

THE WELS COMMISSION ON EVANGELISM:
THREE DECADES OF HELPING PEOPLE BECOME MORE AWARE OF
WHAT THEY ARE:
WITNESSES TO JESUS CHRIST.

by

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On the first Easter Sunday, Jesus appeared to a number of his followers as they were gathered together behind locked doors in a house in Jerusalem and announced to them a very important message: "This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things." (Lu 24:46-48). No longer would they be just followers of Jesus Christ, people who observed all he did and who were taught the truths of the kingdom of heaven by him. Now they were to be witnesses, to be people who told others what they had seen and heard. Jesus indicated that this mission to be witnesses was very important when he spoke to those followers just prior to his ascension. "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." (Ac 1:8). According to this Acts account, these were the last words that Jesus spoke to his witnesses, impressing on them how important their position was.

Those followers of Jesus received the power that Jesus promised and energetically witnessed to others about Jesus Christ. They had a keen awareness of what they were: Witnesses to Jesus Christ. Unfortunately, not all of Christ's followers in subsequent years

shared that same keen awareness of what they were. One of the many reasons for this lack of perception was the misconception that only a select group of Christ's followers are indeed witnesses and that the rest would support them in their efforts. In other words, the pastors and teachers were the witnesses acting in behalf of the laity. As a result, the called workers were given the tremendous task of serving their people and reaching out to the unchurched while the majority of the lay people were often unaware that they too were to be witnesses. Furthermore, the lay people often received little encouragement to witness and were hardly ever trained to do so if they so desired.

The Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod was not immune to this malady in the first half of the 20th century and suffered as a result of it. However, in 1957 at the 34th Biennial Convention of the WELS in New Ulm, MN, the Joint Synod resolved to form a committee which would actively strive to remedy the situation by developing an evangelism program to train lay people to be witnesses to Jesus Christ (1957 WELS Convention Proceedings).

The purpose of this paper is to trace the history of the Commission on Evangelism of the WELS and to give special attention to what it has done in the past 29 years to help our people become more aware of what they are: Witnesses to Jesus Christ.

I. Organizational Structure of the COE.

Initially, the committee that was appointed by the Conference of Presidents in keeping with the 1957 Synod resolution concerning an evangelism committee was comprised of three men who were to be pastors or professors, two teachers and two laymen. The names of the first seven men to serve on this Commission as well as those who served in subsequent years can be found in the appendix of

this paper. This format for the Commission on Evangelism (COE) lasted until the 1961 Synod Convention. At that time it was decided that their purposes and objectives of initiating evangelism programs and encouraging lay evangelism could be better carried out if the COE were reorganized. Therefore, the 1961 Synod Convention made the following resolution:

RESOLVED, That we urge the 1961 Convention of the WELS to authorize the establishment of District Commissions on Evangelism throughout Synod; and be it further

RESOLVED, That the Presidents of the various Districts be held responsible for the appointment of such District Commissions on Evangelism throughout Synod; and be it further

RESOLVED, That such Districts Commissions on Evangelism be comprised of three representatives from each conference of the respective Districts--one pastor, one teacher, and one layman (one pastor and two laymen in those conferences in which there are no teachers).(1961 WELS Convention Proceedings, p. 233).

The result was an executive committee which worked with representatives from each district who in turn would chair their respective District Commissions. It should be noted that all these men who served on the COE did their work on a part-time basis in addition to their respective callings.

The organizational structure of the COE served well at the start. But as the years progressed and the men became more aware of the tremendous task in front of them of effectively informing, encouraging, and training lay evangelists, the COE felt the need to ask Synod to further change the leadership of their Commission. In 1973 the COE expressed its wish to have a full-time Coordinator (BoRaM 1973). In 1975 they put this wish into the form of a Synod resolution (1975 WELS Convention Proceedings, p. 75). Unfortunately, it wasn't until almost a decade later when they finally did call their first Executive Secretary to be a full-time Coordinator.

Since their ten year struggle to secure this position has played a pivotal role in their existence, we will take a more detailed look at this era in their history.

II. 1973-1983 Looking for a Full-time Secretary

Having Expressed their wish for a full-time Coordinator of Evangelism in 1973, the COE made the following resolution in 1975:

Resolved, a) That the Commission on Evangelism be authorized to call a full-time Coordinator of Evangelism; and be it finally

Resolved, b) That the Coordinator of Evangelism both maintain an office to plan, prepare, and publish evangelism materials and be in contact with congregations of our Synod to assist them in establishing and maintaining active lay evangelism programs. (1975 WELS Convention Proceedings, p. 76).

In listing their reasons why they felt this need, the COE reminded the Synod of the COE's objectives as they are found in the Constitution of the WELS, Section 6.03, p. 21: "The WELS Commission on Evangelism is charged to plan, prepare, and publish evangelism materials consistent with the doctrine and practice of the Synod and also is to assist the congregations of the Synod in establishing and maintaining active evangelism programs." They also cited the objective of the various District Commissions on Evangelism: "To cooperate with the Synod's Commission in planning, preparing, and publishing evangelism materials consistent with the doctrine and practice of the Synod and are to aid the congregations of the districts in establishing and maintaining active evangelism programs" (The Constitution of the WELS, Section 6.04, p. 21f).

However, the COE sadly noted that the men who made up these Commissions were finding it increasingly more and more difficult to effectively carry out their assignments because they were serving on only a part-time basis and there was an increasing amount of

materials to sift through and a growing responsibility which they could not handle. If they had a full-time person who could coordinate all of their efforts, many of the problems they faced could be solved. Although the Synod agreed that the COE and the District Commissions were experiencing difficulties, the Synod did not at this time agree with their solution. The report was lost.

Despite this apparent setback, the COE redoubled its efforts to secure a full-time Coordinator and submitted the following report to the Synod in 1977:

Although we make no specific request at this time, the commission continues to feel the urgent need for an evangelism coordinator. In order that this need continue to be evaluated by the Synod, we offer the following description of the duties of a full-time servant in the field of evangelism. (BoRaM, 1975, p. 73f.)

Objective: The Evangelism Coordinator is to heighten within our Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod awareness of personal witnessing to the saving grace of the Triune God.

Administrative Structure: The Synod Commission on Evangelism will act as the policy setting board for the Evangelism Coordinator and will assume responsibility for his work. On a month to month basis, the Evangelism Coordinator will report to the executive committee of the Synod Commission on Evangelism.

Job Structure: The Evangelism Coordinator is an assistant to the Synod Commission on Evangelism which, among its constitutional duties, has the responsibility to "plan, prepare, and publish evangelism materials consistent with the doctrine and practice of the Synod" (Constitution, sec. 6.03).

Goals: Goals will be established in consultation with the Synod Commission on Evangelism.

Job Function: The Evangelism Coordinator is: 1) To acquaint himself with the various methods of evangelism through attendance at seminars, workshops, institutes, and personal study; 2) to familiarize himself with available evangelism publications (e.g., books, tracts, pamphlets, filmstrips, programs, etc.) and to develop a resource book if needed; 3) To engage in an on-going evaluation of methods and materials in order to suggest doctrinally sound approaches to evangelism; 4) To be responsible for

the development and publication of materials to aid personal witnessing and to make them readily available; 5) To counsel individuals (in private and in workshops), the districts, and the Synod in evangelism, aiding district commissions by coordination of their efforts, assistance in conducting seminars, and promotion of evangelism in the local congregation, aiding our worker training schools in providing evangelism experience and education, and aiding our primary and secondary schools in providing evangelism awareness and education; 6) To take care of correspondence; 7) To keep Christ's atonement and great commission before the total constituency of our Synod thorough periodic newsletters and speaking engagements. (BoRaM, 1977, pp. 76f).

In 1979 the COE submitted a special supplementary report concerning a full-time Coordinator of evangelism (BoRaM, 1979, pp. 98-100). In this report the COE noted that during the years 1973-1977 the soul membership of the WELS grew 0.75% while the growth of the population of the United States was 0.84%. The intent of this statistic was to point out that our Synod had the potential to be growing at a greater rate. The report then went on to list eight areas of need within our Synod in the are of mission outreach. Among those needs they noted that many of our lay people were being confused by popular heterodox evangelism programs, that many young pastors and teachers had little on-the-job training in the area of evangelism, that courses on evangelism needed to be developed in our high schools, and that the turnover rate on district commissions was high due to moving. They also noted that congregations needed a large quantity of quality evangelism materials but that the COE which was made up of only part-time men was unable to provide enough of those materials. They concluded their report by stating that our weakest link in spreading the Gospel was our lay evangelism and that a full-time Coordinator would strengthen that link immeasurably.

The following report is the COE's resolution concerning a full-time Coordinator which they submitted to the Synod in 1979:

Resolved, a) That the Synod create the full-time office of Executive Secretary for Evangelism; and be it further

Resolved, b) That the Executive Secretary for Evangelism maintain an office to plan, prepare, and publish evangelism materials and to work closely with the constituency of the Synod in establishing and maintaining active evangelism programs; and be it further

Resolved, c) That the Coordinating Council and the Board of Trustees determine when this is feasible, based on budgetary considerations and program balance in the Synod. (1979 WELS Proceedings, p. 106).

This resolution was referred to the responsible boards and committees until the next Synod Convention.

In 1981 the long-sought-after position of a full-time Coordinator was realized when the Synod resolved in convention to authorize the COE to call an Executive Secretary for Evangelism (1981 WELS Convention Proceedings, p.78). However, they would not be able to do the actual calling until they had the funding by the Coordinating Council and the Board of Trustees. When the 1983 Convention rolled around, the COE found itself with the authorization to call an Executive Secretary but unable to do so due to the lack of funds. Therefore, they once again resolved that they be authorized to call an Executive Secretary (1983 WELS Convention Proceedings, p. 240). This resolution was adopted by the Synod. Finally, in April 1984 this position was filled when Pastor Paul Kelm, who had been serving as Dean of students at Wisconsin Lutheran College became the first Executive Secretary for Evangelism. His contributions will be discussed later in this paper when we look at what the COE is doing presently in 1986.

III. Various Ways the COE Encourages the Laity to be Witnesses.

In keeping with its goal to encourage the laity of the WELS

to be witnesses to Jesus Christ, the COE has been active in a number of different areas during the past three decades. Although the COE is an organization, it has not lost the concern and the love for souls which One Christian expresses for others. In numerous reports to Synod and in many of their publications, the members of the COE constantly shared their realization that the world needs the Gospel of Jesus Christ and that they as a commission were established to encourage and to train Christians in sharing that Gospel with everyone who needs it. The following portion of this paper will attempt to outline some of the programs, the methods, the materials, and the ideas that the COE developed in order to put their love and concern for souls into practice.

A. The Evangelism Bookshop

Since the COE was charged to "plan, prepare, and publish evangelism materials consistent with the doctrine and practice of the Synod" (WELS Constitution, Section 6.03, p. 21), it follows that they needed an outlet to distribute these materials. Already in 1960 Rev. Wilmer Valleskey began to operate the Evangelism Bookshop in Detroit, MI. Through this bookshop, people could obtain the evangelism materials that the COE was producing. In 1977 the complete Evangelism Bookshop was moved to Milwaukee. At first the materials were kept in the house of a retired couple in Milwaukee and could be ordered through Northwestern Publishing House. Rev. Gerald Meyer became the manager of the bookshop. As of 1985 Rev. Meyer continued to manage the bookshop. To aid in searching for evangelism resources, a consolidated catalog of materials has been produced in connection with the Mass Media Ministry. Materials can be ordered through the Mass Media Ministry or orders can be placed directly with the Evangelism Bookshop

at 2537 West Oakwood Road, Oak Creek, WI 53154.

B. Key Materials Produced by the COE.

Throughout the past three decades the COE has produced and assembled numerous manuals, tracts, pamphlets, and other literature ~~that~~ in some way communicate their desire to help lay people become more aware of their opportunity to be witnesses to Jesus Christ. A sampling of the materials which are available is included at the end of this paper. Several of these materials do warrant special attention because they reflect the efforts of the COE at various periods in its history.

The first publication which was available from the COE was a Manual on Evangelism. It was made available in 1959. By 1963 three manuals on evangelism could be ordered from the Evangelism Bookshop. The first of these, Study to Be Witnesses Unto Me, gave the scriptural basis for lay evangelism. The second of these, Organize to Be Witnesses Unto Me, gave insights on how congregations could form an evangelism program. The last of these, Train to Be Witnesses Unto Me, instructed people how to become more prepared to witnesses to Jesus Christ. Over the years these manuals proved to be valuable resources for man an evangelism program.

Since 1963 the COE has continued to produce materials to promote evangelism. Several areas of endeavor included an evangelism program for children in 1965 and a special edition of Meditations, a booklet of daily devotions, which featured daily devotions on evangelism. In 1970 the COE initiated a program which is still going strong in Milwaukee in 1986--the Inner City VBS program which reaches out to the youth within Milwaukee's inner city.

In 1971 two essays were written under the auspices of the COE

which the COE subsequently called "The Handbook on Evangelism." These essays were delivered at the 1971 Synod Convention which has become known as the "Evangelism Convention." The first essay, "We Believe--The Theology of Evangelism, by Professor Armin Schuëtze, discussed the orthodox teachings concerning evangelism. The second essay, "Therefore We Speak--Evangelism in Practice, by Professor Daniel Malchow, gave practical suggestions for implementing personal evangelism. It was the COE's intent that these essays would serve as a springboard for increasing evangelism awareness as they were discussed by pastoral conferences and by local congregations (1971 WELS Convention Proceedings, p. 42).

In the summer of 1972 the COE began conducting area workshops on a manual which was written by Rev. Wilmer Vallesky, Talk About The Savior (TAS). This manual has proven to be an excellent tool to train and guide laymen to be more effective witnesses. In subsequent years the COE reminded people of how beneficial this step by step approach to evangelism can be as they continually urged its use throughout the Synod. In 1975 the COE reported to Synod that they were continuing to sponsor workshops on TAS and that over 500 pastors already had the TAS manual. In 1977 the words of TAS were transformed into living color via a 26 minute film in which a man shares his faith with a fellow passenger on an airliner using the flexible TAS method. In 1985 the Evangelism Bookshop added Professor David Valleskey's training manual for God's Great Exchange, an alternate method than TAS which lay people can also use in sharing their faith.

C. School Visits to Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary and Doctor Martin Luther College.

During the 1970's the COE worked with the seniors at the Seminary

and DMLG in order to acquaint them with the COE and specifically the TAS method of evangelism. At the Seminary one full day was spent acquainting the seniors with the TAS method and then they were assigned actual calls in the metro-Milwaukee with the help of area pastors (ToRaM, 1975, p. 72). However, in 1977 the visits were dropped due to scheduling problems. The exposure that the seniors at the Seminary had to evangelism was greatly increased when Prof. David Valleskey was called to the Seminary and began teaching a course on evangelism during the 1984-85 school year (BoRam, 1985, p. 72). DMLG and Northwestern College also benefitted from an increased awareness of evangelism when both scheduled evangelism seminars during than same academic year. It is hoped that by increasing the awareness of our pastors and teachers concerning evangelism, that they will have a greater impact on encouraging the laity to be more conscious of their position as witnesses and more willing and able to share the Gospel.

D. Synod-wide Convocation on Evangelism.

In the days prior to the authority to call an Executive Secretary, the COE looked for input from a number of sources as to where they should be heading in the future. The following is a report which tells of the events that occurred in Milwaukee in the summer of 1978 (BoRaM, 1979, p. 1102):

In the summer of 1978 a three day convocation on evangelism was held in Milwaukee at Wisconsin Lutheran College. Participants numbered approximately 90 and represented all administrative divisions of the Synod, synodical schools, circuit pastors from all districts, and district evangelism evangelism commissions. Eight essays relating to evangelism were read and discussed. A strategy committee solicited suggestions from the participants, so that the desires of this group might be channeled to the right people and result in some positive actions. Suggestions

were given concerning study and training, production of materials, and further convocations. The convocation also determined to pass along one resolution to the Synod in convention. It was the conviction of the majority of the participants that the volume of suggested work, in addition to that which was already being carried on, necessitated the position of a full-time coordinator of evangelism, and they resolved that the Synod Commission on Evangelism place before the 1979 Synod convention the resolution for the establishment of this position.

Many of those who attended this convocation left with renewed zeal and encouragement to promote evangelism.

E. The Evangelism Lifeline (TELL).

Before 1977 the COE made its work known through workshops, reports to Synod, tracts, and an occasional article in the Northwestern Lutheran. But in 1977 they began printing their own publication, The Evangelism Lifeline (TELL). This newsletter serves to inform people what is happening in the field of evangelism, inspire people through motivational articles, and give specific information to assist pastors and laity as they tell the Gospel of Peace. The first editor was Rev. Ronald Roth who served until 1985 when Pastor Paul Kelm, the new Executive Secretary of Evangelism, took his place. Presently in 1986 it is sent out twice a year to all WELS congregations. In addition, congregations may request up to 20 free copies and may purchase additional copies. In 1985 publication reached 14,500 copies (BoRaM, 1985, p. 73). This newsletter is well-done and has truly heightened the evangelism awareness of many pastors, teachers, and lay people.

F. Mass Media Ministry.

The Mass Media Ministry began in 1980 and was formed to assist congregations with outreach programs by showing them various ways to make known who they are and what they stand for. By synodical

resolution this Ministry was later transferred to the COE to enhance its efforts to promote evangelism. Since one needs to communicate in order to share the Gospel, this branch of the COE serves as an invaluable tool by utilizing the broad range of media which is available in our highly technological society.

IV. 1986. Looking Ahead to the Future.

As one can see from this brief history of the COE's efforts over the past three decades, the COE has come a long way toward carrying out its initial and constant objective of helping people become more aware that they are Christ's witnesses. What began as a seven man committee has become a well-coordinated commission which draws ideas from a wide variety of sources, evaluates them, and puts them to use in meaningful programs which touch the lives of our people in a number of different areas. The materials that are available from the COE, the workshops they sponsor, and the impetus they give through inspiring messages are just a brief glimpse at the results of years of dedication and prayer that the men on this commission have spent serving our Lord. And yet, this COE takes no time to sit back and boast of what it has done but constantly looks ahead for there is still much that the Lord would have done through them. In the final segment of this paper, we will note just where the COE is presently and view some of its plans for the immediate future.

A. Evangelism Office for Evangelism.

Since 1984 Pastor Paul Kelm has been maintaining the Evangelism Office. Already many of the advantages that the COE has envisioned are being realized. Although Pastor Kelm has had input into several new programs, the most rewarding effect of this office has been the resources which are available to it for coordinating the work

of the whole Synod in the area of evangelism. The most creative and effective evangelism programs have usually been generated in parishes, the evangelism office makes use of these and coordinates them so that they are available for the Synod. In cases where a program requires the resources of a number of men, The Executive Secretary is the one who pulls those resources together. The evangelism office also aids many people through providing material for them. For example, the office provides material and training for "New Mode" mission explorers, Travel/Canvass/Witness outreach teams, and evangelism volunteers from the OWLS (Organization of WELS Lutheran Seniors) (BoRaM, 1985, p. 72). As time goes on, the potential for this office of evangelism to increase its relations with our Synod's evangelism efforts and to greater influence people to be more aware of evangelism is high.

B. New Projects.

It can be one thing to optimistically say that a commission is looking forward to expanding in the future and quite another to have our hopes fulfilled. However, several new projects renew our hope that our optimism is not a pipe dream. The first of these projects is an audio-visual evangelism tool known as the R.S.V.P. This easy to remember name is given to a rear-screen visual presentation which visually displays the message of sin and grace and gives a very brief synopsis of the WELS and the local congregation using it while an audio cassette gives vital information. Evangelists can use this tool to make presentations to friends or prospects. This method helps the evangelist overcome fears of not knowing what to say next and it communicates to the friend or prospect on a more relaxed basis.

A second project which will greatly aid congregations is a complete resource guide, the Evangelism Handbook. This soon to be published handbook has twelve chapters which cover a church's evangelism program from starting a program to assimilating new members. It offers a variety of ideas and offers numerous resources (BoRaM, 1985, p. 73).

C. Conclusion.

The COE has been operating for almost 30 years now and is pressing against the ropes to push onward in the years to come. Has it been successful? To what degree has it already achieved its objective of making people more aware that everyone who follows Christ is a witness to him? These questions are difficult to answer. A poll of the members of our Synod could give some sort of an indication of how many realize they are witnesses and who made them aware of that fact but sometimes polls are not necessary. Perhaps the easiest way to ascertain how effective the COE has been is to read the remarks which they make prior to their biennial reports to the Synod. The men who pen those remarks keep pretty close tabs on the strengths and weaknesses of evangelism throughout the Synod and often react emotionally to the high points and low points. In 1985 the report to Synod not only breathed but exhaled a message of optimism that saw that the COE has been effective and the future looks as though it will be even more effective because more people are becoming ^{active} in witnessing which builds up those who witness and brings the Gospel to those who hear the message of Peace. For this reason "positive, joyful Christian spirit is the anticipated corollary of aggressive evangelism outreach in our churches" (BoRaM, 1985, p. 71).

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WELS
135
1985