years of the circuit, but the Gospel is still being taught in its truth and purity. In this paper, I will summarize the history of the Southern Conference, capsulize the six congregations that continue to serve God's people through Word and Sacrament, and view the future ministry God holds for the Wisconsin Synod in Missouri.

Looking at the past, the question of "Why are we there?" is not an unreasonable one. The efforts that our synod has made have not always turned out the way we might hope for in an

¹Gathered by Good Shepherd, St. Peters, MO, for Exploratory Request Form

earthly, numerical and sinful way. Yet we are reminded that it not our will, but God's will that is being done through his ministry. Stability, if not sheer numbers, came with the organization of the Southern Conference. In 1974, Pastor Roger Zehms of Martin Luther in St. Louis County felt that there were enough churches and members of the pastorate to begin the Southern Conference. Prior to its inception, the congregations of central Iowa and the state of Missouri were a part of the Red Wing Conference. As in Red Wing, Minnesota! Once missions began to spring up in Missouri, Pastor Zehms looked to get the pastors of the state to feel more like a tight knit group, rather than the sister that lived too far away. The Missouri circuit of the Southern Conference charter members were Peace in Cape Girardeau (60 miles south of St. Louis County), Grace in Columbia, Redeemer in Florissant (northern St. Louis County), Our Savior in Harrisonville (Kansas City suburb), with its preaching station at Joplin, Peace in Owensville, Immanuel in St. Joseph, and Martin Luther.²

Only three of the charters still remain: Grace, Columbia, Peace, Owensville, and Martin Luther. Peace in Cape Girardeau was formed due to the work of a Pastor Tabor in 1973. He was a Missouri Synod pastor who took a splinter group and formed a WELS church. After he took a call to Milwaukee, Carlton Palenske took over as pastor before Pastor Charlie Iles came in 1983. He was given three years by the home missions board to make the congregation grow. It never happened, and in 1985 Peace was closed. "Cape Girardeau was your classic area congregation," explained Pastor Peter Panitzke, who served Good Shepherd in St. Peters from 1982-1998. "Nobody lived in Cape Girardeau except for the pastor. People would drive 50 miles to come to church...but there was no activity in the church. Just one hour on Sunday."³

²Interview with Pastor Peter Panitzke, April 8, 1999

³Ibid

Closed also in 1985 was the preaching station in Joplin, as well as Immanuel in St. Joseph which was established in 1972. Redeemer in Florissant followed the same fate. In 1974, Peter Berg became pastor with a dual role. He was to work the area where his church was located in northern St. Louis County, while also keeping an eye on the potential for exploration of St. Charles County to the west. Redeemer reached in peak in '85 with 98 communicants and 140 baptized souls.⁴ When Pastor Berg left, Pastor Martin J. Lophas took the call to serve Redeemer. Beside the shepherd of God's flock in Florissant, other things were changing as well. "The area community was changing, racially changing," Panitzke recollected. "There was little reaching out into the black community at all. And then what was really the nail in the coffin was the closing of the A-12 program at McDonald-Douglas (an aviation company with some economic ties left in St. Louis). (They) laid-off five thousand people on the spot...Every McDonald-Douglas family at Redeemer lost its job...thirty families lost their income. They (Redeemer) lost that income...and soon those families left that area."⁵ In 1991, the members of Redeemer sold the church building to an African-American Episcopal church to help get themselves out of debt. Some of the remaining members joined Good Shepherd, others went to Martin Luther, and a small group went to Divine Savior in Belleville, Illinois (a suburb east of St. Louis which was in the Western Wisconsin District).

Our Savior in Harrisonville joined the Nebraska District in 1992, but Pastor Wilbert Niermeier would still play a major part in the spreading of the Gospel in the Southern Conference with his mission work in Springfield.

There certainly were some difficult times for the Wisconsin Synod in Missouri.

⁴Statistical Report of the WELS for 1985

⁵Interview with Pastor Peter Panitzke, April 8, 1999

Nonetheless we rejoice for the grace God has shown to the six congregations which currently make up the Missouri circuit. We will become better acquainted with Peace in Owensville, Martin Luther, Grace in Columbia, and Good Shepherd, along with the latest addition, a dual parish consisting of Zion in Springfield and Peace in Marshfield. The guidance of faithful men in the office of circuit pastor have had a calming and supportive influence in our Missouri churches. The circuit pastors since the inception of the Southern Conference: Pastor Zehms (1974-'85), Pastor Lophas ('85-'91), Pastor Herbert Kuske (semi-retired pastor in Owensville from '91-'96), Pastor Panitzke ('96-'98), and currently Pastor Edwin Lehmann of Zion/Peace.

Peace in Owensville is the oldest WELS church in the state of Missouri. In 1952, a group of 16 concerned members left the only Lutheran church in town (LCMS) and began worshiping in the home of a member.⁶ The small congregation was served by Pastor Gustav (G.G.) Schupmann of Chesterfield, MO. In 1956, a gift was given by one of the members in the form of a lot, where it was later voted to build a basement chapel. With the size of the congregation being so small, the saints were only able to call pastors of other congregations to serve them. After the death of Rev. G.G. Schupmann, his associate, Pastor David Daniels, and Pastor Arthur Schupmann of Ballwin, MO, served Peace. In 1965, the voters requested membership into the Wisconsin Synod and in '66, Pastor Zehms began shepherding them along with Trinity, Ballwin. In 1973, Peace was joined in a joint mission venture with what would become Grace in Columbia. Pastor Leroy Lothert was the mission pastor until 1973, when the use of semi-retired men became the norm. The current house of worship was completed (over the basement chapel) and dedicated in June, 1979. Pastor Richard Tragasz accepted the call to serve Peace in October, 1997. He serves as a bi-vocational pastor, also working as a social worker in Owensville for

⁶Minnesota District: Golden Jubilee History. Minneapolis: Ad Art Advertising Co., 1969

Gasconade County. Outreach in the town of approximately 2,500, located 75 miles west of St. Louis, is one of the challenges Peace faces, along with finding better ways to serve a congregation of 58 souls. "It has always been small and reaching out to attract new members has not met with much success," notes Pastor Tragasz. "There are certainly no shortage of LCMS churches in our area and the town has not seen an influx of new residents."⁷ Nonetheless, we pray that the Lord will continue to preserve this treasure of dedication and perseverance to God in Owensville.

Martin Luther was the first mission congregation directly established by the Minnesota District Mission Board in the state. In March, 1967, Pastor Zehms (are you starting to sense a pattern here?) was charged with the work of exploring the south part of St. Louis County. The first service of the mission was held on Easter Sunday, March 26, 1967, in the Howard Johnson Motor Lodge South with 43 in attendance. The congregation selected the name "Martin Luther Evangelical Lutheran Church of St. Louis County, Missouri", as this was the year of the 450th anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation.⁸ Pastor Zehms was the first pastor of the congregation, installed on September 8, 1968. That same year, land was purchase along a new interstate (I-255 around the city) where the current facility is now standing. The first service was conducted in the new church on September 20, 1970, with the Dedication Service on October 11. By the grace of God, Martin Luther became self-supporting on July 1, 1972. An addition with office space and classrooms was finished in May of 1981.⁹ Pastor Zehms remained a part of this activity in St. Louis until accepting a call to serve in Russia. In 1986, Pastor James Witt III accepted the call

⁷Interview with Pastor Richard Tragasz, March 10, 1999

⁸Minnesota District: Golden Jubilee History. Minneapolis: Ad Art Advertising Co., 1969

⁹Interview with Paula Livingston, member of Martin Luther, April 14, 1999

to Martin Luther, and is still serving there today. Martin Luther opened the only WELS day-care facility in Missouri in September, 1991. It serves the members and community with a five day program. The congregation continues to look for other ways to serve the South County area. As of December 17, 1998, Martin Luther had 311 souls under its care, with 216 communicant members.¹⁰ Future plans include new handicap-access bathrooms and an upper level fellowship area, so that the day-care can be moved to the bigger fellowship area in the basement.

A few years later another mission venture was started in Columbia. Grace has been in existence there since 1974 and is still under interest subsidy from District Mission Board. Pastor Lothert was the congregation's first pastor until 1977. Loren Lucht was the pastor from 1977-1983. During these early years, the pastors maintained a preaching station in Macon (40 miles north). Ronald Zindler came to serve Grace in 1984. While he was there, a WEF unit (Worship-Education-Fellowship facility) was built in August, 1986. Prior to that the congregation worshipped in either the basement or the two-car garage of the parsonage. Faced with economic trouble, the congregation was forced to sell the parsonage that shared the same lot with the WEF unit. Unfortunately, a day-care is housed in the old parsonage, which limits the likelihood for that kind of ministry by Grace to the community. The peak of membership was reached in 1993, when Grace had 80 baptized souls and 61 communicants.¹¹ Pastor Zindler remained in Columbia until 1994. That year, David Silfies was assigned out of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary to fill the vacancy. On January 1, 1997, Pastor Micah Ernst was called to serve the members of Grace. He currently serves a dual parish, maintaining his care of Peace, an ELS congregation, in Jefferson City (45 miles east of Columbia). Currently there are 61 baptized souls and 47 communicants,

¹⁰Ibid

¹¹Statistical Report of the WELS for 1993

most which are people of WELS background who have moved into the area. In spite of the small flock, Grace maintains a high focus on outreach. Six members (10% of the congregation) make up the evangelism team. During the school year, the University of Missouri brings the local population to approximately 90,000. There are many areas of growth and opportunities to lead people to their Savior. "Right now, I think we are about 1,000 homes behind in our canvass efforts," said Pastor Ernst. He sees Christian education as a sound outreach arm in Columbia. "For a mission to exist as a congregation, when working on prospect areas, we should not be dwelling on individuals, but on families. We should help our children by educating our children. They are the future of our church. If you want a mission to last, use a school to nurture children and families."¹² In this way Pastor Ernst sees a chance for Grace to grow within the community. Offering a hand will be a new easy-access, expanded two- or four-lane road that will be built right in front of the church. Multi-family units also are being proposed within walking distance of the church. With growth in population and doors being opened, we pray that with the help of the Holy Spirit, Grace can reach the hearts that are without their Savior.

The Lord has richly blessed the mission work that is being done at Good Shepherd in St. Peters, a suburb 35 miles west of downtown St. Louis. Since 1981, this congregation has grown along with its community. The 1970 census listed St. Peters as a town with 500 people, in 1980 with 15,000 people, and today it is approximately 50,000 people strong. The twin city of O'Fallon (twin because the church is located in O'Fallon, but the mailing address is St. Peters) currently has about 32,000 and has room to expand to 50,000.¹³ Pastors Zehms and Berg saw this "urban sprawl" (as the local media calls it) in 1981 when they began doing exploratory work in

¹²Interview with Pastor Micah Ernst, April 15, 1999

¹³Interview with Pastor Peter Panitzke, April 8, 1999

St. Charles County. Berg held the first service for Good Shepherd on October 18, 1981, with 30 people in attendance. A request was made for manpower to the BHM in April of 1982, and in May, Peter Panitzke was assigned from the Seminary as the first pastor. The congregation began with 16 communicants of the 28 souls. Worship was held in Derado's Restaurant, which later was called the St. Peters Civic Center. "We worshiped in the basement meeting rooms there," recalls Panitzke. "We walked past the golfers every Sunday morning. A lousy place to worship, but we were able to have permanent sign out by the road which was kind of nice."¹⁴ In February of '86, the worship facility was moved to the St. Peters Senior Center. "I assured them "We won't be there more than 18 months," Panitzke told the city, who rented out both of the buildings used by Good Shepherd. Five years later, in 1991, the current church was completed. "The mission board was very patient with us," Panitzke added graciously.¹⁵ Good Shepherd waded through stable years when there was not a great increase in attendance or membership. But once they moved into the Senior Center, things started taking off. A piece of property, a horse pasture at the time, was purchased on what soon would be a very visible and recognizable 4-lane road. Meanwhile church attendance at the Senior center began to grow. A gleam came to Panitzke's eye when he said, "We are the only congregation, that I am aware of, that had two services in temporary worship quarters. We went to two services when we got off of 55 in attendance, because the sanctuary could only seat 71."¹⁶ The church building was completed in June of '91, but water service was not hooked up. The first service held in the sanctuary was a wedding, thanks to a one hour occupancy permit (before the water was on). Good Shepherd grew in leaps and bounds.

¹⁴Ibid

¹⁵Ibid

¹⁶Ibid

The original group that was so happy to have a pastor, turned their sights to the community. As of January, 1999, Good Shepherd's flock was 230 souls with 148 communicants. Pastor Panitzke was truly an asset to the growth and attitude of the congregation, instilling a mission mindset. After he accepted a call in February of 1998, Pastor Michael Dietz picked up the ball immediately after arriving in November of the same year. "This area is booming!" exclaimed Pastor Dietz. "With the growing number of people in the area, we have a tremendous opportunity to reach out to them."¹⁷ Various forms of outreach are presently being explored. A web sight is in the works. Programs like "Easter for Kids", "Mom's Day Off", "Christmas for Kids" are for youth outreach. The possibility of an Lutheran Elementary School is being explored. Support systems for members and new families to the community could be useful because so many are not from the area. With the Lord's guiding hand, the effort of Good Shepherd will continue to flourish.

The congregations of Zion in Springfield and Peace in Marshfield have many reasons to give thanks in their short but interesting histories. First of all, the willingness of service and love for God's people led Pastor Niermeier to preach and teach the Word to a relatively obscure area in southwest Missouri. "Pastor Niermeier had a real missionaries heart," Panitzke explained. "He would ^{travel?} 300 or 400 miles in a weekend just to make sure all the preaching stations had services."¹⁸ Secondly, thanks is necessary for the love and generous gifts of fellow Christians, Gilbert and June McKee, members of Our Savior, Niermeier's congregation in Harrisonville, whose funding kept the Springfield church afloat financially. Finally, thanks needs to be given for the tremendous will and perseverance of people committed to confessional Lutheranism in the area,

¹⁷Interview with Pastor Michael Dietz, March 30, 1999

¹⁸Interview with Pastor Peter Panitzke, April 8, 1999

when it could have been so easy to go in a different direction.

Zion was established on June 7, 1981, with services being held at the Rivermont Cemetery Chapel in Springfield by Pastor Niermeier. Soon after, exploratory status was granted. Paul Thierfelder was assigned as the first resident pastor out of the Seminary in May of 1982. But after only eight months Pastor Thierfelder was called to another field and mission funding subsided. Worship continued in various places with the prayers and help of Our Savior and Pastor Niermeier. Out of their love for the Lord and for missions, the McKee's supplied the funding personally for a full time missionary, who would be Pastor Arlyn Schmeling. He served from June of '89 until January of '92 when he accepted a semi-retirement call. While Pastor Schmeling was on the scene, ground breaking for the current church building was held. On November 9, 1990, the sanctuary was dedicated to the Lord. Pastor Edwin Lehmann was installed in June of 1992 and currently serves Zion and Peace. His duties also include ^{servings as} circuit pastor for Missouri. Springfield is the third largest metropolitan area in Missouri (about 150,000), but outreach is difficult. Pastor Lehmann sees an interesting contrast to a typical metro area. "The area has a definite rural flavor--being at the foot of the Ozarks."¹⁹ Most of the members, which number 82 souls and 67 communicants, are WELS transplants, with tourists going to Branson in the summer adding to attendance. Evangelism concentrates on newcomers to the area because of the dense Southern Baptist, Assembly of God and Pentecostal population.

Thirty-five miles away, "Peace Evangelical Lutheran Church was founded by a group Lutherans desiring to maintain a confessional, doctrinally conservative Lutheran Church."²⁰ In April of 1993, this group decided to organize as a WELS congregation and called Pastor

¹⁹Interview with Pastor Edwin Lehmann, March 22, 1999

²⁰Ibid

Lehmann to be their shepherd. Their first public worship service was held on May 18, 1993. Services were held in various locations until they purchased their house of worship on December 30, 1995. Interestingly, this sanctuary was originally owned by St. Paul's Lutheran Church, a congregation which some of the members were a part of when it closed in the late 60's. They sold it and three other denominations used the facility for worship. The church was dedicated on February 18, 1996. It is the goal of Peace to restore the sanctuary to its original Lutheran design.²¹ This building has brought the past and the present together so that God may be worshipped with praise and thanks^{ed} for his goodness. Pastor Lehmann realizes the difficulty in evangelism in Marshfield as well. People take life at a different pace and in a different mentality. "But people are still people--sinners, and the Gospel still has its power and effect on the heart."²² The 77 souls and 63 communicants can vouch for that as they enjoy the proclamation of God's saving truth.

A great deal has taken place in the state of Missouri in the last twenty-five, the relatively short time for the existence of the Southern Conference. But the congregations of Missouri are not standing pat, but are moving on, looking for new opportunities to extend the preaching of the Gospel. One way of doing that was the establishment of the ELS/WELS Mission Council.

With the guidance and push of pastors Witt and Lophas, this group was formed in 1990 with the following purpose: "1) to reach more souls with the Good News of Jesus Christ as Savior by promoting mission work in existing and in new congregations and 2) to nurture more souls in the Gospel by providing spiritual growth and Christian fellowship programs for the

²¹Ibid

²²Ibid

people served by member congregations."²³ Besides the six WELS congregations of Missouri, the ELS congregations of Faith in Litchfield, Illinois (60 miles northeast of St. Louis), Scriptural in Cape Girardeau, Peace in Jefferson City (the other church Pastor Ernst serves), and Grace in Piedmont, ~~ELS congregations~~, make up the membership of this organization. This council is made up of all the pastors and a representative of each congregation to serve as an advisory board that helps develop cooperation between congregations in the area that otherwise feel they are out on their own. Events prepared and subsidized by the council that are well received by member congregations are youth retreats (junior and senior high are separate), men's/leadership retreats once a year, couples retreats and a directional brochure of all the ELS/WELS churches in Missouri. Other projects the council has examined are summer vicar assistance, exploratory starter funds, and travel-canvass-witness team assistance.²⁴ This council has also given its support to exploratory work that is open in southwestern St. Charles County.

Why are we looking to begin an exploratory in the county straight west of St. Louis and in an area only ten miles away from Good Shepherd? You have to see it to believe it! A migration of people out of St. Louis County is at a fevered pace. Currently there are two bridges over the Missouri River that connect St. Louis and St. Charles counties. A third bridge is under way, directed right into the target mission area. By 2000, it is estimated that 279,000 people will live in St. Charles County, more than the city of St. Louis. There is an average of 100 new families (home buyers only) moving into the target area every month. As was mentioned in the introduction, it is also estimated 45% of St. Charles County is unchurched. That means nearly 120,000 people do not have a church home. That is why Good Shepherd has asked for

²³ELS/WELS Mission Council Constitution

²⁴ELS/WELS Mission Council Minutes from March 27, 1994

exploratory status for a second congregation: they simply cannot get to that many people in a short amount of time. The Minnesota District Mission Board made this area the district's first mission priority in its February meeting. Between the ELS/WELS Mission Council and Good Shepherd, \$4,540 have been pledged in local funding to make this venture a reality.²⁵ We pray that the Lord sees fit that the Board for Home Missions sees this a worthy endeavor and gives its support to continuing outreach ministry in Missouri.

The Missouri circuit of the Southern Conference of the Minnesota District has been preserved through the grace of God for 25 years. But the mission never really ends. The congregations of Missouri continue to answer the call of Jesus' Great Commission. May the faithful work of God's people continue to be blessed in Missouri as they lead souls into eternity.

²⁵Gathered by Good Shepherd, St. Peters, MO, for Exploratory Request Form

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