

DIARY OF A HOME MISSIONARY

Background about the missionary

My first contact with the Wisconsin Synod came through marriage and attendance at a Home Mission congregation in California. I suppose in some ways that was the beginning of my training for the Ministry. It was in this Mission congregation that I was instructed and received into membership as an Adult confirmand. From 1967-1970 I completed the college requirements for entrance into our Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. In the Spring of 1974, just about this time of the year, I learned where I would serve the Lord as a called Pastor.

Bemidji:

St. Mark, Bemidji, Minnesota is located in the North woods of that state, approximately 100 miles from the Canadian border. This part of our midwest is a fisherman's paradise. It seemed a strange place to go for someone who was not a fishing buff. I often say that God did this for a purpose too. I had been trained not to ~~fish for men~~ ^{be a fisher man}, but to be a fisher of men.

St. Mark congregation had been started as an Exploratory endeavor two years earlier. A Nebraska farmer, his wife and three preteen daughters had moved 20 miles south of Bemidji several years earlier. They soon discovered there was no Wisconsin Synod church in that particular part of the state. The closest one was in Brainerd 100 miles South of town and 80 miles from their home. They began worshipping there. After a short time it became evident that they were not able to be as involved with their congregation at such a great distance. Getting the cows milked at 3:00 ^{AM} in the morning and making an 80 mile trip to church was not easy. They talked to their Pastor and began to seek the Minnesota District Mission Boards assistance for starting a congregation in Bemidji.

After a number of letters and doing a lot of canvassing and some newspaper advertising to seek out others who may have shared their interest. An exploratory congregation began holding services in a Union Hall.

Because of the great distance the Pastor in Brainerd was able to help only with Sunday evening worship services. It was evident there was work to be done but it couldn't be carried out from that distance.

By the time I arrived on the scene the congregation had been granted Mission Status and had secured the Mission Board's support as well as a loan of \$10,000 to purchase a small 50-60 year old Seventh Day Adventist Church. This was located in an older part of town. There was no parsonage. But after learning that they would have a full time pastor, the Mission Board and the Church Extension Fund provided the necessary funds to purchase an older home 6 blocks from the church.

Arrival

Because there was no parsonage available for us to move into, we arrived the day before my installation and Ordination. Arrangements had been made for us to stay with a Bachelor member on his sheep farm 20 miles north of Bemidji. Being city folks, we prayed that this temporary home for our first 10 days or so would have indoor plumbing. Our prayers were answered. There was indoor plumbing. Our host made us feel right at home.

Meeting the congregation

Maybe you are wondering...how big was this congregation? Normally a first resident Pastor has a congregation of about 30-60 baptized souls. Bemidji was different.

① We had the Dairy farmers family of 5, ② a Bachelor sheep farmer (our host) ③ a young bachelor who was with the State Forestry Service, ④ a Body shop mechanic, wife 2 sons and 2 daughters, ⑤ an elderly resort owner and his wife, ⑥ a delinquent shoe salesman, and another laborer who was transferring to another area. Grand total 15 people including children. Of course we were a fast growing congregation. As soon as our family arrived the church membership increased close to 25 %.

My reason for pointing out the small size of this group of faithful Christians is this. Do you think they could ever support a Pastor on their own? No they couldn't. But that is where people like you come into the picture. Without your offerings and prayers, places like Bemidji would never get started by having a full time Pastor.

Priorities

The natural order of priorities would seem to be...get to know your members, begin canvassing, form an evangelism committee and build up the church membership. However, the only correct natural order so to speak, was getting to know the members. They were a dedicated and ambitious lot, even though small in number. Our first voter's meeting revealed a desire to purchase an organ. Everyone of the 5 voter's was willing. I asked... "how much money do you have saved for this"? The treasurer... replied I don't know. All of the congregation's funds were in the checking account. There had been no treasurer's report. In fact there wasn't anyone really qualified to set up a beginning set of books. For the first 6 months of my ministry I had to work out all reports with the treasurer and help him set up a system. I thanked God for my past work experience, because they don't teach you how to do those sort of things in the Seminary.

Another project that definitely had to be looked into was the recently purchased 7th Day Adventist Church. It didn't look at all like a Church and that could definitely hinder the work. It was obvious we didn't have the money to replace the roof, replace ceiling plaster, cover up the emercible baptismal tank, completely paint the inside of the building, get pews or chairs to replace the theater seats.

Because I kept a daily account of events at the start of this congregation I will be able to share with you how a congregation gets started in the first place. Through personal contacts initiated by two families in Grand Rapids the neighboring Pastor in Brainerd, ~~100 miles south~~ and I knew there were Wisconsin Synod people available in the area. The District Mission Board hadn't been contacted ~~as yet~~, because these contacts were so new. But God who works in mysterious ways His wonders to perform, planted the thought in the Mission Board that this may be an area to explore. Pastor Crawford and ^I ~~myself~~ were asked to do the preexploratory work.

October 3, 1976 The two families from Grand Rapids, ^{Pastor} Pastor Crawford and I, and the Nebraska farmer and his family, plus another member from Bemidji canvassed in Grand Rapids. The Pastors compiled the necessary information and made a report ~~and~~ ^{recommended starting exploratory work} and gave their recommendations to the District Mission Board. The District Mission Board gave their support to our recommendations at their October 12th meeting. It was also decided that I would assume responsibility for the work in that field if the Home Mission Board in Milwaukee gave its stamp of approval.

November 2nd, The General Board for Home Missions granted Grand Rapids Exploratory status. And that is exactly what is meant by the expression, Explore. Yes, explore the possibilities to begin a congregation, with no promises that it will get Mission status or permission to call its own resident Pastor. In other words there is no real commitment by the Synod to do this work only permission to hold exploratory service. No financial help is given the congregation except to pay the Missionary's out of pocket expenses and to do some publicity work.

November 3rd I wrote a letter to the two families who were interested in beginning this work. I explained the facts of life to them in as Evangelical way as possible. They had to be made aware that it was impossible for me to do this work alone. And that they were going to have to give of their time, ^{talents,} and ~~money~~ to help make this a successful endeavor for the Gospel of Christ. I set a date for ^{to} meeting with them to make further plans.

November 8th The Czesklebas and Harmenings met with me at the Czeskelebas' home. I brought posters advertising the Wisconsin Synod Lutheran Mission's first official meeting. These were posted throughout the community and the immediate area. An advertisement was worked on and placed in the local newspaper and a News Release was accepted by the paper. We contacted the 3 local radio stations with the same information as the Newspaper. They agreed to publicize the meeting. We then Planned the first meeting. A brief devotion, information about starting this congregation, question and answer period, refreshments. The date ^{chosen} ~~set~~ was Nov 14th at the Czeskleba home....7:00 P.M.

Nov. 14, 1976 The first official meeting of the Wisconsin Synod Mission at Grand Rapids. I arrived early. So did the other couple. We were all very nervous. The adrenelin was really flowing. Neither these people nor I had ever done anything quite like this. We knew thru contacts that there were a few more Wisconsin Synod people in the area, but we didn't know if they had the kind of pioneering spirit needed to join such a fledgling endeavor.

The time drew near. There was a knock and one family showed up then another and another until there were 29 people seated in the living room dining room of the Czesklebas. Advertising paid off in dividends. Two families had recently moved to the area and were WELS people. They said they wouldn't have known about the meeting except for all the publicity with the posters, newspaper and radio. We thanked God for supplying the money ~~xxx~~ through the Wisconsin Synod's membership. Of those present 5 families were WELS and 6 families were LCMS.

Everyone agreed that what we had to offer was what they wanted. They agreed to hold the first worship service the following Sunday in the same home or in rented quarters if they could be found. The time of the service was set for 7:00 P.M.

Nov. 16th Another trip to Grand Rapids. A place for worship had been secured. After looking it over we decided to go ahead and worship at the Public Library in the basement meeting room. More posters were made and distributed. Another advertisement was placed in the paper and another news release. The Radio stations carried the same message. Everything was arranged for the first official Wisconsin Synod Church service in Grand Rapids.

Nov. 21st The big day arrived. Naturally I was excited. In fact probably even more than the first time at the meeting a week earlier. Everything was moving so fast. The original two families were the most help that night. They arrived early. We began to set up the meeting room. Some old paraments covered the Library table. A small Wooden Cross and wooden candle stick were placed on the altar. Service books were furnished from Bemidje ^{Prayerbook} with hymnals. We finished ^{our} preparation ^{early} and anxiously and prayerfully awaited the arrival of the worshipers.

We began at 7:05 just in case some one was late. Two ladies from palisade 40 miles away showed up, Pastor and Mrs. Crawford and a layman and his wife were there. They had traveled 100 miles to be with us. 25 people in all attended. Only 2 families from the LCMS contingent showed up. Some of the original people were a little dissapointed. However it worked out for the Lord's good and that is what is most important.

Two families from the Mo. Synod that did show up wanted to begin Doctrinal Discussions ~~with them~~ to establish fellowship with this congregation, and the WELS. The time was set for the following Sunday at 6:00 P.M. The one family was already at work making a portable sign for the front of the Library on Sundays.

The other family said they would contact the other people from the MO. Synod, because they were all close friends and they felt they were afraid to even talk about changing churches. They seemed to understand that there was no commitment to membership before doctrinal agreement was reached.

Refreshments were served after the service.

Nov. 23, 1976 More advertising was done. I had an appointment with the one Mo. Synod family that was already making the church sign. They'd been WELS members before, but had joined the Mo. Synod when they moved to Grand Rapids. They offered the use of their home for midweek Doctrinal discussions ~~room~~ so we wouldn't be so cramped for time during the 1 hour before the services.

November 28, 1976

The second worship Service. Doctrinal discussions began at 6:00. It was decided to tape all the discussions for the benefit of those who may be ill. All of the original Mo. Synod families showed up this time. It appears that they are interested. We thank God for the opportunity to witness to the truth of Scripture. The first discussion concerned itself with an essay... "Scripture is its own Interpreter" written by myself. Each family was given a copy and the discussion that followed revealed complete agreement on this Biblical principal.

A discussion session was planned for the following Tuesday at the Zimmermans' home, 7:00 P.M. The format for all discussions was announced.

Worship began at 7:00. Another WELS family showed up because of the Radio and Newspaper advertising. They had just moved to the area. 29 attended this service.

Nov. 30, 1976

Doctrinal discussion number 2. I originally figured about 1½ hours would be more than enough time. 13 adults were present from 7 different families. One already a WELS member. The group seemed much more at ease in a home and less formal surroundings. *The discussions lasted for 2 1/2 hrs.*

During the day ^{more} advertisements were placed and posters distributed.

Dec. 5, 1976

39 attended the services. ~~The second Sunday in a row~~ *The second Sunday in succession* We broke our attendance record. An informational meeting was scheduled for the following Sunday for the benefit of all concerned.

The remaining ^{Tuesdays} Tuesdays for the month of December were used for daytime contacts and evening Doctrinal discussions.

Dec. 12, 1976

Before the worship service an Informational meeting was conducted to explain

1. How an exploratory congregation becomes a mission.
2. How a new congregation supports its ministry
3. How a new congregation grows under Christ... *Worship* Evangelism, Sunday School, Bible Class. We planned to start Sunday School sometime in January and also to have an Adult Bible Class during that ~~time~~ *time*. Only 21 showed up for worship.

Sunday December 26th Only the original two Mo. Synod families ~~remained~~ decided to become members of the WELS. The others remained with the Mo. Synod congregation even though they agreed doctrinally with our church. They continued to worship most of the time with our mission, but communed in their church. I think a resident pastor will make the difference with several of these families. We still do not appear permanent...at least in the eyes of the world.

January 1977: Bible class was started for adults. Most of the time there were 15-20 adults in attendance. While the children attended Sunday School classes in the other room, the adults were in the worship area studying the Gospel of St. John. Church attendance could usually be estimated from the Bible Class attendance.

Lent During Lent we conducted services on Thursday evenings at a local rest home.

attendance was always good. ~~xxxxx~~ Practically all of our members came. Congregational officers were elected in January. There was no constitution so one had to be developed. Our men busied themselves with this task.

January - April

During these months the congregation continued to grow both in number and spiritually. The congregation was becoming ~~more~~ one big family. The members associated with one another during the week as ~~more~~ well.

Request made for Mission Status

At our April meeting the voters decided to request Mission Status. They were anxious to proceed with naming the congregation and taking the necessary steps for permanance in the community. We were confident that we would be given Mission status but doubted very seriously that the Mission board would give us permission to call a resident pastor. God proved us wrong. We were granted both requests and then decided to call through the assignment committee from the Seminary graduating class. I tried to keep everything low key because I didn't think wedget a man so soon. But again the Lord had other plans. Peter Reid was assigned to serve as the first resident pastor of the Newly formed and named St. Luke Congregation, Grand Rapids, MN. I spent the next month and a half serving this young mission knowing that soon my personal contact and joys as their pastor would be over.

July 10th 1977 It was my God-given privilege to Install and ordain the first resident Pastor at St. Luke, Grand Rapids, before a full church in the library basement. 100 people were there. Friends from congregations in the conference and their closest neighbors... Bemidji 70 miles West and Brainerd 100 miles south

THESE JOYS AND PRIVILEGES ARE ONLY POSSIBLE BECAUSE GOD AND HIS PRECIOUS GOSPEL MOVE THE HEARTS OF OUR PEOPLE TO GIVE OF THEIR FINANCIAL GIFTS TO HIS KINGDOM WORK.