

MISSION FESTIVALS - PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE

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When Christ commanded us at His ascension to teach all nations and to baptize all nations, Christ never instructed us as to the form of teaching we were to use. Christ in His Great Commission wished for His followers to go and spread His Holy Word but never told us how. Not only in Christ's Great Commission but throughout Scripture, we have God's command to share His holy Word with all men. God never told us how we are to spread His Word but He gave us the command to disperse His holy Word to the ends of the earth. There is only one way of sharing God's Word and that is to speak the Word of God to all men.

However, in order to share the Word of God, all Christians must not only know the Word of God but be motivated to spread God's holy Word. Many Christians may never leave their home town but all Christians are missionaries.

In our mission festivals all the members of our church are motivated to show the need of mission work in our church. Though the need of mission work is dear to the hearts of all Christians, it is a sad fact that far too many times our mission festivals are overlooked. Far too often our members don't even know that we have a special day set aside pertaining to the subject of our church's mission work.

In this paper I will look at the different mission customs in the past-dating from 1872-1910, the present-dating from 1910-1982, and even into the future. By viewing these different customs this paper will demonstrate the influence mission festivals have had on Lutheranism in America. The story of mission festivals is that once an elaborate practice has seemed to deteriorate from a festival to a service. However, the closing pages of this paper demonstrate that the members of the church realize the need for mission festivals and offer suggestions to bring back some festival in our mission services.

As one turns back the pages of history to the early years of our Synod, one realizes that mission work and mission services were held with the highest esteem. Our churches have always known that mission festivals were a wonderful way of showing our thanks to God for His Word and motivating our members to support the mission work of our Synod. The custom of mission festivals took many different forms. Some churches celebrated the day with their own members. Each church would have their pastor or a guest pastor speak to their congregation and that was all the service would entail. At least the individual church realized that it had an active part in mission work.

However, other churches took the word festival literally and made a real festival out of their mission fest. In the past, several churches would get together and hold joint mission services. Most of the time these mission services would last all day. The mission festival was not only a service but also a very special social engagement for the year. The members of the churches not only waited with eager

anticipation for the message of the day, but they also longed for the visits with their relatives and friends. Through the years and volumes of the Gemeinde=Blatt one is able to relia~~ve~~ the mission festivals of the past.¹

One such mission festival is described in the August 1872 issue of the Gemeinde=Blatt. The churches involved with this particular festival were; Farmington, Jefferson, Fort Atkinson, and Hellenville. The churches would gather together at one of the above congregations and the mission service would be an all-day observance. With the above churches, though this is not a set law, the host pastor would serve as liturgist and the other pastors would preach the sermons. Usually there were two services held for each mission Sunday, one in the morning and one in the afternoon. Yet, in this particular festival, three sermons were presented. The length of the sermons were not given, yet I wonder how many people today would be willing to listen to three sermons! Each pastor would base his sermon on a mission theme.

In regard to the social session the host congregation would serve the noon meal between the two services. There was plenty of time between services in which the people could visit with family and friends. The social contact was important. Through such contact many of the members not only became acquainted with fellow members of their Synod but they could also discuss the mission work of the church. It appears that abundance of information was passed among members during the

¹ Evangelisch=Lutherische Gemeinde=Blatt, August 1872.

social session of the festival.

The collections which were gathered at these festivals demonstrated how precious the church's mission work was to the members. In this particular mission fest, the collection amounted to \$115. The figure may appear low but one must remember that in 1872 dollars were not given but quarters, nickels, and pennies were given. For this festival no mention is made as to where the collection was sent. One just concludes that the money was used to continue mission work in the church.

Also, though no attendance figure was given, it is stated that the roads were lined with horse and buggies. Also by the amount of the offering one is able to conclude that the festival was well attended. These four churches would hold a joint festival with a rotating schedule. Each year a different church would have the honor of hosting the joint service.

Many of the early festivals dating from 1872 to 1910 followed the above pattern. Usually three or four congregations would join together with one of the congregations serving as the host congregation. Sometimes even all of the churches of a particular county would gather together for a joint mission service.² The host congregation would provide the meal for the day. Most of the time, two services would be held. One would take place about 10:00 AM and the second service about 2:30 or 3:00 PM. The sermons were preached by the travelling pastor or a guest speaker. The sermons usually

²Gemeinde=Blatt. August 1884.

had a general mission theme to them. There was not a strong emphasis on either foreign or home mission but usually a general sermon of the work of our Synod in the Lord's harvest was the theme of the sermons.

The collections which were gathered were used for various needs of the congregations. The 1873 mission festival of Oshkosh, Ripon, and Fond du Lac was divided equally in half between their parish education and their Hermansburger mission. For the 1885 mission fest of David's Star Church the amount of \$114.74 was divided as follows: \$74.74 to the Seminary in Milwaukee, \$20 to the Jewish mission, and \$20 to the Negro mission. In 1887 the Menomonee festival divided their collection for the travelling pastor, negro mission, emmigration mission of New York, and to aid their institution education. The pattern of recipients of the collection seemed to be for the pastors and teachers education. Not only would they provide funds for the students preparing for the Lord's mission work but portions of the collections were given to aid our Synod's education institution. In Minnesota the mission fest of Lake City, Frontenac, West Florence, and West Albam help build a church in the area.³ Though the offerings were used for many different aspects of church work, the offerings were usually designated for some specific mission work of the day.

The figures for attendance are hard to obtain. However, as one looks at the offerings gathered, one is able to believe that the festivals were well attended. No doubt since

³Gemeinde=Blatt. August 1897.

the festivals were held all day long it was hard to obtain an accurate count because people would come and go throughout the services.

The period from 1910 - to the present has seen a change in the customs of mission festivals. The Gemeinde=Blatt no longer goes into great detail but usually just gives figures on the amount of the collections. This period of mission festivals will be pictured by a typical festival from David's Star celebration of mission Sunday. The following paragraphs were arranged by information supplied by Mr. & Mrs. Rudolph Zarling who are members of David's Star Church. The age of Mr. Zarling is 80 and Mrs. Zarling is 77. In my interview they recalled different mission fests which they observed throughout their lives. A summary of the interview follows.

David's Star mission fest took place on the second Sunday of August. Other churches of the surrounding area such as Cedarburg, Freistadt, and Jackson were invited. Usually these churches would have their own mission fests on different Sundays and most of the time you would attend all of the area mission fests. The mission fest would be a whole day affair. The theme for the day would be a general mission theme. Many times the speakers would be missionaries and they would discuss their particular work but the sermons discussed the need for mission work. The ~~services~~ were usually conducted in the German language. As the years went on the Zarlings commented that the morning service was in German and the afternoon in English. The services would be held outdoors in the church's woods. The altar was made by certain men of the church and the pulpit was carried down

from the church.

Zarling's only comment concerning the attendance of the festivals was that the services were well attended. Since the services were held outdoors and the people would come and go an accurate count was hard to take. Usually the afternoon service was better attended than the morning and the reason given for this was in the morning the invited churches held their own services and then in the afternoon come to David's Star service.

The Zarlings recalled how important the social gatherings were. The church band not only played for the services but also between the services. Between the services gave ample opportunity to renew old acquaintances among other members of the different churches. Others would take this opportunity to visit the cemetery to pay respects to their lost loved ones.

A noon meal was served by the ladies of the congregation. The meal was free until 1950. The menu for the day was weiners, bread and butter, cheese, cakes, and wetcakes. Most of the time the food was donated by the members of the church. One of the biggest attractions of the noon meal and between the services was the refreshment of beer. Around the tap most of the men could be found discussing the matters of the day. An evening meal would also be served for those who remained. Visiting would continue well into the evening hours as the members cleaned the area after the festival.

The offerings which were gathered have always been used for mission work. The Zarlings recalled how some of the money

was given to the Seminary but most of the time the offering was given directly to the Synod for the support of its mission work.

David's Star mission fest is a typical picture of a festival held during the period of 1910 to the present. My aunts and uncles and parents recall events similiar to those cited by Zarlings. All of them noted a change of mission customs over the past few years. From the late 1950's there has been a change seen by the members of our church. Mission festivals do not seem as effective today as they did in the past. Some interesting comments were made of the mission festivals of today.

Zarlings noted that when our fellowship with the Missouri Synod was severed the attendance became lower. No longer were other churches invited but David's Star held their own service. My parents also noted that in the late 50's when joint services were dropped that attendance also began to decline. When each individual church has its own mission fest they cannot present such an elaborate festival as many churches can together.

Also, today the mission festivals do not seem to get the attention as they did previously. Today the people are not willing to sit through a whole day of services. Many of our members only wish to hear one service. Today many of our mission fests are only one or two Sundays out of the year. The speakers are no longer missionaries but usually only an exchange of neighboring pastors. Some churches such as my home congregation, have Seminary students preach but besides a different speaker no one seems to know that it is a special

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Sunday.

Today at least many special offerings are held by our congregations for mission fests. As in the past, these offerings are designated for support of our Synod's mission work. The offerings are given for both home and world missions. The offerings may not go for specific areas but the money is used for needed support in our mission work. The amounts may vary, but the members still realize how important it is to carry on mission work so that all men might hear God's holy Word.

As the years progress from 1872 - 1982 the customs of different mission festivals have appeared to decline. The need for mission work and the support of missions may not have changed but the service itself has changed. Instead of two or three services we now only have one. In place of an all day social event we now have only one hour long service. In place of several congregations gathering together, the trend of today seems to be for each church to celebrate its own mission festival.

Whatever the reasons for the decline of missions festivals may be, mission festivals have had a lasting imprint on Lutheranism in America. I am sure all of our members would admit the need of mission work. The motivation our members receive from different practices is so important in strengthening their faith. The heritage of the celebration of mission fests has been implanted in the hearts of our members. The heritage of mission festivals are held very dearly. David's Star's annual service still draws large crowds. It is interesting to observe through my interviews how some of our members would

like to celebrate mission festivals. Judy Kilmer of David's Star church offers suggestions for future practices.

One of the biggest complaints I received during my interviews was the fact that the churches do not seem to be inovated in using their imagination when it comes to the planning of mission festivlas. Many of those interviewed, especially those who were older, wish that we would return to the old practices of the church and have an all day affair. They believed that just one hour is not long enough to emphasize the importance of mission work. The success of David's Star seems to support the idea that the members of the congregation are willing to sacrifice a day to hear about our mission work.

Mrs. Kilmer thought that mission festivals should last longer than just one Sunday. She thought a good idea would be to have three Sundays in a row for mission festival. One Sunday would be to introduce the festival, the next would be the main theme of the fest, and the third would be a summary. This is one avenue which is possible to take.

Another avenue to take to rekindle interest in mission festivals would be the use of visual aids. All those interviewed stated that it is hard to picture the work that is being done without some type of visual aids. Some churches are turning to this method of visual aids and getting all of their members involved in making these visual aids. The ladies may make graphs, the men build certain projects, the youths can sing. It is very important to involve all of the members of the church.

All those interviewed agreed that the offering for the

day is very important. Though no special fund was mentioned, all were in accord that the offering was to be used to support the Synod's work. An interesting point was developed during the discussion that mission festivals did renew in their hearts the need to increase their mission givings. Not only was their offering increased for that particular day, but also increased for the rest of the year because they were reminded of the need of supporting mission work and that all of us our missionaries.

Zarlings, my parents, my aunts and uncles all wished to have joint services for mission festivals. The older ones recalled the advantages of the social contact between members of other churches. The younger ones who I talked to placed the social session on the bottom of their list for improvement. However, all agreed that strength is found in numbers so maybe in the future a trend could be of having joint services again. With several congregations together we could once again have an elaborate festival which the individual congregation can not supply.

The heritage of mission festivals are very precious to the members of the church. The old practices should not be dropped entirely but changed for our society today. The need to increase awareness of the churches' mission work must always be placed before our people.

It has been said that history repeats itself. If this is true, maybe someday soon our mission fest will return to mission festivals. Our practices today, of 1982, are different of 1882 but it seems like we are returning to the days of old. Though our mission festivals have dwindled in the

magnitude as they were 100 years ago, yet comfort should be found in knowing that least our churches realize the need for mission Sundays and still celebrate them. Through these festivals our members are made aware of the need for supporting our Synod's mission work. Also, through such festivals our members are renewed with added zeal to share in the expense and in the work of sharing God's Word with all men of all nations. Though the practices have changed, we are thankful that we still practice mission festivals in our own way and that we will always have mission festivals.

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In the interviews I allowed them to discuss what they have seen in their lifetime. Pastor Nolte and Mr. and Mrs. Kilmer were of younger age than the rest of those interviewed.

Also my own observations were given.