

Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary

La Iglesia Luterana De San Pablo, Tucson, Arizona

WELS' First Spanish Mission

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When our forefathers immigrated to this continent they brought their staccato and guttural-sounding language with them. They looked on their Muttersprache fondly, and it was many years before the Wisconsin Synod gradually allowed English to infiltrate its liturgical and homiletical ranks. They found it necessary to give way so that the church could reach out and communicate the message of the Good News to more and more people.

Today in our Synod there are men who find it necessary to learn all sorts of languages in order to bring the Gospel to even more ears. We have missionaries all over the world. This is not something we boast about, but simply have undertaken because we are compelled out of love for God and for all men to do so. Christ in His Great Commission left this instruction:

Therefore 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. And surely I will be with you always, to the end of the age. (Matt. 28:19-20, NIV)

Yet one does not have to travel only to Japan, Africa, or Columbia to find people whose ears do not understand our "new Muttersprache," English. Mission endeavors to those who speak other languages do not only mean crossing the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. There are millions in our own country who have need of Jesus in their lives, yet have little opportunity to hear the truth because they speak

little or none of this country's language. The United States is a melting pot, a field with many strains of grain ripe for harvest.

One of the fastest growing ethnic groups in this country is Hispanic - the Latin-Americans. For many years the southwestern portion of our nation has been filled with men and women whose dark eyes and Indian-Spanish features show them to be of Mexican descent. In fact, when the U.S.A. won that land, the Indians and Mexicans made up the vast majority of the area's population.

In this paper we are going to take a look at our Synod's first Spanish Mission, our first outreach to the people who speak that flowing tongue. It all started right here in our country, and has blossomed into a growing field of over a dozen missionaries and hundreds of Spanish-speaking members here and in two foreign countries. This is a history of the San Pablo congregation in Tucson, Arizona.

The story really begins with Pastor Venus H. Winter, the first man expressly commissioned to carry the Gospel banner to the Hispanics. Ever since his youth Pastor Winter was attracted to the Spanish people. He hadn't had much firsthand experience with them, but as a boy of about twelve he was introduced to a delightful little book written by Gustav Harders entitled, La Paloma, (The Dove). Harders, who had come from Germany, spent many years in the southwest as a missionary to the Indians, Chinese, and also the Mexicans. His work began just after the turn of the century.

Pastor Winter, on a cassette tape, related some of Harders' personal history and how the work among the Indians began. Harders had "a unique way of loving people of another race." He had spent some time in Milwaukee as a parish minister, but decided to go south to help explore the possibilities of beginning the Lord's work among the people of that region. Earlier, men had tried to set up shop on the Pima reservation near Casa Grande, Az., but a Presbyterian minister gave some helpful advice. He said, "Go to the Apaches." He had learned that those Indians had not yet heard the Word to any great extent. This was in the 1890's, not long after Geronimo's time, and white men were not to be trusted. One can imagine what circumstances were like for those first white missionaries.

Harders, however, had a keen sense for work among the people of that culture. Not only did he preach to the Apaches, but he worked with them, slept in their wickiups, and ate their food with them out in the open field. He soon became a trusted pastor to many of them.

His work also brought him into contact with many of the Chinese who had drifted to that area. Legend has it that Harders used to sit on the steps of the post office in Globe, Az. trying to convert Chinamen. Gustav Harders is now buried in Globe, his home after his many years of faithful service to the Lord. Even today one might see a Chinese family in the pews of churches in Tucson or Phoenix.

It was by a book authored by Harders, then, that Pastor Winter's interest in Mexicans was first aroused. He didn't

have much opportunity to pursue their language in following years, though, because he went off to school to concentrate on entering the public ministry. Upon graduating from the Seminary, he was assigned to Martin, S.D., a Sioux reservation area. There he purchased an Atwater Kent radio. In a special bulletin for the 25th anniversary of San Pablo, Pastor Winter wrote:

From the tower of the church to a long two-by-four wired to a fence post across the road we stretched a wire for an aerial. With that combination we could hear Mexico. I liked the sound of the Spanish language as it came over the radio. One of the stations broadcasting was Via Acuña, Coahuila, República de México. I didn't know that some day I'd be in Via Acuña, conversing with its citizens in their tongue.<sup>1</sup>

For years following he still had no chance to study this fascinating language because of the demands of his office and the absence of a place to learn. Later, Pastor Winter accepted a call to Grace Lutheran Church in Flint, Michigan, and finally Opportunity knocked. He began with an evening course in Spanish grammar, and after a couple of winters joined the Flint Spanish Club. Here he met people from all over Latin-America: Cuba, Mexico, Brazil, and even Argentina. He welcomed this hobby and his interest grew. It was diversion for him, and was especially enjoyed at this time because his wife had passed into eternity.

But all this while he kept his language study a secret. He says:

I was certain people would draw conclusions, and I'd be charged with neglecting my own duties and with being an eccentric pastor, for what normal minister in our conservative Wisconsin Synod could

ever dream of a hobby like studying Spanish? Golfing and fishing were accepted diversions, but Spanish was unheard of.<sup>2</sup>

Soon his hobby became known. The Michigan District showed a zealous interest in foreign missions, and at a meeting in Ohio in 1946 there was agreement to do work among the Spanish-speaking in the southwest of this country. At that time we could not enter either Mexico or South America. Someone mentioned Winter's name - so the word of his secret pastime had leaked out. Arthur Wacker, chairman of the district mission board spoke with him about it, and a year later he was commissioned to go to Arizona and start from scratch.

In December of 1947 Pastor Winter and his 12 year old daughter Barbara began their "incredible journey." This paper cannot do justice to the storytelling abilities of Venus Winter. What he reveals on tape is truly amazing and at times amusing. There was no heater in the car as they made the trip from Flint to the SW. The windows froze over as they crawled along through Chicago, and they had to clear small patches with a razor blade in order to see the road. In Iowa the roads were so slippery that they careened into a ditch and hit a fencepost, but nobody was hurt "because of the Lord's protecting angel." The duo was snowed in for a time in Fort Collins, Colorado, so they holed up on New Year's Day and listened to Michigan beat USC 49 to 0 over the radio. The details are too numerous to mention here, but it is quite a story.

Finally they did reach their destination, and the missionary and his daughter moved into a trailer on N. Castro Street in Tucson. At first Pastor Winter spent time looking into various cities trying to find a nucleus of Spanish-speaking Lutherans with which to start. No such nucleus was found, however, and no Spanish services were held for eleven months. During this period he continued in his Spanish studies, listened to Mexican broadcasts over the radio every day, and went to Spanish movies about once a week. It is interesting to note that these methods of ear training in the language are still highly recommended for missionaries even today. It is important to get a good grip on a foreign language and to immerse oneself in it as much as possible.

This was not an easy time for our first Spanish missionary. Where does one start without anyone even showing the slightest amount of interest in your message? Here was a man champing at the bits, eager to tell these people about the Savior - but his advances were coolly received.

We read from Pastor Winter's report:

I was to learn to do real mission work, that, beginning without a nucleus of confirmed Lutherans. Those eleven months without Sunday services may seem like the "life of Riley," but they were not exactly fraught with peace of mind. I had no congregation, nor the prospect of any. I was to make converts of people who had never heard our message, and if they did, they were warned against it.<sup>3</sup>

But his persistence paid off, just as God said it would. The beginnings were humble, but finally there came the day when hard work showed its benefits. The first Spanish

service in the Wisconsin Synod was held on December 5, 1948 in Phoenix, Az. An Adventist chapel was rented. The area had been canvassed, but none of those people showed up for the service. Thirteen people from the nearby Zion congregation did come, though, to take part in this historic event. Two of those thirteen people spoke Spanish. Pastor Winter was not disheartened at the turn out. It was a start, no matter how small the number. The whole service was conducted in the Spanish language, but as the missionary put it: "I doubt if I ever had a more attentive audience." (Cassette) Everyone sang the hymns with gusto, and Pastor Winter remembers his first Spanish sermon as one of his happiest experiences, even though not many understood him.

In the afternoon a second service was held 130 miles away in Tucson. It also took place in an Adventist church, located on 5th Avenue. Forty six people turned out for the occasion. Seven of these belonged to the Adventist church, and the rest were mainly from the neighboring WELS congregation (Redeemer), which that day was celebrating its Mission Festival.

But the winning of Mexican-American souls for the Lord would prove to be a struggle. God never said His work would be easy. Missionary Winter remembers it this way:

Not all the succeeding Sundays were that bright. Our records show that there was a period of sixteen consecutive Sundays where there was nobody in church but the pastor...and Barbara (his daughter). But since we paid rent for the use of that church, I made use of the whole hour there by memorizing Spanish hymns and Bible verses....Matters looked hopeless and one learned to pray....It simply was a miracle that we ever gained a foothold among our Mexican-American people.<sup>4</sup>

Eight months after these first services, on August 7,



1949, the first Sunday School class was held. Three children were present. Later as many as 22 students were picked up at their homes and driven to the church in an old Ford. Since the children stayed for the Sunday service as well, there was a young congregation to preach to.

The morning service in Phoenix was discontinued later that year because it was decided that a concentration of efforts in Tucson alone would be more effective. It is located only 65 miles from the Mexican border. It was also quite an expense to drive from Tucson to Phoenix and back every week. Instead, radio services were instituted in Tucson on station KOPQ, 1450, on Feb. 20, 1949. They are continued to this day. Many people were gained by the Gospel over the radio - the "Lord only knows how many." It is interesting to note that last year the missionaries in Puerto Rico and the Executive Committee for Latin-American Missions decided to step up their radio broadcasts and advertisements. The radio has proven to be an effective way of spreading the Good News to many.

In February of 1951 the Winters moved out of the house trailer that had served as parsonage into a four-room home where the pastor resides even to this day. At the present time it is located about six miles away from the church.

The small but growing congregation worshipped in the Adventist church until 1953, when they found a room in the C.E. Rose School. It was more centrally located to make it more accessible to more people, but scheduling activities during the week proved to be a problem. Vacation Bible

School, mid-week services, and other classes were held at the parsonage. Nonetheless, Sunday School enrollment increased.

August 23 of 1953 was another happy day for the young congregation. Pastor Winter was privileged to confirm in the faith two young men, Armando and Antonio. These were the church's first confirmands. They practiced their faith actively by assisting the missionary "every Sunday morning in bringing Jesus the Savior to their younger, Spanish-speaking brothers and sisters in Sunday School classes."<sup>5</sup> Enrollment in the Sunday School was then 28 children, and membership was 34 souls and six communicants. Average church attendance was 18 persons a Sunday.

Finally in 1955 the new Spanish Lutheran Church was able to hold their worship services in their own church building. It was dedicated on August 7, and is located on the corner of 12th Avenue and Wyoming Street. The guest preacher that afternoon was the Reverend Felix Segovia of Monterrey, Nuevo León, México. 250 persons came to this special event - even some as far away as Phoenix and Glendale.

A sum amounting to \$17,500 was appropriated to the Spanish Mission out<sup>of</sup> budgetary funds for purchasing the property and building the modest chapel. The newly formed Arizona-California Mission Board realized that worshipping in a rented school building was not the ideal situation, so they readily approved this funding after getting the green light from the executives of the General Mission

Board and the Board of Trustees.

The chapel measures forty by twenty feet and, at that time, had one classroom equipped for a day school. It is strategically located in a section far enough away from other Protestant Spanish missions, and even the nearest Catholic church is over two miles away. Sunday School enrollment in 1955 was about 25, and the services were attended by an average of 25 persons, most of whom were children. There were eight communicants and thirty-five baptized members contributing an average of \$67 per communicant for home purposes and \$18 for the work of the Synod.

Pastor Winter's work still consisted of much door-to-door visitation in the city of Tucson itself and also in outlying sections. The Mission Board in 1955 requested him to "look into the feasibility of beginning to serve isolated groups of Spanish-American people who are congregated in smaller communities around mining camps or ranches."<sup>6</sup>

The next landmark for San Pablo was September of 1957 when the Christian Day School was opened. The first year eleven students attended, "a number not too imposing," says Pastor Winter. But they expected to begin in a humble way, and the children that did enroll were faithful in their church and school attendance. The Pastor himself was the teacher, (for the first three years all alone), and thoroughly enjoyed watching the children grow in their knowledge of the Savior.

By 1964 thirty students were in the school, thirty in Sunday School, and 53 in VBS. Children played a major role

in the development of San Pablo, just as they do now in the early years of our missions in Puerto Rico and Columbia. At times Pastor Winter felt that the school was the major attraction for the parents, but their children did and still do receive a solid Christian-based education. As the 1960 District Report states:

From the fact that the majority attending the regular worship service is comprised of children, it would appear that working with and through the children will bring the greatest blessing. Therefore we encourage a continuing program of thorough instruction and indoctrination of the children. We believe that in this way a solid foundation will be laid for a future congregation.

This may seem like a slow way of doing things, but patience is certainly a virtue in doing mission work. Hopefully these children will continue and instill in their future families a desire to hear the Word. Certainly they will also witness to their parents about Jesus Christ through their words and actions. Thanks to the Lord, there is a gradual increase of spiritual fruit from year to year in San Pablo.

Some of the teachers who have instructed at the school are:

Victoria Kannenberg (Ahlswede), 1960-1962  
Lois Lemke (Radtke), 1962-1964  
Janice Ewald (Wehausen), 1964-1965  
Mary Ehgel (Schnose), 1965-1969  
Rue Stone, 1969-1971  
Mrs. Ruth Moeller, 1971-1972  
Shari Plamann, 1972-?  
Kenneth Zahn, 1976-1978  
Joe Archer, 1978-1981

The current teacher is Michael Wilde, a recent graduate of DMLC. He will take Spanish courses this summer. Pastor

Eggert writes that the children for the most part know English, but in their homes it is a different story. It is important to have a workable knowledge of the language for effective communication to all. The services are also in Spanish, and one can imagine that it might become frustrating to not know what is being said.

This past year Pastor Winter suffered a stroke leaving his left side of little use. After having served San Pablo as its only shepherd since its beginning, his years of faithful and hard work came to a close. A call was extended to Pastor Rupert Eggert, a member of our first missionary team in Puerto Rico. Pastor Eggert accepted the call, but still cannot serve full time at San Pablo since his Spanish congregation in El Paso would be left vacant. He is also the Friendly Counselor for our Mexican pastors. He writes:

I go to Tucson every other week for a Spanish service and one here (El Paso) on the other Sunday. In between we fill in with an English service....I stay on for Monday to have a chapel service and also catechism class with the older children and make what visits are necessary.<sup>8</sup>

The school presently has 14 students. Over the years it has been a source for the contact of many families. Many of the former graduates have moved away, so the congregation hasn't grown to a large number. But the Gospel has been preached and taught to many young and old over the years, and there have been results.

Pastor Winter was alone in his WELS Spanish work for 17 years, until El Paso started its congregation. Puerto

Rico was the next step. We are now in South America, and have brothers ministering in Mexico as well. Today there are 20 - 25 men involved. There still is a long way to go. The Wisconsin Synod has barely made a dent in the Spanish community in the United States and in other countries, but a start had to be made somewhere. As Christians we cannot ignore the opportunity given us by the Lord to preach the Gospel to everyone. San Pablo, our first Spanish Mission, and its first missionary, Venus H. Winter, have taught us much about the best ways to carry out Christ's directive, and have filled our hearts with joy and thanksgiving. As the psalmist and Pastor Winter have proclaimed: "The Lord hath done great things for us; whereof we are glad." To this we reply, "Amen!"

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> La Iglesia De San Pablo, special 25th Anniversary Bulletin, p. 4
- <sup>2</sup> Ibid., pg. 5
- <sup>3</sup> Ibid., pg. 6,7
- <sup>4</sup> Ibid., pg. 8
- <sup>5</sup> Arizona-California District Report, 1953, pg. 11
- <sup>6</sup> Ibid., 1955, pg. 16
- <sup>7</sup> Ibid., 1960, pg. 33
- <sup>8</sup> Personal Letter, Rupert Eggert, Feb. 17, 1982

## Bibliography

- Special 25th Anniversary Bulletin from La Iglesia Luterana De San Pablo, 1973.
- Arizona-California District Reports, 1953 to present.
- Personal letters from Pastor Rupert Eggert, Feb. 17, 1982 and April 1, 1982.
- Cassette tape recording from Pastor Venus H. Winter, April, 1982