

THE EARLY YEARS OF OUR WELS COLOMBIAN MISSION

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When our Senior class at Seminary received the assignment to research and write a paper on some area of WELS history which had previously not been covered, I decided to investigate the beginnings of our mission in Colombia, South America. The only recorded information I could find concerning the beginnings of our mission were two statistical reports covering roughly the first six years. These statistics do not tell much of the story of the founding of our mission. While they objectively report the work that was being carried out (their only real purpose), they do not reflect well the tremendous joy and the occasional sadness which are a part of mission life. The statistics do not reflect the long hours the missionaries spent planning out strategies, solving problems, and finally putting them into effect. It is my intent in this paper to write a history which covers the conception, birth, and first months of our infant Colombian mission.

### I. Pre-Mission History

In 1963 the delegates who had gathered for the Synod convention expressed their readiness to bring the gospel to the continent of South America. (1) Special funds which had been donated to begin the work in South America were designated for exploratory trips to the continent in order to find potential mission sites. The very first trip was undertaken by Pastor

reported that there were many opportunities among the German, Spanish, and Portuguese speaking peoples while no Lutheran work of any sort was being done among 10 million indians. (2)

That first trip was followed in January of 1971 by another such exploratory conducted by Missionary Rupert Eggert of Puerto Rico and the Rev. Ernest Zimdars of El Paso, Texas. (3) After touring a number of South American countries the cities of Tucuman, Argentina, Santa Cruz, Bolivia, and Medellin, Colombia were chosen as potential mission sites. In the Fall of 1973 a second exploratory team consisting of the Rev. Ernest Zimdars, Missioner Roger Sprain, and teacher Frank Warner, toured the three targeted cities to determine which city offered the best opportunities for starting our WELS mission. (4)

At the last minute Tucuman, Argentina was rejected as a mission site. A few days before the exploratory team set out, the Argentine peso dropped in value due to an inflated economy. This in turn made for an unstable political situation. (5) The missionaries were left with a choice between two sites which were cultural contrasts. Santa Cruz, Bolivia provided a rural setting. The majority of the people were impoverished farmers who managed to provide for their daily needs by working the land. (6) Medellin, Colombia on the other hand boasted itself a city of 1.2 million people. Though the majority of the people could be considered impoverished, there is also a sizable middle class along with a much smaller group of people who could be classed as extremely wealthy. (7) Medellin was finally chosen as the

future mission site for a number of reasons. First, very little Protestant work of any kind was being carried out in Medellin. (8) The World Gospel Mission and other Protestant groups were at this time doing mission work in Santa Cruz. Secondly, Santa Cruz provided approximately 250 kilometers of paved roads. So travel among the rural villages would have to be done in a four wheel drive vehicle. Even then there was no guarantee during a period of heavy rains that trips to the outlying villages could be made. Expansion of the a mission in Santa Cruz would be difficult and limited. (9) This did not present a problem in Medellin, because not only were the roads around the city paved, but also those leading to other cities in the country of Colombia.

## II. Medellin, Colombia: A Profile

In order organize and begin a mission effectively it is important for the missionaries to know the territory in which they are working. Following is a profile of the city which our missionaries found in 1974. Medellin, the 2nd largest city in Colombia, boasts a population of 1.2 million people. (10) Its elevation of 5000 feet gives the city spring like weather year round. The Andes Mountains form huge walls around the city, hemming it in on every side. Medellin, to the eye of the visitor, takes on the appearance of a modern city on the move. Skyscrapers, freeways, and modern factories cover the narrow valley floor. Underneath this modern exterior lives a people, however, who are steeped in a rich cultural tradition which dates back some three hundred years. The valley in which the city lies

was discovered in the early 1600's by the Spanish conquistadors. The city of Medellín itself was founded by the Spaniards in 1677.

(11) Medellín because of its location is isolated from the rest of Colombia. Today a trip to the capital city of Bogota, the closest metropolitan city, is fourteen hour drive by car through winding mountain roads. (12) As a result, Medellín during her first two and half centuries of existence developed with a minimal amount of the influence from outside culture. These strong individualistic and traditionalistic traits can be seen and felt in the life of Medellín today.

Medellín is an urbanized industrial city which is known mainly for its production of textile materials and coffee. Cloth material which is woven in local factories is either shipped to other factories in the area and made into clothing which is used by the Colombian people or shipped out to factories around the world. A thriving coal industry in the nearby hills provides fuel for the city's factories.

Medellín in and of itself is not an agricultural city, but agriculture has its influence on the city. Farmers who grow coffee, vegetables, livestock, and other produce in the nearby hills bring their harvest into Medellín. Here they may sell their coffee to factories which collect and package it for worldwide distribution. Otherwise several large markets in the city provide a place for the farmer to sell his produce locally. At the same time the farmer is able to purchase all the items that he and his family need. Since Medellín is the largest and

most modern city of the mountainous state of Antioquia, most people come to town to take advantage of goods and services that the city has to offer. Especially on weekends one is able to observe the country folk in town dressed in colorful shirts, skirts, shawls, and blankets, selling their goods. These country people help preserve Medellin's ethnic traditions.

### III. The WELS Resolves to Enter South America

On the heels of the 2nd exploratory made by Pastors Eggert and Zimdars in 1971, the Board for World Missions brought a favorable report to the Synod Convention in Watertown, Wisconsin. Their report urged the assembled representatives of the Synod to authorize the move to begin work in South America as soon as possible. If the convention were to okay this move they would be going beyond the proposed budget. Pastor Wicke, editor of the Northwestern Lutheran, reports, "...the floor committee's resolution, 'Under God's blessing let us go forth!'" (13) This meant that the work in South America could begin, but that could only happen when money became available. Unfortunately one year later less than eight thousand dollars had been collected for the project. It was at this time that the Lord provided for the beginnings of the South American mission with a special gift. President Naumann reports it in this fashion,

"On Monday, September 25, the Synod was presented with a check for \$144,000 in order to pay for the full operation of our South American mission for the first three years. That amount with the interest it will earn, together with about \$7,500 already in a South American mission fund will underwrite the South American mission budget for its first four years."  
(14)

With this gift the resolve of the WELS to begin work in South America would finally become a reality.

#### IV. Mission Work Begins

World mission work doesn't really begin with knocking on doors and witnessing to heathen. First a mission team has to be assembled. The mission team for Colombia that was finally assembled consisted of Pastor Ernest Zimdars, Teacher Francis Warner, and Pastor Roger Sprain. Pastor Sprain was also chosen as superintendent of the field. (15) The three men were installed at DMLC on August 14, 1973 at the closing service of that year's Synod convention. (16)

Normally at this point training in the Spanish language would have been the next step for the mission team. Missionairs Sprain and Zimdars, however, had previous experience in Spanish work, so work began immediately on obtaining permission to enter Colombia. Mr. Warner began Spanish studies with his wife in Mexico soon after he received his call. (17)

Obtaining Visas, permission in writing from the Colombian government to enter and live in the country, proved to be an almost impossible problem for the missionaries. The Colombian government would not allow our missionaries into their country unless we were incorporated. Incorporation meant very basically setting up a constitution and bylaws for the mission which conformed to Colombian law and then having these papers recognized by various offices within the Colombian government. The only catch was that this had to be done in the country. The

problem was that they wouldn't let the missionaries in the country until the incorporation was completed. Fortunately, such a situation was not a problem for the Lord, he provided an answer to his people's prayers. Missionary Sprain flew down to Colombia in the fall of 1973 to work on the mission team's papers. At that time the Colombian government granted the missionaries temporary visas so that they could enter the country and work on the incorporation of the mission. (18)

After a missionary has gained access to a country, packing and moving are the next steps. This is not as easy as it sounds. Moving from one city to another in the U.S. is a costly and time consuming thing. Moving overseas to a foreign country is more so. Due to budgetary constraints the missionaries were limited to 3000 lbs. per family. This may sound like a lot especially considering that furniture and large appliances would be bought in Medellin, it was in fact very difficult to stay under that limit for a family of five. Not only does the family have to take along its personal belongings, but anything they might need that couldn't be bought in Medellin. Pastor Sprain during his trip in the fall of 1973 made lists for the missionaries of items which they would need to bring along when they moved. (19) A good example would be appliances. Electric typewriters, mimeograph equipment, electric razors, electric frying pans, curling irons, T.V.s, radios, etc., were not available in Medellin or could only be gotten at prices way above those normally paid in the U.S. English books, for the family's



enjoyment and for the Pastor's library, could not be readily obtained in Medellín and so these heavy items had to be added. For the missionary families, the fall of 1973 meant selling and getting rid of many items, with the purchasing and packing of many others. When it was all done the Sprain family ended up with sixteen suitcases, eighty boxes, a piano, and a dog.

January 20, 1974 was designated as a Synod wide Sunday of prayer. (20) That morning at 5 A.M. the Sprain family boarded an Avianca 727 jet destined for Medellín, Colombia. A few days later the Zimdar and Warner families followed. When the missionaries arrived the first order of business was settling down in their new homes and finding the nearest grocery store. This may not sound like it has a lot to do with mission work, but in fact it is a very important part of getting a mission going. It is very important that a missionary get his family and home settled so that he can really concentrate on the outreach effort once it begins. The adjustment is called "culture shock." I think it is important to record a few of the adjustments our Colombian missionaries went through in order to paint a realistic picture of the missions history.

While Sprain was in Colombia working on the visas, he rented houses for the missionaries to stay in when they first arrived. (21) The missionaries, however, spent their first few nights in the Hotel Nutibarra in downtown Medellín, because the houses were in need of a good cleaning. Also furniture, especially beds, needed to be purchased. All three missionaries had homes in

middle class neighborhoods of the city. (22) These homes were of Spanish European design. All were three or four bedroom with red tiled roofing and an open air patio at the center of the house. Unfortunately none had yards of any consequence, since the homes were built side by side on every block. Any recreation by children had to be carried on at nearby local parks. The open air patios were great for little flower gardens and hanging plants, but they also allowed ants, cockroaches, and mice into the home. Spraying the house with insecticide was a regular necessity. Perhaps the most inconvenient aspect of these homes was that the kitchen sink was equipped to handle only cold water. The reason for this was that most Colombian homes had a maid who took care of the cleaning chores. It was felt that if hot water was available it would only be wasted. As a result water for dishes had to be boiled. For the most part these houses made comfortable homes for our missionaries once a person got used to the little idiosyncracies.

The one aspect of the Colombian culture which probably affected the missionary's life and morale more than any other was the food. Unclean water created the most problems. Animal and human waste products often contaminated the water and so it could not be drunk from the tap. Intestinal dysentery was the sure reward for the person who did. Vegetables and fruit also needed to be carefully washed for the same reason. Fortunately, the local Pepsi and Coke bottlers came around once a week selling soda and five gallon jugs of distilled water, so the missionaries

always had drinking water. Tap water sufficed for dishes and hygienic purposes. On the positive side, Colombia raises some of the best beef in the world. The missionaries were able to enjoy having different cuts of beef at very reasonable prices. The local markets provided a variety of fresh fruits and vegetables at very low prices also. Since Colombia is a western culture our missionaries don't have as difficult time adjusting to the local diet as perhaps our missionaries to the Orient; caution, however, is necessary and prudent.

The transportation in Medellín is a culture unto itself. Traffic patterns are a cross between European and American systems. Streets intersect not in a "cross" pattern, but in a circle. These circles, called "rompoys," are little hills curbed at the bottom and decorated with flowers in the center. A person carefully merges with traffic already on the circle and goes around until he reaches the point he wants to get off. In the center of the valley a freeway system travels the length of the valley, east to west. There were no posted speed limits. Getting around was not really difficult as long as you were patient and you kept your eyes open. The majority of the people in Medellín do not own their own vehicles, but they regularly ride various bus lines which run through out the city. The reason most people ride buses is the cost of automobiles. Our missionaries found this out when they went to purchase vehicles for the mission. A Dodge Colt 1500 cost \$10,000 new, while a used, four wheel drive Nissan Jeep cost around \$15,000. (23)

Medical help was always available, though the hospitals of Medellin were not blessed with all the modern equipment which we have available to us here in the states. Fortunately, the missionaries were blessed with the services of a highly skilled Colombian doctor who had been trained in the U.S. Besides the fact that he spoke English the missionaries appreciated his ability to treat different illnesses they often faced, especially the different varieties of intestinal flu.

#### V. Summary of the First Year

I have stated that during the first weeks at the new mission field the missionaries spent the bulk of their time getting settled. At the same time the work itself was not completely neglected because during those first weeks the three missionaries met at the Warner home in order to discuss mission strategy. Following is a list of some of the items discussed and objectives decided upon at those meetings.

1. No Spanish service would be held Sunday, Feb. 3rd, 1974. The missionaries did, however, get together for an English service on that date. The first Spanish service was scheduled for the following Sunday.

2. The missionaries agreed to work as a team at first, rather than spreading out and each working a separate neighborhood or barrio.

3. The team decided that they would not work exclusively among the poor since it would be very difficult to find leadership abilities and funds on which to build a national church with national workers.

4. Therefore the first emphasis of the missionaries would be among the middle class.

5. Work among the wealthier individuals in Medellin was not seen as realistic goal since these people are difficult to contact.

6. It was decided that Missionary Warner's home would be used for Sunday services on account of the fact that several of the cities major bus systems passed by his home. (24)

It may sound kind of odd that the missionaries were speaking of services before they had done any canvassing. The fact is that they already had a request for services. During the one the exploratory trips to Medellin our missionaries met Mr. Reynaldo Gomez at a local Colombian bank where he was employed. (25) Mr. Gomez had been visiting the few Protestant missions in the city, but he had been satisfied with none of them. He wanted to attend a church which studied the Bible and therefore was eager to worship in a Lutheran church. During the middle of that first week in Medellin he called the Sprain residence inquiring as to when services would begin. Two weeks later on February 10th, the first WELS Spanish service in Medellin was held at the Warner residence. (26) It included the missionaries and their families, plus the Gomez family of four. The following week 15 Colombians were in attendance at the worship service besides the missionaries. During the next four weeks there was the average attendance grew to approximately 35 Colombians every Sunday. (27)

The Sunday services was not the only work that the mission team was doing with the Colombians. In March of the Spring of 1974 two Bible classes and a Sunday school were started. One Bible class and the Sunday school were held an hour before the Sunday morning service. These two classes averaged four adults and eight children respectively. The other Bible class was held in the home of Dr. Corrales, with an average attendance of eight adults. (28) At this time adult instruction courses were

started. Don Reynaldo Gómez and his wife Maruja began first on March 18, soon after Don Jesús Cuartas, one of the young mission's leading evangelists, also received instruction.

(29)

A part of the mission's long range planning was the hope of training of Colombians for leadership in the church, evangelism, and perhaps even for the ministry. (30) As the small mission grew rapidly during its first year the missionaries prayed that the Lord would lead such men to them. The Lord answered their prayers very quickly. For some time a Presbyterian Minister had been bringing his family to the Sunday service. He brought to the attention of the missionaries a young man who had been studying in the Catholic church as a Carmelite priest. He left the order because he disagreed with the teachings of the Catholic church. Through the Presbyterian Minister he met our missionaries and began attending church services. He soon expressed an interest in studying for the ministry. (31) At this time Carlos Cueto, a young man brought to the church by Jesús Cuartas, also expressed the same interest. As a result the missionaries began setting up a two year Bible Institute program to help deepen their Bible knowledge. (32) It was hoped that this training would prepare them for seminary level studies. From the very beginning of the mission one on one evangelism with Colombian people was a daily event. This was due not so much to the missionaries and their efforts, but the new members of the church who were sharing their faith with those around them and

bringing them to the church. Through these Evangelism contacts the missionaries were led to two new parts of the city in the late fall of 1974. (33) Through the Cuartas family Pastor Sprain met Melba Gómez, a resident of Envigado, a large suburb of southern Medellín. A short time later she led the missionaries to another large neighborhood named Versalles. Versalles, high up on the eastern slopes of the valley, is the home of a much poorer class of people. (34) At this point the missionaries decided to divide up the work. Pastor Zimdars continued work with the central congregation working out of the Sprain residence. (35) Mr. Warner and his wife worked in Versalles which was averaging 50 children in Sunday school and twelve adults in the Bible class. (36) Pastor Sprain took up the work with the Gómez family in Envigado where there was a nucleus of four teenagers and eight teenagers. The work there suffered due to heavy opposition from a Roman Catholic priest in a nearby church. (37) As a part of the outreach effort short radio programs, with an evangelism message, were aired on a local station beginning in August of 1974. One response to the broadcast was received. (38)

#### VI. Concluding Remarks

Mission work is sometimes pictured as a missionary sitting in a wooden chair under a Palm tree explaining the words of John 3:16 in a foreign dialect to natives in colorful dress. Mission work involves witnessing, but it also involves a lot of other peripheral activities. Finding a mission site, learning about a

country, packing your family and belongings, following a foreign governments guidelines are all a part of mission work. The beginnings of our Colombian mission were no different. Fortunately, as a person looks back on the history of this mission, the Lord's guiding hand can be seen acting on behalf of his people. He narrowed down the choice of countries when a decision had to be made so that one city stood out. He provided money through the special gift when it seemed like the South American mission would never get off the ground. He arranged things so that our missionaries could enter the country even though humanly speaking it was impossible. He even provided the first souls for the mission before our missionaries were ever ready to formally begin the outreach effort. The Lord has been responsible for every stage of development in the Colombian mission's history. I pray that this will always be the case because it is his mission!



#### ENDNOTES

- 1 - THE NORTHWESTERN LUTHERAN (NWL), April 11, 1971.
- 2 - "WELS WORK IN OTHER AMERICA (WELS)," Anonymous. A report to the Executive Committee for Latin America. p. 36.
- 3 - NWL, April 11, May 23, 1971.
- 4 - Prof. Roger Sprain, "HISTORY OF THE COLOMBIAN MISSION." A summary report covering mission activity from 1974-1976. Also a oral interview. Jan. 1988.
- 5 - Sprain.
- 6 - Sprain.
- 7 - Sprain.
- 8 - Sprain.
- 9 - Sprain.
- 10 - WELS, p. 1.
- 11 - Sprain.
- 12 - Sprain.
- 13 - NWL, September 12, 1972.
- 14 - NWL, November 5, 1972.
- 15 - Sprain.
- 16 - NWL, September 23, 1973.
- 17 - Sprain.
- 18 - Sprain.
- 19 - Sprain.
- 20 - NWL, January 13, 1974.
- 21 - Sprain.
- 22 - NWL, July 27, 1975.
- 23 - Sprain.
- 24 - Sprain.

- 25 - Sprain.
- 26 - Sprain.
- 27 - Sprain.
- 28 - NWL, June 2, 1974.
- 29 - Sprain.
- 30 - Sprain.
- 31 - Sprain.
- 32 - Sprain.
- 33 - WELS, p. 39.
- 34 - NWL, April 20, 1975.
- 35 - Sprain.
- 36 - NWL, April 20, 1975.
- 37 - NWL, April 20, 1975.
- 38 - NWL, April 20, 1975.

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- THE NORTHWESTERN LUTHERAN, September 12, 1971
- THE NORTHWESTERN LUTHERAN, November 5, 1972
- THE NORTHWESTERN LUTHERAN, December 17, 1972
- THE NORTHWESTERN LUTHERAN, Sept. 23, 1974
- THE NORTHWESTERN LUTHERAN, Jan. 13, 1974
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- THE NORTHWESTERN LUTHERAN, April 20, 1975
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