

PEACE LUTHERAN CHURCH:  
THE MANHATTAN PROJECT

Glenn Rosenbaum

Senior Church History

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The Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS) returns home to New York! That might sound like an ignorant remark, especially among those with even the slightest bit of WELS historical knowledge, who knew the WELS began in Wisconsin. But there is a grain of truth in that opening statement. To understand what is meant, one must take a quick look back to the years of 1838-1848. In this time period, a man named John Muehlhaeuser, a missionary from the Langenberger Mission Society of Germany, served in New York City and in Rochester, NY. He then left for Wisconsin, where he founded Grace Lutheran Church in Milwaukee. During his stay in New York, he was sought out, and assisted by two other missionaries from the same mission society. These two men, William Wrede and John Weinmann, eventually followed Muehlhaeuser to Wisconsin where Wrede was called to Granville and Weinmann was called to Oakwood. In 1850, it was these three men and their congregations who began the WELS. Therefore, one might be so bold as to state that the American birthplace of the WELS is New York, considering that the founders began their American ministry in the Big Apple.

So, when Peace Lutheran Church of Manhattan began serving the people of New York City, it was a bit of a homecoming for the WELS. Of course, Peace Lutheran did not receive a celebratory parade or a grand fanfare (except maybe among the angels), but they had a humble, small beginning and even today find themselves struggling to thrive in terms of numbers. But to know that this

city of more than ten million souls has at least one organized congregation in the city itself (with another getting under way in Brooklyn) where the Word of God is taught in its truth and purity gives cause for rejoicing to the Lord that the WELS is "back home".

As with many mission congregations, Peace Lutheran began as a preaching station. Actually, the original intent of the work in Manhattan was to serve the students and the military in the area under the auspices of the Michigan District Special Ministries Board. It was in 1974 that Pastor David Pagel of Triune God Lutheran Church in Ramsey, New Jersey, began serving New York City and he continued to serve there until he accepted a call in 1981 to Appleton, Wisconsin. Throughout those years there were many changes in makeup of membership and places to meet. There were services held at West Point Military Academy, Governor's Island, and various institutions. As more of a nucleus was formed in the city itself, services were held in the apartments of various members.

The first contact Pastor Pagel made in the city was Dorothy Braun, a Bronx resident who often attended services in New Jersey, but requested that services be brought into the city. So, once a month Pastor Pagel traveled into the Big Apple to bring the rich treasures of God's Word to the people there. These once a month services were held in the apartment of John and Christine Bills and, for the most part, continued there until 1984. Pastor Pagel recalls vividly the building where the first

services were held because there were three fires there during the time of the service. Elizabeth Milio also offered her home as a place for worship and Bible study. These Christian individuals realized the need for the preaching and studying of God's Word among the people of the city and were pleased to open their abodes to facilitate the gospel ministry.

Pastor Pagel was led by the Lord to accept a divine call to St. Matthew's Evangelical Lutheran Church <sup>(now Appleton, WI)</sup> in 1981, so seminary graduate John Paustian was assigned to take his place in Ramsey, New Jersey. Of course, Pastor Paustian also assumed the duties connected with the group meeting in Manhattan. The monthly church services were averaging 10-12 adults in attendance and the group began to feel the need to become independent from the Ramsey congregation. By January 1984, the Manhattan group asked the mission board of the WELS to consider them for exploratory status. Originally, the WELS home mission board felt the people in the city itself could be served by congregations located in areas just outside the city (Long Island and two congregations in New Jersey), but it now became apparent that another plan ought to be considered. So, throughout 1984, visits were made to Manhattan by the mission counselor and the district mission board.

Also in 1984, there were other notable changes and significant events. In June, church services were now held twice a month and, by September, the group met every week for either a formal church service or a Bible class. This increase in formal

worship and study time was made possible through the arrival of Glen Thompson, a former WELS missionary in Zambia, Africa, who arrived in 1983 to pursue graduate studies at Columbia University in the heart of Manhattan. As Pastor Paustian continued to serve the Manhattan group, Thompson lent a hand by leading Bible study in his family's apartment. By October, there was enough forward progress and hope for continued growth that the group went so far as to officially organize themselves as the WELS-Manhattan group, with John Bills as the chairman and Alan Hoffman and P. Fleming as the financiers.

In March 1985, the WELS-Manhattan group held their worship services in First Baptist Church located at 79th and Broadway. They remained in this facility until June, 1986, during which time they averaged 15 adults in attendance. It was during this time period that the first wedding was performed and there were also four adult confirmands throughout the year.

It was also at this time (Sept. 1985) in their short history that they learned of the fact that the home mission board had granted their group exploratory status, as well as manpower. The North Atlantic District Mission Board extended a divine call to Glen Thompson and he was installed on March 2, 1986 as first full-time pastor of Peace Lutheran Church of Manhattan. With the services of a full-time called worker, the Manhattan group was, first of all, thankful to their Heavenly Father for blessing their congregation in such a way and also were eager to experience growth, in respect to their own faith-life and in

respect to expanding their gospel ministry to the millions of other city-dwellers.

The first big change along the way was a new place of worship, as they had to vacate the First Baptist Church building. The members of Peace now assembled at 2121 Broadway, Room 202, on Manhattan's upper west side. The worship area was surrounded by dance studios which didn't cause too many problems during Sunday morning services, but did provide numerous distractions during Tuesday evening Bible class. They remained here for three years and during this time had forty plus communicants on their membership list.

1987 brought another significant change for the young congregation. They sent word to the synod's assignment committee with a request for a tent-minister, one who would find his own employment and, in his spare time, help out the congregation in its evangelism and nurture endeavors. The rationale behind the idea of using a tent minister or ministers is found in the following:

---the ethnic, linguistic and cultural diversity of NYC need a wide variety of spiritual/pastoral gifts to be properly served

---wide geographic areas

---a vacancy could be a great setback because congregational continuity is greatly needed. Having several pastors would alleviate that problem

---due to work schedules of most New Yorkers, evening and weekend visits are most convenient. More manpower at these times would be more efficient than one available at all times

---lay ministry would have to increase out of necessity

---multiple pastorate would give added encouragement to each minister and would allow for needed breaks and get-aways

Seminary graduate David Rosenbaum received this tent ministry call to Peace Lutheran and arrived in New York in September of 1987. Since his arrival there, he has supported himself through employment at the New York Stock Exchange, JP Morgan Bank Company and various other businesses. In his spare time, he leads Bible study and worship services, makes personal evangelism visits and hospital calls and fulfills any other pastoral duties which present themselves. In March 1988, Pastor Rosenbaum accepted an official call as associate of Peace and was installed in May of that same year.

Also at this time, another opportunity to establish another WELS congregation in New York arose. This one is in Park Slope in Brooklyn, the most populous of New York's boroughs. Pastor Dan Krause is doing the pastoral work in this area, where he began in 1988. The members and the pastors of both congregations work very closely with each other and often cover for one another.

The Peace congregation had to move its place of worship yet again because their lease was up on their Broadway street property. It was obvious that the Lord's hand was hard at work here as the congregation received an offer in June, 1989, from a Pentecostal group to use their facilities. Soon afterward, however, this group folded and the building was taken over by another Pentecostal group who didn't allow the Peace congregation to stay. But Peace was not without a home for very long. On

December 1, 1989, Peace began holding their worship services at the corner of Amsterdam and 100th, in an ELCA church building. This is where services are also currently held.

It might seem more beneficial for the congregation to look into purchasing something more permanent for their worship site but there are numerous reasons proposed for not doing that very thing. The high cost of purchasing/building, the goal to expand rather than to become stationary, the emphasis of a ministry built on people not buildings, and the responsibility of outreach placed on the people rather than the beauty of a church building all contribute to the recommendation that a permanent building not be purchased at this time.

One big step which the congregation did take was the purchase of a parsonage in May 1990. This rather large apartment presently provides living quarters for Pastor Thompson, his wife, and two children and is located only a few blocks from their present worship site. Any land or building space in the city itself costs an exorbitant amount of money, so this is a major investment and shows the determination of the congregation and the WELS to make the ministry in Manhattan a successful one.

Of course, in most congregations success is measured by the number of members listed in the membership lists. If that were the means to measure the success of Peace, then the work of this small congregation might be considered a failure. The membership list has decreased in number, the average weekly attendance has dropped off, and the evangelism efforts have not produced the



fruit of new members. Yet, the ministry of the pastoral team and the members of Peace Lutheran can not be labeled a failure because of a lack of numbers. This is a unique ministry in many ways and therefore the fruit of this ministry may come about in unique ways.

Peace Lutheran of Manhattan has a unique ministry and yet has the same goal of all other WELS congregations--- to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ and to make disciples of all the world. But, unlike most other congregations, evangelism efforts can not be done door-to-door. Locked lobby doors and the inhabitants' fear of opening doors to strangers prohibit this.

So, most evangelism efforts are made through mutual connections, friendship evangelism, and by visiting the people on the street. Distributing sandwiches and blankets to the homeless allows contact and conversation to be made with otherwise cold and unresponsive people. Although many of these mission prospects will never set foot inside Peace Lutheran, at least there was an opportunity to present simple law and gospel to them and to tell them that, in spite of their woes and sins, Jesus loves them and forgives them. That type of ministry may never show itself in numbers, but it doesn't mean it is not effective. And when it does result in another soul filling the church pew, that person, whether in tattered rags or suffering from AIDS or both, is presented with the truths of God's Word, which is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes.

As WELS members move in and out of Manhattan, as lax

Lutherans revive their membership in their old home church, as new converts are brought to learn of the glorious truths of God's Word, it is comforting to know that Peace Lutheran of Manhattan exists to provide for them a church home which teaches and preaches and lives Christ crucified. The WELS in Manhattan--- a homecoming of sorts, to bring all sorts home... to their Heavenly Father, who supplied his Son for all people to know of and believe in as the Savior of the world.

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