

The Early Ministry of Reverend Carl S. Leyrer

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After recounting the incredible faith of many Old Testament “heroes”, the writer to the Hebrews begins chapter 12 with the following words:

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.” – Hebrews 12:1

Without a doubt there is great encouragement to be found in remembering both the faith of those who have gone before us as well as God’s faithfulness in their lives. All too often, however, our recognition of this “cloud of witnesses” in our own lives is limited to biblical examples or heroes of the Reformation.

After completing an interview with Pastor Carl S. Leyrer – a man whom up this point I have known only as “grandpa” – I was reminded that I need not go back centuries to find one who helps compose this “great cloud of witnesses.” In my interview with Pastor Leyrer I had the opportunity to talk with a man who has been a blessing to God’s kingdom in many ways; a man who has the true heart of a pastor – a heart that is filled with love for God and love for his flock; indeed, a man who serves as a fine example for young pastors in many ways. All praise and thanks to God for the ministry of Carl Leyrer!

I. Brief Summary of Oral Interview

Early Years

Carl Simon Leyrer was born on September 11, 1919 in Hopkins, Michigan, to Pastor and Mrs. Carl Leyrer. As the fifth child in a family of six children, Carl was blessed with many siblings with whom to grow up. At the early age of nine months, the Leyrer family moved to Lansing where Carl would form his first memories of the world and be educated through the second grade. After the Leyrer family had lived in Lansing for eight years, they moved once again and found themselves in the town of St. Louis, MI. St. Louis would remain Carl’s home for the remainder of his elementary and high school education and the background for many fond memories.

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In 1937, Carl graduated from the local public high school in St. Louis and was faced with the question of how he should continue his education at the college level. As with many high school graduates, there was some uncertainty about what vocation and line of studies to take up. The offer of a one-year scholarship by Central State University in Mt. Pleasant made Carl's decision easier and he enrolled in his first year of collegiate classes in the fall of 1937. Carl recalls that the chance to attend Central State University was exciting because it allowed him to continue his education in the area of science. To this day, Carl insists that if he had not become a pastor, he would have become a chemical engineer. In addition to his science classes, Carl was also able to take language classes that would eventually serve him well when he decided to enroll at Northwestern College.

After one year of Central State University, the decision to follow in his father's footsteps and become a pastor had been solidified in Carl's mind. Although he noticed the "struggle" of a pastor's family both financially and emotionally, Carl couldn't help but notice the "helpful" nature of the ministry. When someone needed help or were in trouble, they turned to his father, the pastor. The willingness to serve people in this way, as well as the solid theological training through his father's confirmation classes, moved Carl to enroll at Northwestern College in the fall of 1938. Although his public school education lacked any training in Latin and German, Carl's one year at Central State University established enough of a foundation that he could enter Northwestern College as a traditional freshman.

Seminary Years

Carl Leyrer graduated from Northwestern College in the spring of 1942 and was enrolled at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary in the fall of the same year. Looking back on his Seminary years, Leyrer mentions that they were some of the happiest years of his life. As a student, Leyrer gained a deep level of respect for all of his professors. Professor John P. Meyer, however, stood out as his favorite.

Because World War II served as the backdrop for Leyrer's Seminary years, the curriculum was briefly changed in order to accommodate governmental guidelines for the draft. All theological students and clergy were given the draft rating of "4D." Mentioning that the only lower draft rating, "4F", was

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reserved for the physical or mental handicapped, Leyrer joked about the quality of men, himself included, enrolled at the Seminary. In order to retain this “4D” status, students had to be enrolled all year long. This led to the removal of summer vacations (only two-week breaks) and an accelerated seminary curriculum that was completed in the March of 1945. Because another Seminary class graduated in May of 1945, the classes have been distinguished by “A” and “B.” With great pride, Leyrer graduated from Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary with the class of 1945A.



**Graduation Photo –
Class of 1945A**

When Call Day of March 1945 arrived, Leyrer found himself with the same mix of motions that is commonplace among Seminary graduates. Included in these emotions were sadness about missing friends and classmates, anxiety over ability to carry out ministry, and the excitement of starting a new phase of life and preaching the gospel. Although having no reason other than his “adventurous” spirit to substantiate his intuition, Leyrer remembers thinking there was a chance he would be called to serve in Oregon. In reality, however, Carl Leyrer was assigned as a “Missionary at Large” by the Southeast Wisconsin Mission Board. For the sake of posterity, Leyrer remembers that his salary was \$109.75/month with an additional \$25/month offered for rent. This salary would skyrocket to \$125/month after Leyrer was married with an additional \$6.25 added for every child. Leyrer’s job description included both canvassing various areas of the Metro-Milwaukee area in order to determine what areas would be receptive for starting a mission as well as actually starting it. Reflecting on this somewhat vague assignment, Leyrer noted that “things” were not as regimented or regulated as they are today – more independence was placed in the graduate’s hand.

While “Missionary at Large” was Leyrer’s first assignment, he ended delaying his initial work in order to fill a brief vacancy for Pastor John Mahnke at the congregation of Mt. Lebanon, Milwaukee. After being ordained on April 15, 1945, Leyrer began serving Mt. Lebanon. Because the congregation was well established and rather large, Leyrer remembers feeling the uneasiness of being thrown into the

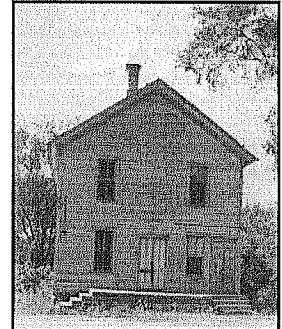
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situation. In the end, however, many ministry skills were honed in the couple of months at Mt. Lebanon and Leyrer learned much about evangelism from Pastor Mahnke.

Christ, Big Bend, WI

After filling the brief vacancy at Mt. Lebanon, Leyrer began to carry out his duties as “Missionary at Large.” After canvassing various neighborhoods, Leyrer was informed of a family in the Big Bend area that was interested in the startup of a mission. As a result, Leyrer canvassed the area and decided to start a mission congregation in the area. When recalling this part of his ministry, Leyrer tells a story about accidentally canvassing the family of a local Baptist church in Big Bend. After the pastor’s wife adamantly opposed the planting of any Lutheran church in Big Bend, Leyrer became all the more firm in his decision to target the area. If anything, this speaks about the determined personality of Leyrer that would characterize his ministry.

Now that the location had been chosen, Leyrer continued to canvass the area and many prospects were uncovered. Shortly after working in Big Bend, Leyrer sent out flyers advertising the first worship service of “The Lutheran Church of the Wisconsin Synod” to be held on July 8, 1945.¹ The site of this first worship service was the old Town Hall of Big Bend. This building, described as “condemned” and “decrepit,” would serve as the home for all worship services for the next three years as well as the background for many fond memories. Rent for the Town Hall was \$3/service that included a man to monitor the pot-bellied stove during the worship. Although there was no running water and “you either froze to death or burned to death,” the Town Hall became the first Wisconsin Synod church in Big Bend.



The Old Town Hall
– Big Bend, WI

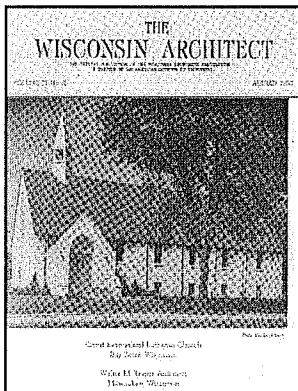
On July 8, 1945 the first worship service was held with 27 people in attendance. Although some of the 27 in attendance were visitors from other WELS congregations, the Wisconsin Synod Lutheran Church in Big Bend had started and would quickly begin to flourish. In August of 1945, the average

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worship attendance was already in the twenties. One day that remains emblazed in the memory of Leyrer is December 9, 1945. On this Sunday, the attendance of worshippers gathered in the old Town Hall had exceeded 50 for the first time. Despite an offering debacle that saw the collection bags scatter money on the floor and coins into wooden cracks, Leyrer couldn't help but be amazed that God in his grace would grant 50 worshippers in attendance.

As the church continued her steady growth through the early part of 1946, Leyrer notes that it was in Lent of 1946 that the attendance blossomed greatly and made the organization of a official church body the next logical step. On May 12, 1946, this group of believers became officially organized under the name of "Christ Lutheran Church" – a name insisted on by Leyrer out of love for his Savior. Leyrer notes that he intentionally held off on the formation and naming of the congregation until he had a chance to "graduate" his first Bible Information class. This allowed the newly confirmed in the faith to become charter members of Christ if they so desired. Officially, Christ was organized with 46 communicants, 18 voters, and 90 souls on the official register.

As soon as Christ became official a building fund was established, as the Town Hall was quickly



Christ Lutheran Church as featured by "The Wisconsin Architect" Magazine

becoming inadequate. The ensuing building project became all encompassing and was the focal point of Leyrer's final years in Big Bend. Land was purchased in 1946 and ground breaking for the new church building took place in the spring of 1947. Serving as the general contractor throughout the project, Leyrer was determined not to build a "cheesy" building. Rather Leyrer remembers being adamant that the new church would be built with Lannon stone.

According to Leyrer, however, this was made difficult because resources for the new church were limited due to the effect of World War II.

Financing for the new church came from different sources. A \$15,000 loan was granted from the Wisconsin Synod with additional money coming from private donations. Perhaps even more important than the money, however, was the pride and labor placed into the building project by Christ's own

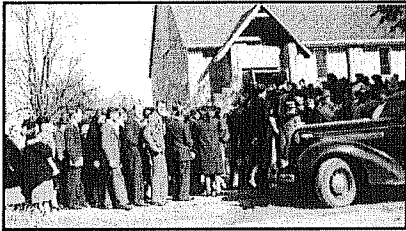
¹ For a copy of the flyer announcing this first worship service, see Addendum 1.

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congregation. Commenting on his own effort in building the church, Leyrer stated: "I blessed every block that went into that church." Much money was saved on furnishing the church as individuals donated items such as the baptismal font and organ. When all was said and done, the new building was completed for \$31,000 but valued at approx. \$60,000.



Interior of Christ, Big Bend



Christ's Dedication - 1948

On October 17, 1948 the last worship service was held in the old Town Hall. Immediately following this service, the congregation walked to the site of the new church and placed the symbolic cornerstone. One week later, on October 24, 1948, Christ Lutheran Church dedicated the new building. It was with great joy and thanksgiving for God's grace that Pastor Leyrer watched his parishioners walk into the building to worship for the first time.

With the luxury of the new church building, the congregation continued to grow. In 1949, Christ had 135 communicants, 40 voters, and 215 souls listed on their books. For the next couple of years the church would continue to thrive as Leyrer was able to get into more homes in the area and spread the gospel message. In 1953, on the day the Leyrer family moved into the first parsonage built by the congregation, Leyrer received a call to start a congregation in Zion, Illinois. Leyrer accepted this call and conducted his final service for Christ in July of 1953. At the time of his departure, Christ consisted of 217 communicants and 350 souls.

Our Savior's, Zion, IL

When Pastor Carl Leyrer received the call to organize a congregation in Zion, Illinois, he was not eager to leave Big Bend. At the urging of the District Mission Board, however, Leyrer accepted the call to organize and minister to a nucleus of Wisconsin Synod members who were already present. On

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September 13, 1953, Leyrer was installed in a service led by Pastor John Mahnke and became the first Wisconsin Synod pastor in Zion. Leyrer explains that Zion was a city originally founded by a religious cult and had its share of charismatic churches in the area. Despite the lack of orthodoxy among these church bodies, Leyrer was confident that many of their members “did know Christ.”

Upon arrival, Leyrer and his family were given the use of a beautiful parsonage “with Lake Michigan for a backyard.” This parsonage served the congregation of Zion well as all Bible instruction classes, choir, etc. were conducted there before an official church could be built. As for the early days of worship, the nucleus in Zion rented out the local movie theater for Sunday morning worship. All materials for Sunday morning worship were brought in for the individual service, including a portable organ. Sunday School was held at 10:30am with worship starting at 11:00am. With movies starting in the early afternoon and a local Catholic congregation renting the theater before 10:30am, Leyrer commented that their worship was “sandwiched between the pope and Marilyn Monroe.”

Despite the less-than-ideal worship conditions, the nucleus in Zion continued to grow. Leyrer regularly visited the homes of prospects and implemented a Sunday School program that consisted of dedicated and well-trained lay leaders. Once again, Leyrer waited until the first class of 13 prospects had successfully completed a Bible information class before officially organizing the congregation. As with Christ, this allowed the new confirmands to be among the charter members of the new church. On June 13, 1954, the congregation was organized under the name “Our Savior’s” – a name, once again, strongly encouraged by Leyrer out of love for his Savior. At the time of organization, Our Savior’s consisted of 77 communicant members, 36 voters, and 76 children in Sunday School.

As with Christ, Big Bend, much of Leyrer’s ministry in Zion was centered on a building project. The building plans, as drawn up by the congregation, called for the construction of four different units. The first unit, a large parish hall, came first and was the only portion built



Our Savior’s Groundbreaking - 1956

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during Leyrer's time in Zion. In July of 1956, groundbreaking on the new building took place.

Once again, funding for the building program at Our Savior's came from a couple of different sources. The two most notable sources were \$25,000 from the congregation's own building fund while synod granted a loan for \$60,000 with the understanding that Our Savior's would become self-supporting after one year. Although this was a near impossible request, Leyrer and the congregation accepted the loan and, by God's grace, were able to meet the conditions. It was also estimated that an additional \$50,000 was saved as the result of volunteer labor from the congregation. All in all, a building valued at @140,000-150,000 was built for \$90,000. On July 28, 1957, Our Savior's conducted their last worship service in the local movie theater. On August 4, the congregation worshipped in the basement of their new facility for the first time. It was a glorious event!

Due to the loan agreement with the synod, Our Savior's moved at rapid pace to become self-supporting. In January of 1957, the church council prepared a preliminary budget on the basis of self-support. The budget was approved and July 1, 1957, was set as a date for Our Savior's to become self-supporting. The fact that this event occurred just three years after the organization of the congregation set a record at that time for the Wisconsin Synod.

In 1958, Leyrer received and accepted a call to serve as the Dean of Men at Northwestern College. In January 1959, Leyrer preached his final sermon as pastor of Our Savior's Lutheran Church. At the time the church recorded 183 communicants, 386 souls, and 50 voters.

II. Insights into the Ministry

Throughout the interview, Pastor Carl Leyrer offered many insights and commentaries that are valuable for the future pastor. What follows is a brief summary of some of these insights:

- **Educational Superiority:** At one point of the interview, Leyrer commented on the benefit of his Seminary education in preparing him with a sound biblical basis. The education received now, however, Leyrer says is superior to the education received in his day. With the benefit of classes on

evangelism and education, as well as the vicar year, he believes the men graduating from the seminary today are much more qualified to handle the rigors of the ministry than perhaps they think.

- **Place of Doubt in Ministry:** When commenting on his feelings as Call Day approached, Leyrer mentioned he had doubts concerning the ministry that, in retrospect, were quite healthy. Anyone entering the ministry without any doubts or apprehension is probably in it for the wrong reason. The ministry will be tough; it will be challenging; but the Lord will carry you through it.

- **Love for Ministry:** If any message came across through the body language of the interview, it was the incredible love for the ministry and the people that Pastor Leyrer held in his heart. Even many years after the fact, he would recount stories of success and difficulties while wearing his emotions on his sleeve. The gospel created bonds that are impossible to describe.

- **Value of Missionary Position:** Although acknowledging that it would be impossible for every graduate to have the opportunity to start their own congregation, Pastor Leyrer sees an incredible value. In starting your own congregation, it isn't as easy to take blessings from the Lord for granted. In the mission setting is "where you learn the value of a single soul."

- **Blessing of Family:** Although only a small portion of the interview was centered around Pastor Leyrer's family, the importance and blessing of a godly wife was stressed numerous times. Reflecting on the difficult financial times of his first call, Leyrer stated repeatedly what a wonderful blessing his wife, Leah, was. May God grant every pastor with such a blessing for a wife!

- **All Glory to God:** This seems like a fairly obvious statement for a pastor to make. This truth, however, so permeated the interview with Pastor Leyrer that it reinforced it all the more. No fewer than 20 times did Leyrer stop and comment that all earthly successes and milestones in his

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congregations were attributed to God's grace and for the purpose of glorifying God. As difficult as it may be at times, may we always return to the reason for proper perspective of ministry!

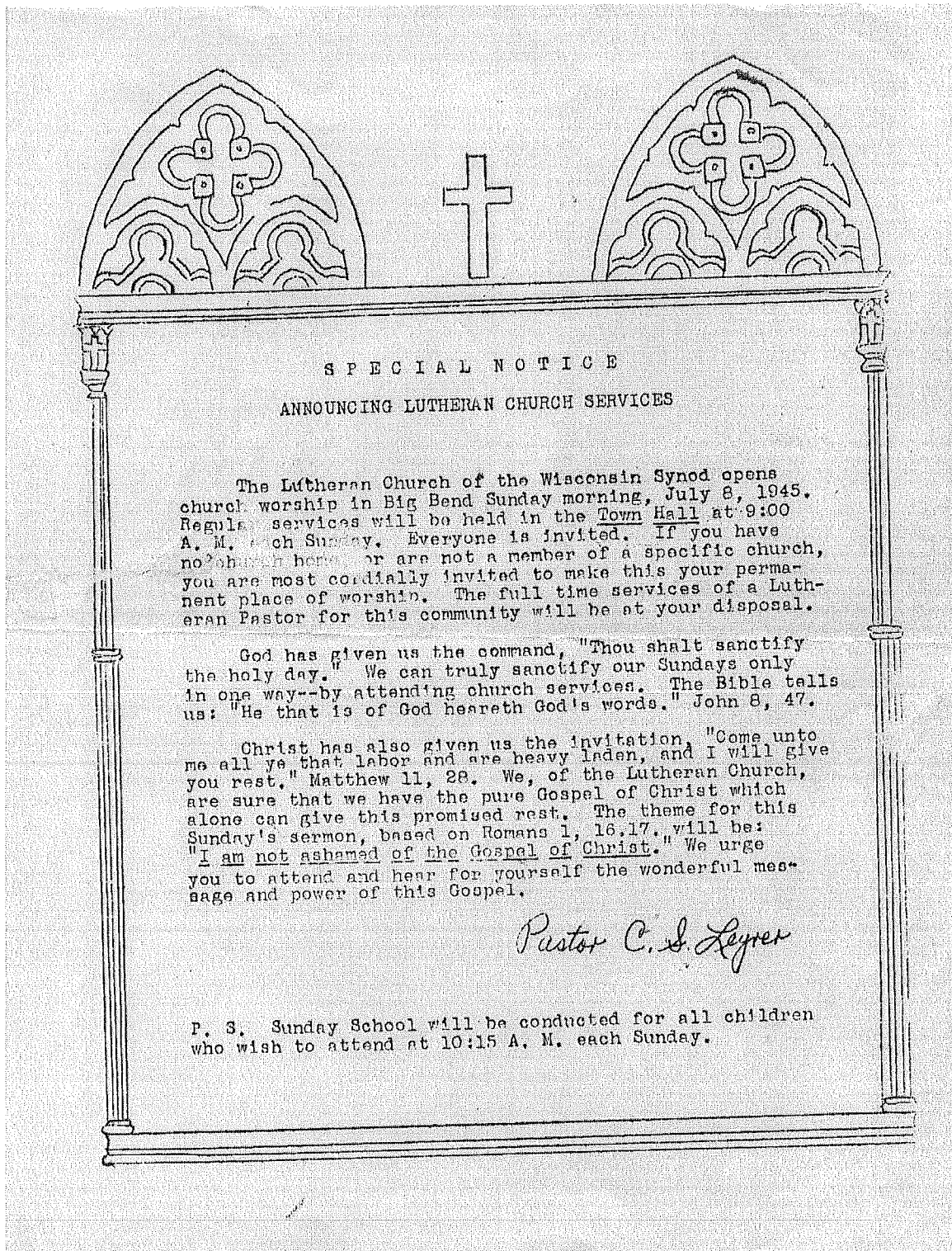
➤ **Advice for Future Pastors:**

- ◆ You will make mistakes!
- ◆ One of the hardest things to learn is patience – yet it is invaluable!
- ◆ Be Confidant in your theological training!
- ◆ Be aware: Young pastors have a tendency to be legalistic!
- ◆ Mission work can be done anywhere – all you need are people!
- ◆ Don't make a cliché out of the phrase: "By the grace of God..." It is true and without it we, and our ministry, are nothing!

Notes on Imported Pictures

- ❖ Graduation photograph (p. 3) downloaded from wls.wels.net.
- ❖ All other photos taken from Carl Leyrer's personal collection and reprinted with his permission.

Copy of flyer advertising first worship service of "The Wisconsin Synod Lutheran Church" in Big Bend:



❖ Copy of original found in Carl Leyrer's personal collection. Reprinted with his permission.

Discussion Items for Oral Interview with Pastor Carl Leyrer

➤ **General Background/Early Years**

When and where were you born?

Where did you grow up?

How large was your family?

What schools did you attend? (Elementary, high school, college)

As you were growing up, what impression of the ministry did you receive from your father serving as a pastor?

Why did you decide to become a Lutheran pastor?

➤ **Seminary Years**

In what year did you enroll at the seminary?

What do you remember about your class?

What do you remember about your professors?

Because of World War II, you were in an “accelerated” program that produced two classes graduating in 1945. Can you explain how that worked?

➤ **First Called Position**

As graduation and call day approached, do you recall any feelings you had toward actually becoming a pastor?

At the time of Assignment Day 1945, did you have any thoughts on where you would prefer to serve as pastor or where you thought you might be assigned?

What did your first called assignment turn out to be?

Can you explain the title, “Missionary at Large?”

Where were you ordained?

Do you remember what your salary was?

How did you go about determining where to start your mission?

Where did that place turn out to be?

What was your mission plan for starting the congregation and keeping it growing?

When did you start worship services and where were they held?

How long were you in Big Bend?

How had the church grown in the time you were there?

Do you still have any contact with Christ, Big Bend, to this day?

Can you think of any particular challenges that confronted you in your years as pastor in Big Bend?

- spiritual condition of people
- stewardship
- building program
- personal burnout
- other...

What ministry lessons did you learn during your time in Big Bend?

➤ **Second Called Position**

Where did you accept a call to serve after Big Bend?

What was it that led you to leave Big Bend and serve in Zion?

What was the ministry situation in Zion when you got there?

What was your ministry plan for serving the congregation in Zion?

When did you start worship services and where were they held?

How long were you in Zion?

How had the church grown in the time you were there?

Do you still have any contact with the congregation in Zion to this day?

Can you think of any particular challenges that confronted you in your years as pastor in Zion?

- spiritual condition of people
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- personal burnout
- other...

What ministry lessons did you learn during your time in Zion?

➤ **Family Life**

Whom did you marry?

When did you get married?

How many children do you have?

How did your family affect your ministry at both Christ and Our Savior?

Comment on the value of a supportive, godly wife for the work of a pastor especially as he begins his ministry.

How difficult was it to balance your time between your work as pastor and your role of husband/father?

Do you have any words of wisdom for future pastors in the area of family life?

➤ **Miscellaneous**

Knowing what you know now, is there anything you would do differently as a home missionary called to start a congregation?

What difficulties do you foresee confronting new candidates for the ministry?

Do you have any words of wisdom for the young pastor who is fired up to do God's work, but is concerned with the possibility of burnout?

Looking back over your ministry, do you have any further advice/words of wisdom for future pastors?