

GOD OPENS ANOTHER MISSION DOOR
A HISTORY OF DIVINE WORD EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH
PLOVER, WISCONSIN

by

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A letter arrives in the mail. One family writes to a pastor and expresses an interest in starting ELS services in the Stevens Point area. God's grace is at work. He opens another door for missions. He shows that here is another place where He would have His Word proclaimed. From that initial request from several concerned Christians, Divine Word congregation has grown to a church of 267 souls in shortly over ten years. God's amazing grace once again shows itself for all of us to see!

BEGINNINGS

In order to trace the history of Divine Word we need to go back to the year of 1969. That year several families moved into the Stevens Point area. These were families that were looking for a strong, confessional Lutheran Church. This group first contacted a group of such Christians from Our Savior's Lutheran Church, an ELS church located in Amherst Junction, which is about 15 miles southeast of Stevens Point. This church was being served by Rev. Wilhelm Peterson of Grace Lutheran Church, Madison, Wisconsin. Pastor Peterson was trying to get the people to leave Amherst Junction and to establish an ELS congregation in the Stevens Point area, perhaps as a result of the group of families that had just moved into the area. However, most of the people at Our Savior's didn't want to leave. One of the reasons why they wanted to stay

was because of the ELS cemetery at their church.

Meanwhile, the Charles Hunger family of Stevens Point decided to contact a pastor from the Wisconsin Synod. Mr. Hunger, who was a high school teacher in Stevens Point at the time, wrote to Rev. William Lange of St. Paul's Lutheran Church in Wisconsin Rapids, Wisconsin. Pastor Lange relayed the request to the Mission Board of the Western Wisconsin District. Even previous to this request St. Paul's had some contact with people in Stevens Point, for their Men's Club had been sending some cars over to Stevens Point to transport students from the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point (UW-SP) to St. Paul's for services. The District Mission Board showed interest in establishing exploratory services in the area, to those families who were interested in a doctrinally conservative, Bible centered church, and to serve the WELS students at the University.

If we were to summarize then the outward reason why this WELS church got started in the Stevens Point area, we could list three items. First, the fact that the ELS church in Amherst Junction did not want to establish a church in the area. Second, the request of the Hunger family, who along with several other families, were looking for a Confessional Lutheran Church. Third, the number of WELS students at UW-SP who could be served by establishing a congregation. The primary, inward reason why this church had a beginning was that God set before His people another open mission door.

GETTING STARTED

The District Mission Board gave Pastor Lange the go-ahead.

The ELS gave its approval. Plans were then set in motion to hold exploratory services in the Stevens Point area! During the summer of 1970 Pastor Lange met with the families who had expressed interest in services. Early in September, Pastor Lange and his vicar, Paul Zittlow, met in the Hunger's house to plan for the first exploratory service. Many items were discussed, including a site for this service, a newspaper ad, a portable church sign, and a canvass of a portion of Stevens Point. There was some difficulty in finding a place to hold services, as Stevens Point is a strong Roman Catholic city. Unable to locate a place to rent for services in the city, Pastor Lange and the dedicated families who wanted to get services started ended up renting the Whiting Town Hall for their Sunday services.

On September 13, 1970, the first exploratory service was held at the Whiting Town Hall with 28 people in attendance! Their "church" was a one room school house which was clean and roomy, and came complete with a piano. The rental fee was just \$10.00 per Sunday. Pastor Lange conducted that first exploratory service, while Vicar Zittlow remained at St. Paul's in Wisconsin Rapids to conduct the 10:30 service there.

Pastor Lange and Vicar Zittlow then made plans to serve the people in the Stevens Point area with regular services. Following that first service Pastor Lange and Vicar Zittlow generally switched off. One week Vicar Zittlow would preach his sermon at St. Paul's 9:00 service and Pastor Lange would

take the liturgy. After this service Pastor Lange would leave for Stevens Point, about a twenty mile drive. He would conduct the exploratory service at the Town Hall, while Vicar Zittlow conducted the entire second service at St. Paul's. The next week Vicar Zittlow would take the early liturgy at St. Paul's and then would conduct the service in Stevens Point, while Pastor Lange stayed at St. Paul's. Either Mrs. Lange or Mrs. Zittlow would play the piano for the exploratory service up until the time when someone from Stevens Point was found who could perform that service. Holy Communion was celebrated at the Stevens Point church once a month.

During that first year Pastor Lange and Vicar Zittlow were involved in efforts to gain members for this infant church. The WELS students at UW-SP helped Pastor Lange and Vicar Zittlow in evangelism calls. Follow up calls were made on prospects who attended services. There were also newspaper ads and coverage, together with mailings to people in the area. One major milestone during the first year was the establishment of a Lutheran Collegians chapter at the University. Many of the university students attended the exploratory services and this campus ministry played an important role in establishing a congregation in the Stevens Point area.

The Wisconsin Synod gave this group of believers permission in 1971 to call a pastor and to officially start a mission in the area. The Mission Board felt that the mission had prospects and was ready to move ahead. Therefore, Synod decided to call a graduate from the 1971 class at Wisconsin Lutheran

Seminary to serve this growing mission congregation.

PASTOR ROGER KOBLESKE

On Call Day, 1971, at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary in Mequon, Wisconsin, Roger Kobleske received the divine call to serve the mission church in Stevens Point. The information he received about the congregation was very sketchy. The reason for this, he was told, was that originally Stevens Point was not on the list of places to be granted manpower, that this was a last minute action by the General Board for Home Missions (GBHM).

Pastor Kobleske, his wife, and his infant daughter were unable to move to Stevens Point until late July, 1971, since no housing had been located. Eventually they moved to an apartment at 2416 Algoma Street in Stevens Point. On August 1, 1971, Roger Kobleske was ordained and installed as the first resident pastor of Divine Word. God, in His grace, continued to shower His abundant blessings upon this infant church.

As was mentioned earlier, the congregation had already received mission status and the right to organize from the Synod. In September of 1971 the congregation was officially organized. There were 13 voting members present at the meeting. It was at this meeting that the Wisconsin Synod's model constitution was adopted and the name "Divine Word" was officially accepted. This name was the suggestion of a college student, a young man by the name of Steve Loehr. By the end of 1971 Divine Word had grown to 48 souls, with 31 communicants.

Pastor Kobleske spent his first year in the ministry

organizing the congregation, canvassing, and working at the campus ministry at UW-SP. The congregation experienced steady growth, mainly through transfers. Divine Word also began searching for land.

In 1972 the Lord led this flock to a section of land in Plover, a town on the outskirts of Stevens Point. In October of 1972, the present land site of 3.6 acres, at the corner of Plover Spring Drive and Washington Street in Plover, was purchased for the sum of \$9,000.00. The area was nothing but sand and pine trees when Divine Word bought the lot. By December the congregation had requested the Synod for a relocatable chapel. The congregation felt that this chapel would give them an identity and a feeling of permanency in the community. Divine Word was one of the first missions to use this relocatable chapel. It was a double wide mobile home type unit. Although there were some problems getting this temporary unit approved by the Plover Village Board, as well with some plumbing problems, the facility did help the growth of Divine Word. When this unit was dedicated on December 2, 1973, the congregation numbered 111 souls, 67 communicants. By the end of 1974 the membership had grown to 146 souls and 85 communicants.

While Pastor Kobleske served Divine Word, the campus ministry also expanded. Pastor Kobleske began to use the Missouri Synod chapel at UW-SP for Lutheran Collegian services. Previously the congregation had used an old telephone van to bus the collegians to services in Plover. When services began to be held on the campus there was no longer any need to pro-

vide such transportation. The van was then used to transport children from Plover to the Christian Day School in Wisconsin Rapids on a daily basis, so that the children at Divine Word could take advantage of the Christian education offered by St. Paul's Christian Day School.

The next major undertaking at Divine Word was the building of the parsonage. This took place in 1974-75. The congregation did as much of the work as possible in order to hold down costs. The floor plan was the congregation's own. It was designed not only to provide living space but also space for Sunday School classes and Boy Pioneer meetings, both of which were underway at this time. The usual construction delays and problems were encountered but everything proceeded at a good pace. On April 26, 1975, the parsonage was dedicated. The final cost was \$34, 786.

Less than one year later, in March of 1976, Pastor Kobleske asked for his release to pursue a teaching call at Kettle Moraine Lutheran High School. The congregation failed to receive a candidate from the graduating class of the Seminary and, as a result, Pastor Kobleske agreed to stay on as vacancy pastor. In July of 1976 the voters extended a call to Rev. Craig Weber, who was serving Abiding Savior Lutheran Church in Weslaco, Texas at this time. The Lord moved Pastor Weber to accept the call and he thus became the second resident pastor of Divine Word Lutheran Church.

PASTOR CRAIG WEBER

Pastor Weber and his family moved to Plover in late August, 1976. On September 5th, he was installed as pastor of Divine Word. In that month another historic milestone occurred: bids were let out for the construction of a new church and fellowship hall. The low bidder was Don's Construction of Waupaca, Wisconsin, with their bid of \$183,197. Groundbreaking ceremonies took place on October 31, 1976, with construction beginning shortly thereafter.

By the end of 1976 church membership had grown to 185 souls and 106 communicants. The average Sunday church attendance was 116 and 46 children attended Sunday School. God continued to richly bless the work being done in Plover.

The prayers, gifts, and work of many people brought to completion a beautiful church and fellowship hall, which was dedicated to the Triune God on July 24, 1977. Guest speakers for the three services were Rev. Roger Kobleske, Rev. William Lange, and Rev. Elton Huebner. The membership figures at the time of dedication were 199 souls, 120 communicants. At this time the congregation decided to have a pictorial directory of all members made up as a remembrance of this special occasion.

In the year 1978 Pastor Weber began efforts to get the congregation firmly organized as a working body, to carry out a sound program of ministry. An advisory committee was formed to reorganize the offices and various boards of the Church Council, and to revise the charter Constitution and By-Laws. The adoption of the 1978 budget saw the congregation go "self-supporting," with the exception of the capital subsidy received

from Synod. The congregation adopted an official seal based on Mt 28:18-20, Christ's Great Commission. The Board of Education also began investigating the possibility of opening a Christian Day School for the children of Divine Word.

The year also saw a number of things done to make the new worship facility more pleasant. Included among these things was the landscaping around the church, the building of a stairway to the balcony, the building of a baptismal font by Eldon Nuessmeier, and the purchase of church pews from Mt. Olive Lutheran Church of Appleton, Wisconsin.

1978 marked the first year where the membership at Divine Word experienced a decline. This resulted mainly from the transfer of many families out of town because of different employment. The Church Council recognized this as a problem for the church in the future and they felt that the situation would need to be watched in the years ahead.

At the annual voters meeting in January of 1979 the voting members decided to open a Christian Day School in the Fall of 1979. The vote was 12 to 9. Since the margin of passage was so narrow, another meeting was called in February 1979. At this meeting it was decided to delay the school until suitable funding became available. The Lord again blessed the growth of Divine Word in 1979 so that at the end of the year the congregation numbered 218 souls and 133 communicants.

In January 1980, the Christian Day School proposal was again voted down due to the financial strain it would place on the congregation. A subcommittee was formed to investigate

alternative methods of Christian Education and to promote the Christian Day School. In June the Parishoner's Advisory for Christian Education (PACE) was formed and a five-year plan was devised for the establishment of a Christian Day School.

1980 also marked the tenth anniversary of Divine Word Lutheran Church. A special service of thanksgiving was held on September 14, 1980, at 3:00 PM. Pastor William Lange was the guest speaker. An anniversary dinner was held following the special service.

In October of 1980 Divine Word started their first radio program on the local radio station WSPT. The program was entitled "Come to the WELS." The congregation numbered 236 souls and 137 communicants at the close of the year.

The year 1981 brought with it the adoption of a new revised Constitution and By-Laws. This document was printed in booklet form and included a Handbook for Church Officers. The new document was well received by the congregation.

The fund set up for the Christian Day School already had a balance of \$12,000 in 1981. Again the Lord blessed Divine Word with a substantial growth in membership, with the totals reaching 267 souls and 165 communicants.

In July of that year an interesting reversal took place. At this time St. Paul's of Wisconsin Rapids had a vacancy as a result of the retirement of Pastor William Lange. Pastor Weber filled that two and a half month vacancy, working with Vicars Michael Wolff and David Clark, once again alternating the preaching duties even as Pastor Lange and Vicar Zittlow

had done when they began the exploratory services. The Lord does move in mysterious ways, letting the members of Divine Word help the members of St. Paul's, who had helped get their congregation started! Pastor Weber served as vacancy pastor until September 13, 1981, when Pastor Norman Paul was installed in Wisconsin Rapids.

This then concludes the history of Divine Word Evangelical Lutheran Church in Plover, Wisconsin. This church is certainly another miracle of God's amazing grace, of God opening yet another door where His Word would be proclaimed. This church faced obstacles, the chief one being the religious makeup of the Stevens Point area, which is almost 90% Roman Catholic. God has richly blessed Divine Word; this one can plainly see. He continues to do so. God will perform still other miracles of His grace; He will continue to open doors for us where we may proclaim His Word, even as He did in Plover, Wisconsin.

STATISTICS

YEAR	MEMBERS	COMMUNICANTS	AVG CHURCH ATTENDANCE	BAPTISMS	CONFIRM ATIONS	MARRI AGES	BURIAL	AFFIRM BY FAITH
1971	48	31	NA	0	1 (A)	0	0	NA
1972	80	50	NA	3	1 (A)	1	0	NA
1973	103	62	NA	4	4 (3A)	1	0	NA
1974	146	85	102	10	7 (2A)	1	0	17
1975	163	92	116	6	3 (2A)	1	0	11
1976	185	106	116	4	4 (1A)	2	0	2
1977	207	127	126	9	7 (4A)	0	1	19
1978	187	118	123	7 (2A)	7 (4A)	2	0	1
1979	218	133	124	7	8 (3A)	0	1	13
1980	236	137	136	10	2	2	0	5
1981	267	165	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA

YEAR	GIVING-ALL PURPOSES AVG / COMMUNICANT
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1971	41.94
1972	98.72
1973	130.18
1974	157.61
1975	173.50
1976	165.57
1977	173.18
1978	267.88
1979	227.15
1980	290.09

BIBLIOGRAPHY

My sources for this paper consisted in correspondence from and/or interviews with the following pastors: Pastor William Lange; Pastor Paul Zittlow, Pastor Roger Kobleske, Pastor Craig Weber.