

Missouri Synod Approach to Mission in the Early Period

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1. If we were to put Perry County (Missouri, USA) out of our minds for a minute and consider the origin of The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod (LCMS), there is one fact which would impress us, namely that the LCMS was, in the words of the late Dr. Roy A. Suelflow, "basically, at its inception, a mission synod." Of the twelve charter *voting* members five were trained and sent as missionaries by Wilhelm Loehe. Of the twelve Charter *advisory* members five were sent by Loehe. Of the twelve "Friends of the Project" F. C. D. Wyneken must be noted because of his 1841 appeal to Loehe. The majority of the men who became charter voting and advisory members of the Synod in 1847 were not a part of the original Saxon immigration. Actually, C. F. W. Walther's congregation, Old Trinity, St. Louis, was the only *Saxon congregation* that joined at the time of the founding convention.

2. Much credit for arousing interest in sending these men and women to America must rightly go to F. C. D. Wyneken (1810-1876). He is remembered as the father of Lutheran Home Missions in the 19th century, who worked tirelessly in the interest of mission. He called attention to the need for mission work through his publication *Notruf* for "the distress of the German Lutherans in North America." We should also give credit to Wilhelm Löhe (1808-1872), a pastor and mission leader in Neuendettelsau, Germany, who prepared and sent more than 80 missionaries in response to Wyneken's appeals for help in support of Lutheran work in America. Löhe published a plea for workers in 1841, and with J.F. Wucherer (1803-81) published a paper in 1843 in behalf of America's need: *Kirchliche Mittheilungen aus and über Nord-Amerika*. These two men were co-founders of the home mission work in Bavaria, Germany, fought the rationalism of the day, and championed the cause of the Lutheran Confessions. Löhe in the meantime supported a theological school for the training of emergency helpers (*Nothelferserninar*), a "practical seminary," established in 1846 at Fort Wayne, Indiana. Wilhelm Sihler (1801-85) served as its head and professor with eleven students enrolled. At the request of the LCMS, Löhe turned the school over to the Synod in 1847. Löhe also established a Mission Society and a Deaconess Society in Neuendettelsau, Germany, in 1849 and 1854, respectively.

20 *Missio Apostolica*

When these missionaries to America-Sihler, F. A. Crämer (1812-91) and others-had joined forces with C. F. W. Walther (1811-87) and organized the Synod in 1847 the need for mission was accented in the synodical constitution, for one of the stated purposes of organizing the Synod was the spreading of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The new organization, small as it was, sent out missionaries immediately to survey and determine the possibility of doing mission work among the pioneers on the American Frontier. In the very first synodical proceedings we read of the work of these itinerant missionaries (*Reiseprediger*). In their individual work, too, the early fathers were intense missionaries. They tackled the problems that faced them in bringing the Gospel to-the new settlers. It was an accepted principle that each pastor was to look after the needs not only of his own immediate congregation, but to reach out as far as possible to the unchurched.

3. In the meantime Walther sounded a clear Lutheran note in *Der Lutheraner*, which he began to publish (1844), well before the organization of the Synod. Other pastors and congregations saw this banner of Lutheranism. For many who were looking for a rallying point, this became their regimental banner. Little by little, many others also applied to the Missouri Synod and entered into its membership. In this way, more Löhe men and also others were gained, which gave the Synod an exceptional growth in its early years.

Among those who joined were not only pastors with established congregations and home missionaries, but also missionaries already active in actual heathen mission work. We can mention here only a few names of those who were active in Michigan Indian mission work and who joined Synod shortly after its organization: E. J. Meier (b. 1828), E. G. H. Miessler (1826-1916), and E. R. Baierlein (1819-1901). These men added not only to the ranks of the synodical clergy, but they brought their former mission projects with them, so that in a few years a sizeable number of pastors were not in charge of established congregations but were really doing heathen mission work within the sphere of the Synod.

With this comparatively large number of missionaries comprising Synod, mission interest was so intense that before 1850 the proposal was brought before Synod to open mission work among the Indians in the State of Oregon. The fact that an Indian war was going on there at just that time did not deter them, but was considered additional reason why work ought to be planned immediately. At this point we could at least mention David Brainerd (1718-1747), who was earlier known as a friend of and a missionary to Indians, commissioned by the Society in Scotland for propagating Christian knowledge to work among Indians.

As the Synod grew, administration became more difficult, especially over the far-flung mission fields. To enable it to carry on mission work on the local level, synodical districts were formed in 1854. The emphasis was on decentralization,

which was the theme of the Synod in its early years. This seemed to be one of the chief factors which made a vigorous mission program possible.

4. However, Indian mission work received one setback after another. First, one of the champions of the work, Baierlein, was recalled by his sponsor, the Leipzig Mission Society (1819 on) in Germany, and sent to India in 1853. Baierlein had been sent to America by the Leipzig Mission to do mission work among the Indians, and his association with the Missouri Synod was purely incidental.

The Indians in Michigan were being settled on reservations. That consequently broke up some of the work in the older stations. Competition from sects tore away chunks of membership. Furthermore, the language barrier was a problem. Besides a few missionaries who were not charter members of Synod, there seem to have been only a few men who learned the Indian dialects. In one report we find a plea for a young man who would be able to handle at least English to help a missionary working among the Indians. The Indians, understandably, had no appreciation of the German of the missionary.

Finally, after the mission projects had suffered repeated setbacks, Synod resolved to close all its Indian work. This is the blow that felled completely the struggling project of Missouri Synod missions to the heathen. Synod's efforts were then narrowed to the home mission program of outreach to German immigrants who were coming in a steady stream. In short, the work among the Indians did not go well.

5. In home missions the Synod faced a tremendous challenge, of course, for those were days of the Midwest frontier, when the Midwest and the West were receiving tens of thousands of immigrants. The Missouri Synod faced the challenge admirably and strained its energies to gather German Lutherans into congregations and supply them with pastors. We can read column after column in *Der Lutheraner* of the difficulties of the *Reiseprediger*. They certainly deserve commendation as faithful servants.

As admirable and commendable as the home mission program of Synod had been from the beginning, however, there is one thing that strikes one when reading the reports of the home missionaries. Their goal was almost without exception to work among Germans, and more specifically, among German Lutherans in need of Word and Sacrament, congregational nurture, and pastoral care. That this was all good and necessary goes without saying. However, whether it should have been emphasized to the exclusion of all other activity seems to be questionable. In recent years, this type of ethnocentric concentration would be looked upon as a form of racial prejudice.

6. In spite of this somewhat restricted view of missions, an ecumenical spirit was evident in inter-synodical relations. In the 1860's free conferences were held with other Lutherans, which finally led to the organization of the General

22 *Missio Apostolica*

Council. Even though it may be disappointing to some to read that the LCMS felt unable to join, an encouraging note was struck in 1872 when the Synodical Conference was formed by a group of conservative Lutheran Synods. This new organization soon vigorously took up the challenge of then so-called "heathen missions" on the home front by beginning work among the American Blacks. Technically, this was not a Missouri Synod project, but the Synod was vitally interested and also contributed men and money willingly and generously. This project was no doubt an important factor in helping to keep alive the memory of the words "Go into all the world"

However, tensions were developing among Lutherans, also within the Synodical Conference. Differences of opinion concerning the issue of the Civil War were not forgotten even when the war was over. One acute question was that of "usury." Friction on this one point alone almost brought the tension to the bursting point.

7. Later the differences became even more serious when the doctrine of election (predestination) became the main issue. Polemics then became the main occupation of many individuals on both sides of the question, and the big challenge was no longer focused outward - to go out and win new peoples for the Savior, but it was bent inward - to defend the fortress of pure doctrine against attack from without and to cleanse it within.

That there were vital issues involved and that the truth had to be defended, no one would deny; but the emotional violence with which the flames of discord flared throughout the Synodical Conference during the 1880's did untold damage to the spirit of mission. For decades the ability of either side to undertake any larger mission project on a sizable scale was crippled.

8. However, there was one staunch spirit who kept on throughout the turmoil of these times to focus on the words "Go out into all the world" This man was George Ernst Ferdinand Sievers (1816-93), the father of Missouri Synod's foreign missions. When many lamps were hidden under bushels, his burned brightly on the stand; when other visions narrowed, his did not. Sievers had been associated with the old Indian missions. When this work was closed, the commission or board was kept intact because there were mission properties to be disposed of. Between conventions, Sievers sold the mission properties, and at conventions he never tired of bringing before the Synod the need of bringing the Gospel to the heathen. We find him year after year trying to stir up interest and arouse his brethren to the challenge. Sometimes the reply was that there was no open door. Then Sievers pointed out that the major nations of the Orient had just beets opened to foreigners. Once Sievers' appeals were brushed aside with the reply that there was no sign from God ("Kein Fingerzeig Gottes") that the Synod should really start foreign mission work. Synodical inertia was finally overcome

by pressure from the individual districts, many of which put in urgent pleas that foreign work be started.

The Board of Foreign Missions was instructed to make a study of foreign fields and to come before the Synod with recommendations. The Board was instructed, however, to pay particular attention to the Island of Ceylon (Sri Lanka) because it was reported that there were many Lutherans there. The concept of doing heathen mission work among Lutherans would probably strike us as strange today. Later Sievers became the chairman of Board of Foreign Mission but the Lord called him home before the Board's first meeting, set for Oct. 4-5, 1893. (For informative material, cf. A.R. Suelflow, "The Life and Work of George Ernst C.F. Sievers," in *Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly*, issues in 1947-50.)

Finally, an opening presented itself when a Japanese student, Henry Shigetaro Mizuno, at the Springfield seminary, was ready in 1895 to go back to Japan as the Synod's first missionary. This young man, Mizuno, pleading unsuccessfully for a co-worker, left our shores. However, ere long, other developments took place and all plans for Japan were shelved, and Mizuno was turned loose to shift for himself. (cf. "Henry Mizuno, Samurai without Support," by W. J. Danker, *CURRENTS*, Oct. '92, pp. 339ff. Also Arthur Stregé's B. D. Thesis on Japan Mission, at Concordia Seminary, 1952.)

Synod's attention was then turned to India and to two missionaries who had been working under the Leipzig mission society but had felt constrained to leave doctrinal reasons. One source states that upon the suggestion of some Missouri Synod friends in Germany, these men, Theodore Naether (1866-1904) and Franz E. Mohn (1867-1925), were sent to America where they were commissioned at Immanuel Lutheran Church, St. Charles, Missouri, October 14, 1894 and sent back to south India as Missouri Synod missionaries. Finally then, a beginning had been made in foreign missions. But it was seven years before anybody actually from within the ranks of the Missouri Synod clergy could be sent to India in spite of urgent pleas throughout the Synod.

9. Shortly thereafter, just at the turn of the century, work was begun in South America. A German Lutheran pastor, active in Brazil, had requested help from the Missouri Synod to work among German Lutherans. The challenge was accepted. C.J. Broders (1867-1932) went down to explore the field and to make contacts. His method was probably typical of the conventional Missouri Synod misses methods of the time, for he kept looking until he found some German Lutherans without a pastor, organized them into a congregation, and induced them to call a Missouri Synod pastor from North America. Then his work of breaking the ice was finished.

It is interesting to note that the Synod, after only a few years of work in South America, urged the formation of a district as soon as possible. It is a very hypothetical question, of course, but an interesting one, to ask what

24 *Missio Apostolica*

happen if the same policy were pursued in other foreign mission fields, such as India, or Japan, or the Philippine Islands. The constitutional difficulty encountered might be considerable at this late date after half a century and more of having all major decisions made by a Board based in St. Louis.

10. In synodical circles, however, interest was being aroused for a foreign mission to be begun, not like that in India, i.e., with missionaries who were formerly attached to an outside mission society, but with the Synod's own personnel - and not like that in South America, but rather among non-Germans "heathen." This movement in the Synod by Dr. E. L. Arndt (1864-1929) culminated in the organizing of the Evangelical Lutheran Mission for China (1912), the mission society which in 1913 sent him to China: Rev. Arndt began the work in his own way, establishing missions and schools in Hankow in 1913. He made it a point to learn the language. Under God's blessing his work prospered. With considerable hesitation and reluctance, the LCMS took over the work officially in 1917. This late date is a sad commentary on our mission history and on the Synod's "corporate inertia" in starting a mission project with its own forces to bring the Gospel to "heathen" nations.

After the Synod had taken over the China field in 1917, the work increased and in 1920 a full-time Director of Foreign Missions was called, namely, the late Dr. Frederick Brand. This marks the beginning of more centralization in foreign missions and also, eventually, more aggressiveness. At any rate, the work was not successful in number of converts. At the same time, controversy on the terms for God in Chinese also arose: whether a generic name for God or a personal name should be taken.

Into this period falls also the redoubled effort of the Synodical Conference in the field of "Negro" missions, for in 1936 work in Nigeria was begun. This was, again, not strictly Missouri Synod work, although our Synod lent the chief support for this project. (Note: words like "Negro," "heathen," "native," etc. were widely and commonly used in the past.)

11. After the appointment of Dr. Brand as full-time Director of Foreign Missions, an old dream of Sievers' was again revived, namely the plan to found a School of Missions for the training of foreign missionaries. Sievers had brought this plan up repeatedly, but no one listened. A few years after his Directorship of the Mission Board, the plan was brought up again. This time some people listened. The fact that it took about 15 years to get the mission school project under way at the Seminary does not indicate undue haste on our part in doing the Lord's work. During the presidency of Dr. Louis J. Sieck (1884-1953) a missionary orientation program was begun in 1944. Rev. E. C. Zimmermann, then repatriated from China, was called to head the program. Others contemplated a bigger dream. Dr. Roy Suelflow, a veteran missionary to China and Taiwan, strongly advocated the importance of having a Mission School for the Synod's

mission. In 1954 he said at Concordia Seminary: "Start immediately to build up a mission school at the Seminary. A good staff of about a dozen men here in the mission school would attract missionaries from many other churches and our Biblical and confessional standard would thus permeate many missions all over the world."

12. With World War II, however, we were reminded that foreign mission programs dare not be geared to the slow pace of figuring by centuries, but that urgency is required in the King's business. We also discovered from the reports of chaplains and service pastors that there were heavily populated lands which we hadn't aggressively considered as potential mission fields. Through contacts of service pastors and chaplains we were able, after nudging and prodding on their part, to start work in the Philippines and Japan. Post-War expansion of our foreign missions also includes work in New Guinea (now called Papua New Guinea), Guatemala, as well as in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and South Korea.

With the overriding expansion of Communism in Asia, particularly China, the Board for Missions in Foreign Countries was forced not only to evacuate its workers but also to re-evaluate its whole mission policy and strategy. If at this early date (1948) after the collapse of LCMS work in China legitimate conclusions may be drawn, they would seem to call into question the wisdom of centralized planning under conditions where the center of the planning is far removed from the center of the work. Indeed, this subject has been an ongoing topic for reflection and critical assessment ever since.

As we look back on more than a hundred years of synodical mission history, there are several points that cry for attention. One that might well be noted in this period of centralized aggressiveness is the fact that our major mission advances have never resulted from mission board initiative or creative, centralized planning, but have rather taken considerable, consistent pressure from the outside, from the bottom up, as evidenced particularly by the beginning of foreign work in 1894-95 and in China, 1913-17. Yet in all this we can with humble hearts thank and praise God for many blessings. The Gospel was preached and taught. His Word, as promised, did not return without results. Many blood-bought souls for whom Christ died and rose again were brought into the Kingdom of God. All glory be to God above.

Much more could have been said about the early beginnings of LCMS mission work, just as much as there is a need to gibe and evaluate the developments and directions of LCMS mission work since 1945. For more background the following partial listing of references can be helpful: Danker, W. J., *Two Worlds or None*, 1964; Koepfmann, Herman H., "Missouri Synod Undertakes Foreign Missions," article in *Concordia Theological Monthly*, August 1951 pp. 552-566; Lueking, F. Dean, *Mission in the Making*, 1964; Meinzen, Luther W., *A Church in Mission: Identity and Purpose in India*, 1981; Meyer,

26 *Missio Apostolica*

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