



WELS  
MISSIONS  
IN  
THE  
NORTHWEST

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I wish to express my gratitude to the pastors of the Pacific Northwest who answered my questionnaires. Their valuable insights added the depth of personal experience.

It seems that the west coast of the United States is usually labeled a "non-religious" area of the country. This seems particularly true about the Pacific Northwest. Perhaps this is true, and perhaps it is not. It is the aim of this paper to show not only the mission activities of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Church in this region, but also to determine whether the current trends of mission emphasis are sufficient. It is the contention of this writer, that although the Northwest, like any "frontier", offers unique challenges to the missionary, and that these challenges could be adequately met by an increased mission emphasis.

The Pacific Northwest District became a part of the WELS in 1918. But the events leading up to the district date back to 1894. Unfortunately the records of the district and of the synod for these early years (until 1932) are rather bare. So a detailed record of the history is not available. The basic facts and trends however are available. In 1894 R. Wolff of Tacoma, Washington decided to leave the old Ohio Synod. He and his congregation, St. Paul's, joined the Wisconsin Synod. The reason for this change is not stated in the synodical records. In 1902 Pastor Wolff was forced to retire because of ill health. The congregation was served by a vacancy pastor until 1903 when A.G. Ernst was installed as the pastor. He served as their pastor until 1907.

Unfortunately the short stay of Pastor Ernst shows one trend that has seriously hurt mission work in the Northwest. The Wisconsin Synod's work in the Northwest has always suffered under the handicap of a constantly changing ministry. During the 1920's, there was a time when Pastors Soll and Lueckel were the only workers on active duty to serve all the missions in Washington, Oregon and Idaho. In the first place it was difficult to get anyone but a Seminary graduate to come into the western mission field. Perhaps the rigors of the "wilderness," the long absences due to travelling, etc., were thought by some to be too much for one's family. Also there was a feeling that the Northwest was a "burial ground" for those who were not "making it" in an established congregation in the Midwest. An elderly pastor in the Midwest said to a young graduate who was about to leave home to pursue his call to a small congregation in the state of Washington in 1929,

"We have no business out there; the sooner we close this field the better." 1

This was a feeling that has lasted until only recently. The Seminary graduates who were placed in the Northwest by the assignment committee, were often tempted to return to the Midwest. The lure of an established congregation, the financial obligations of an ever increasing family (missionaries were paid only \$50.00 a month out of which had to come the rental of a parsonage and a horse, train and boat

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1. As quoted in the 1968 Proceedings, p.5.

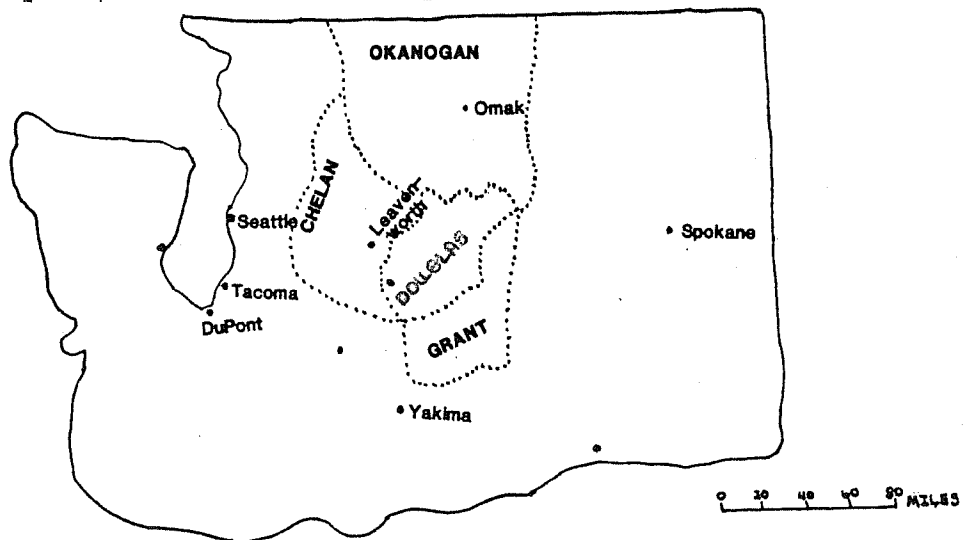
tickets for his journeys and all other personal expenses), and perhaps even marriage itself often sent the young missionary back to the midwest. This lack of a continuous base of experienced personal kept mission work in the area taking two steps backward for every three forward.

As the years passed this attitude fortunately changed to a degree. It was no longer too difficult to get men to fill the needs in the Northwest. And financial aid for the missions was more readily available. Even in the years when there was a surplus of graduates at the Seminary, the Northwest could have easily absorbed them all. The only thing which prohibited this was that the necessary cash was not available.

St. Paul's was the only church of the Wisconsin Synod in the entire Northwest until 1905. In October of that year Pastor Ernst organized Grace Church in Yakima, Washington. It was served by J. Ebert, a former LCMS pastor. This congregation, however, had a very difficult time at the beginning. Since the congregation did not have its own place to worship, it had to rent the Sunday School rooms of a Presbyterian church and an Adventist church. An even greater hindrance was the hostility of the local LCMS congregation. Perhaps they felt that the new WELS church was infringing on their territory. This seems to have been the carry over from the early years of the LCMS and WELS controversy about

whether a church from each synod could be in the same area. The situation turned into an synodical case which was not settled until 1912. The WELS won the decision.

In 1907 new opportunities for mission work presented themselves in Washington for the Wisconsin Synod. Lutherans from Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Iowa who had moved to Leavenworth (a tiny village nestled in the Cascade mountains) asked for a pastor. A graduate, M. Raasch was sent to serve them. His field contained all of North Central Washington-- Chelan, Douglas, Grant and Okanogan counties.



This covered an area of about 100 square miles. The terrain of this area is covered by mountains, dense forests, lakes, rivers and deserts. There were no paved highways or airplanes. Where possible he took a train. But this often meant waiting hours, or perhaps days for a branch line to pick him up. From the drop off point he would have to travel on horseback or lumber wagon to his destination. Often he would have to travel over 340 miles round trip. His flock, German Russians from the Volga area, welcomed him. Raasch

carried on alone in North Central Washington until 1910. The Mission Board in Wisconsin then sent a Seminary graduate, F. Stern, to Mansfield to take over part of the work.

By 1910 there were four missionaries in the Washington mission field. In November of 1910, these four men met in the study of St. Paul's Church in Tacoma, for the first conference of Wisconsin Synod pastors in the Pacific Northwest.

In 1912 there was alot of activity in the Washington mission field. The Mission Board sent three graduates to the area. E. Kirst came to Ellensburg, W. Haas to Clarkston, and S. Probst to Kennewick. For awhile a mission in the White Bluff's region gave promise of growth and development. But in World War II the Federal Government took over the whole area and created the Hanford Atomic Energy Commission. As a result every one living in the area was moved out and scattered to many smaller communities.

Also in 1912 F. Soll was called to Grace congregation in Yakima. He had been a pastor in Wisconsin and Michigan. He had also been President of the old Joint Synod of Wisconsin. His main duty was to see that the work being carried on in the Northwest stayed within the bounds of conservative Lutheranism.

Also in 1912, contact was made with a group of Lutherans in Portland, Oregon. Missionaries Soll and Probst explored the area and conducted services for the people. In 1913 Missionary Lutz arrived. He, however, remained only a year. F. Eppling arrived in 1916.

By 1917 the work of the Synod in the Northwest had expanded and 9 missionaries were active in Washington and Oregon. These were: Ave Lallemand in Tacoma, F. Soll in Yakima, E. Kirst in Ellensburg, S. Probst in Kennewick, L. Krug in White Bluffs, W. Hass in Clarkston, F. Eppling in Portland, G. Haase in Mansfield and W. Lueckel in Omak.

The year 1918 marked great changes in the Northwest. In 1918 the one independent congregation and the seven mission fields of the Pacific Northwest became the Pacific Northwest District of the Evangelical Joint Synod of Wisconsin and other States. Perhaps this stemmed from the inherent desire to be an integral part of the Synod which had supplied them so much help. Or perhaps this was part of the urge for closer union which also showed itself in the formation of the Evangelical Joint Synod of Wisconsin a.o. States from the federation of four state synods.

All the missions of the new Joint Synod were now under the supervision of the District Mission Boards. The missions of the Northwest, however, presented a problem. They



could have been combined with Dakota-Montana missions of the Minnesota District. The old familiar proposal was also heard again, "Turn the entire western mission field over to the Missouri Synod." While these various proposals were being considered, someone suggested that this area be turned into a District Synod. This request was unusual because there was only one self-supporting congregation in the whole Northwest. That one was St. Paul's in Tacoma-the oldest congregation in the Northwest. Perhaps it was the fact that F. Soll was exercising a stabilizing influence that this motion was carried. Whatever the reason the Pacific Northwest became a district of the Wisconsin Synod. On July 18th 1918 the following Pastors and delegates answered roll call at Grace Church in Yakima, Wa.:

<u>PASTOR</u>	<u>CONGREGATION</u>	<u>DELEGATE</u>
R. Ave Lallemand	Tacoma, Wa	-
L.C. Krug	White Bluffs, Wa	R. Gruenhagen
F. Soll	Yakima, Wa	Karl Lemke
W. Hass	Clarkston, Wa	Peter Arp
F. Eppling	Portland, Ore.	-
G. Hasse	Mansfield, Wa	A. Matthiesen
W. Lueckel	Omak, Wa	-
E. Kirst	Ellensburg, Wa	-
-	Kennewick, Wa	F. Krug

Pastor Bergemann, the first President of the new Joint Synod made the three day train trip and presided in the organizational meeting. The following officers were elected:

Pres.: F. Soll  
 1st V.P.: R. Ave Lallemand  
 2nd V.P.: L.C. Krug  
 Sec.: W. Hass  
 Tres.: P.J. Walk (layman)

The new District Synod did not elect a Mission Board since

all of its congregations, with the exception of St. Paul's in Tacoma, were missions. Pastor Ad. Spiering, President of the North Wisconsin District, was to be the spokesman. The district did finally elect its own mission board in 1920.

In keeping with the regular turn over of clergy in the Northwest, when the district held its 1920 convention, only three Pastors who were present when the district was organized answered roll call.

The district, however, was making progress. In 1920 R. Fenske became the first missionary at large in the Pacific Northwest. However, after a short time he accepted a call to the vacant position in Ellensburg. Thus ended the only time this district has had a resident missionary or anyone who was specifically called to oversee the missions.

When the district celebrated its 10th anniversary in 1928, 9 pastors were laboring in 17 congregations and missions. The communicant membership of the district had increased from 447 to 626. This may not seem to be very much, but considering the many set backs and obstacles the district experienced, this growth was truly amazing.

In 1938 Zion Lutheran Church in Rainier, Wa., a tiny little town nestled near Mt. Rainier, which had once been served by the old Ohio Synod, applied for membership in the

district. A resident missionary, A. Levenhagen, was sent to minister to them. In the same year, R. Schoen, a former Missouri Synod Pastor, organized a mission in Gresham, Oregon, and applied for membership in the Pacific Northwest District. However, as the lean years came the district mission budget could no longer subsidize both the mission and the newly begun school, so aid was cut off. The pastor and the congregation then joined the Missouri Synod hoping for aid. That aid never came. The congregation then closed its doors a short time later.

The year 1941 saw new activity in the Northwest missions. F. Stern, who had been one of the first Wisconsin Synod missionaries in the Northwest, was called to Seattle. There he established Grace church on the far north side. He also did work further north in the area now called Edmonds. There he established Salem Lutheran Church.

The area of Spokane, Washington was always looked on as the most promising area in the Northwest. By 1944 Trinity church was organized. Within a few years two more missions were established. All three grew steadily and quickly. By 1950 these congregations had a total of 307 members. This area of mission was a constant encouragement to all the other missionaries. What happened in the next few years was to cause a great deal of pain and heartache.

Nineteen pastors and missionaries were serving 23 parishes in the Northwest when 1957 came in. The number of communicant members had risen to 1602 and 3 Christian Day Schools had been established. Yet this number was to fall sharply. When the 1957 Convention of the Wisconsin Synod voted to protest the Missouri Synod's stance on fellowship and the doctrine of the Word, the effects were quickly felt. From the events which followed rapidly one observer was led to conclude that there had been a studied plan to persuade all the pastors and churches in the district to resign from the Wisconsin Synod and then reorganize as an independent Synod. In short order, the three churches in Spokane withdrew from the Synod. Good Hope Church in Ellensburg did not follow the lead of its pastor. Perhaps others would have left if the Wisconsin Synod had not voted to end fellowship in 1961. In rapid succession the smallest district of the Synod had lost about one third of its pastors and the churches they served. A listing of the congregations which left is:

<u>CONGREGATION</u>	<u>NUMBER OF MEMBERS</u>
Clarkston, Wa	97
Orofino, Id	61
Spokane, Wa	26
(St. James)	
Spokane (Shadle Pk)	120
Spokane (Trinity)	184
Opportunity, Wa.	31
* -----	-----
6	519

† These numbers do not include the number of individuals who withdrew from their congregations.

An exact tally of the number of people who left on principle is almost impossible to determine. The Northwest has such a mobile population that many congregations fluctuate up and down in their yearly totals. The above numbers are those who stated the reasons for their leaving the synod.

There was one good result from this troublesome time. These troubles helped to strengthen the resolve of the pastors who stayed in the Wisconsin Synod. They were determined to continue in the spirit and to build upon the sound principles which had guided the district when it was organized.

By the time that the Pacific Northwest District celebrated its 50th anniversary in 1968, there were again 19 pastors active in 23 congregations. The communicant membership had risen to 1820. And there were three Christian Day Schools operating. The area of Spokane also began to grow again. St. Matthew's congregation which was started in 1962 already had to request permission to build a new sanctuary to accomodate its growing membership. Calvary congregation in Bellevue, Wa. was expanding its sanctuary and chapel annex to accomodate its burgeoning Sunday School. Also during this time the congregations in Edmonds and Mt. Lake Terrace, Wa. merged into one congregation which kept the name "Salem." The little congregation of Rainier, Wa., however, suffered a severe setback. When the lumber mills

shut down, the town's only industry was gone. In fact the town almost became a ghost town. The little congregation which never had more than 50 communicants, lost more than half of its membership. Since there was no pool of souls on which the congregation could draw to rebuild itself, it was only a few years (1976) until it became only a preaching station.

One happy experience of 1968 was that the Wisconsin Synod's mission work in Alaska got underway. Only 10 years before Alaska had classified as a dismal opportunity. But within these short years the outlook did a 180 degree turnaround. David Zeitlow accepted the call to Anchorage, Ak to begin the task of being the first mission in Alaska.

The next few years marked continued growth for the Pacific Northwest District. New chapels were erected, schools were expanded and new areas explored. Furthermore 1973 brought a welcomed addition which seemed to give the district a sense of identity. In 1973 the special district convention gave its blessings for the formation of the Pacific Northwest Lutheran High School Association. This group was given permission for land search and publicity. One hundred families with a little over 400 people were charter members. Yet this represented only 50% of the pastors and only 12% of the baptized members of the district. Not very good, but it was a start. In 1978 the Association

voted to open its High School in the DuPont area around Tacoma, Wa.. And so it was that in the 75th year of WELS High Schools, Evergreen High School in DuPont opened its doors. Mr. Wayne Baxmann served as one of the two teachers and the President. Rev. Richard Wiechmann served as the other instructor and the Dean of students. There was a total of fifty-seven applications for the Freshman and Sophomore years by the time the 1978 convention celebrated its opening. One of the problems this school faces is that there is no housing for the students who travel from out of town. There are carpools coming down from and going back to the Seattle and other areas everyday. However, many children and parents are discouraged by the 1 hour to 1 1/2 hour trip. Yet by the grace of God the school is continuing to grow.

Christian education is a vital concern for the Christians in the Pacific Northwest District. Since they are so far the heart of conservative Lutheranism there seems to be a definite desire to build schools. In the years 1976-1977, two new schools were dedicated. Then in 1979 Grace congregation in Seattle opened its new school. To date there are eleven Christian grade schools operating, with several more in planning, if funds permit.

The Northwest is still not without its problems. In 1982 the congregation in Fairbanks, AK had been involved in a lengthy legal battle with the architect who also served as

construction manager. The problem was that he used up the allocation before the building was completed. The court decision was for the church. Also congregations often find it difficult still to get manpower. The Snoqualmie Falls, WA. congregation has had a difficult time to get its own pastor Snoqualmie is part of a dual parish with Calvary in Bellevue. However, the members felt that this dual parish situation was not helping their church grow. Pastors Siegler and Oldfield attempted to find the necessary information to show that this was a productive area. However, this plan could not progress very far because Pastor Siegler accepted a call to California and Pastor Oldfield had all he could do in taking care of the vacancy and his own parish. But thanks be to God, after two years of trying to convince the GBHM, they have received their own Pastor-D.Weiser.

Another problem that plagues the PNW is that there is a highly mobile population. A case to illustrate this is the little congregation of Twisp, Wa. located in the foothills of the Cascades. About three years ago things looked so bright for this church that they were looking for a building to buy for their church. Since then the nucleus has grown smaller. In 1981 alone they lost 27 souls. The majority of whom had moved away. A small group still meets there and are assisted by Rev. Paul Lemke.

Today the Pacific Northwest District stands at 40



congregations with 2 exploratory areas. There are 5,644 souls with 3,911 communicant members. Eleven grade schools serve 349 pupils with 27 teachers. There are 32 pastors with 2 vacancies. And there is one high school. Truly the Lord has blest the short history of this district.

What has been the attitude of the the Wisconsin Synod and its pastors toward the Pacific Northwest and mission work there? The Pacific Northwest has often been criticized severely for the slow growth of its missions. There seems to be a general attitude that the Northwest is a poor investment of our time and money. One person this writer has talked to put it quite crassly as "There is not enough bang for the buck out there." A close personal friend of former President Soll once asked him, half in jest, "After all, Fritz, what do you have out there in Washington? I have more communicants in my one congregation than you have in your entire district." Such attitudes show only a lack of understanding about the difficulties and the situation of the Northwest. As was said earlier in this paper, the one thing that hurt early WELS mission in the Northwest was the constantly changing clergy roster. When the missionaries in a given area continually change, there is no chance to build consistency. The insights one man gains from his experiences in doing mission work in that area are unable to be tapped or passed on to others. Just as one man starts getting accustomed to working in the area, he accepts a call to

another. The next man then has to start over from scratch and recover all the same ground that the first man covered.

Another reason for the slow growth in the Northwest originally, is that there was not the great number of transfers into the congregation that was experienced by midwestern congregations. In the Midwest people moved freely around. But the Northwest seemed to be a wilderness, and it was in the early day, that no one except a drifter would go to. Fortunately this problem has become less acute. The Northwest offers many lures and financial opportunities which attract midwestern WELS Lutherans west.

The third difficulty and probably the hardest one to overcome is the "frontier attitude" prevalent in the Northwest. As it was throughout the history of the United States, as the population moved out of civilization, those on the frontier often became apathetic to religion. They became so concerned with survival that religion became a non-necessity. That attitude was true for the Northwest in the early days of WELS mission work. And it is still somewhat true today. The anecdote is told that all the white stuff one sees on the mountains is not snow, but all the transfer papers the people throw out their windows as they go through the mountain passes. In a questionnaire the writer of this paper sent to some of the pastors in the district, many of the pastors pointed to this attitude as their biggest problem.

This "wildwest" attitude, as one pastor put it, gives free reign to their thinking. These people left the Midwest and its values. They don't want to be "saddled down" with them again, especially religion. (A copy of the survey follows).

#### CHART I

##### MISSION SURVEY OF THE PACIFIC NORTHWEST DISTRICT

1. How often do you make evangelism calls?
2. What is the general reaction to the call?
3. What is the "conversion rate" in %?
4. What is the usual excuse for not joining the church or coming to faith?
5. What is the public reaction to a church in your area?
6. What is the public reaction to religion in general in your area?
7. Why? (your own ideas concerning effects of the community, economy, etc.)
8. What seems to attract people to your church?
9. What is the hardest obstacle to overcome?
10. Do you feel there is a sufficient emphasis on mission work in the district?
11. Is there a general willingness of your parishoners to support and help in your congregation's local outreach?
12. If no, why not?
13. Does mission work in this area differ from mission work you have done in other areas?
14. What do you think needs to be done to increase the harvest in the fields of your area?
15. What could Synod do to help?

The pastors continually pointed out that mission work in this area should not be compared to mission work elsewhere.

One pastors writes,

"This is something that continually frustrates us in the Pacific Northwest when people and the General Board in Milwaukee compare our work to work done in an area such as Port Washington. The whole concept of church and salvation in the minds of the people out here is different. They are less familiar with the concept of church. I guess that makes it an even greater joy

when one of them is brought to the foot of the cross."

The work they pointed out is just as hard here as it is elsewhere. To "blacklist" the area with the idea that it is harder than all the rest is unfair. Another pastor writes,

"It is sometimes said that mission work in our district is more difficult than it is in other areas of the Synod. I don't feel this is true. An unchurched person is an unchurched person no matter where you find him and the Gospel will have an effect on him no matter where he lives if the Gospel is explained to him. There are cultural problems that may affect our work out here more than in other areas. We have the Mormon influence which is a great problem. We also have the god of recreation to a greater degree than most areas and a more liberal attitude toward religion. However, when you get one on one with the Gospel everything is equal. That is the key--to get one to one with someone with the Gospel."

It does present its own unique features. But so does each of the other areas the WELS is working in. It may be true that congregations in this area stay on the subsidized list longer than those in other areas. Glancing at the Statistical Report proves this. Are we in the market for quick returns? Do we need to get "more bang for our buck" or just spread the Gospel into an area in which conservative Christianity is scarce? It is estimated that about 95% of the Pacific Northwest is unchurched. It is truly a field which is ripe for harvest. It needs to be given the consideration due it. Most of all it needs to be given a chance.

In a comparison of the Pacific Northwest to the other

districts in Synod one notices several features. In this comparison this writer used: the Pacific Northwest (PNW), the Western Wisconsin (WW), and the Arizona-California (AC) districts. These three districts were compared by year in regards to the number of missionaries in the area (M), the number new fields opened (NF), the number of adult confirmands (AC), and the number of mission congregations that became independent (I).

	P N W				W W				A C			
	M	NF	AC	I	M	NF	AC	I	M	NF	AC	I
1951	12	2	31	0	20	3	56	0	14	4	20	0
1953												
1955	x	0	37	0	x	1	56	1	x	0	48	0
1957	x	0	23	0	x	1	35	1	x	0	54	0
1959	x	0	31	0	x	0	42	2	x	1	50	0
1961	x	1	21	0	x	0	18	1	x	3	33	1
1963	x	2	17	0	x	0	27	0	x	3	18	2
1965	13	0	24	0	8	1	19	4	11	2	26	0
1967	13	1	31	0	6	2	11	0	14	1	28	1
1969	x	1	32	0	x	0	14	3	x	1	29	5
1971	x	1	54	3	x	0	13	1	x	4	21	3
1973	x	1	42	0	x	1	13	0	x	0	11	1
1975	x	1	53	0	x	3	23	2	x	0	18	2
1977	x	1	40	0	x	3	24	3	x	2	4	0
1979	x	46	0	x	x	1	20	0	x	1	20	0
1981	x	0	32	2	x	0	38	0	x	3	28	1
1983	x	0	24	2	x	0	24	1	x	0	21	0
13 yrs	38	9	507	8	14	13	377	19	25	2	409	18

Outstanding in this table is the fact that in the twelve years of this survey the Pacific Northwest had only eight congregations become independent, while the Western Wisconsin and Arizona-California Districts had 19 and 18 respectively. Why? That is a good question, especially when one considers

that in that time the PNW had 507 adult confirmations, while the other two districts had 377 and 409. That is quite a difference. This writer thinks that the way to explain the apparant discrepancy is that the Western Wisconsin and Arizona-California Districts had more tranfer-ins of former members and that accounted for their quicker gain to independence. More people move around Wisconsin and to the sunbelt (hence the retirement belt) than move to Washington, Oregon and Idaho. This fact alone could account for the difference.

Nor does the amount of new fields look so bad until one realizes that the Western Wisconsin District has over 4 times (169) and the Arizona-California District has almost 3 times (102) the number of congregations which the Pacific Northwest has (39).<sup>(2)</sup> Yet the area covered is about 1/3 for the Western Wisconsin District and about the same for the Arizona-California District (although much of both of the areas is uninhabited). True, the population densities are different, so one cannot go by these facts alone. However, when one realizes that the Pacific Northwest has about a 95% unchurched population and that here are areas where one can drive 100 miles without finding a WELS church, then the conclusion is obvious. The PNW district is a ripe field

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2. Figures taken from 1984 *Statistical Report*.

waiting for harvest. There are just too few workers and too few new fields opened to adequately cover the territory. There needs to be added emphasis in mission work. The difficulties need to be overlooked so that the Gospel may not be hampered. Mission work in the PNW needs to be as enthusiastically supported as it is in other areas. We cannot take from Peter to pay Paul, so to speak. Most of the pastors in the survey felt this way. They all agreed that Synod was doing all it could. But their biggest lament was that their area always seemed to be overlooked when the missionaries and mission aid are handed out.

The pastors of the area cited one policy which might help to make the Northwest a faster growing mission area. They recommend that there be a faster purchase of land and a shorter time until the erection of a sanctuary. This, they said, would allow greater identification and attractiveness in the community. A part of this plan is already in the working. The GBHM staff is to develop a program to utilize mission minded individuals and/or groups of our Synod to make advanced land purchases in potential mission areas as an investment of their own money. These purchases would be made in consultation with the GBHM. This would help the CEF cash flow, make available better sites and provide earlier identity among other advantages. Another recommendation by the pastors is to establish a mission counselor as other districts have. Perhaps in time this step will

come too.

The history of the Pacific Northwest District has been short when compared to other districts. Yet its brief history has been filled with many difficulties and hardships. Despite these hardships the joy of the Gospel shines brightly. For no other reason than for the grace of God has this district continued to struggle and grow. And with His grace it will continue to grow. Does the Pacific Northwest District deserve the nickname "the graveyard of the Synod?" There is no graveyard where the Gospel is preached. If we were to neglect this district because of its particular hardships, or because it is not growing as fast as we would like, then it would become a graveyard. God keep us from ever letting this happen. Pray that the Pacific Northwest District continues to grow and flourish.



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