

GOOD HOPE EV. LUTHERAN CHURCH OF OMAHA:

WHY DID IT CLOSE?

Douglas Free

Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Library
11831 N. Seminary Drive. 65W
Mequon, Wisconsin

Professor Fredrich
Senior Church History
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On April 22, 1979, the voters of Good Hope Lutheran Church of Omaha, Nebraska, held a very special meeting. A decision had to be made. It is the type of decision no one likes to make. The end result of that meeting was that "the church be closed and worship discontinued with the 10:00 A.M. service on May 27th."

This decision was not made in haste. Good Hope had constantly been plagued with hardships in the 22 year history of the church. Already back in Dec. of 1970, Pastor G. Free, President of the Nebraska District, wrote to Pastor L. Gruendeman, chairman of the Nebraska Mission Board, "Good Hope has delayed their calling until their Annual meeting in January. At that time, in keeping with the wish of many, they will consider the future of their congregation...That could be a very historical meeting." The church lasted slightly more than eight years after that meeting. But the handwriting seemed to be on the wall. The future was bleak. The people struggled to keep their church open. But God had other plans and on May 27th, 1979, the congregation worshipped for the last time. One can only imagine the sorrow those members must have felt, members who fought hard, who sacrificed their time and money to keep the church alive. All that remains are memories. Sad to say for some of the people all the memories aren't pleasant. They realize that if things had been done just a bit differently Good Hope might still exist today.

Why doesn't it exist today? Simply because of the large debt it had incurred. That is the reason why many churches close down. But the case of Good Hope is more involved. The problems this church had actually began from the very start of

the church. Unfortunately the church was never able to get back on it's feet. Already in the early 60's a member of the mission board had serious doubts as to whether Good Hope would survive. "Try as they might, neither the members nor their Pastors could solve their difficulties.

Some may claim that if the church had experienced some growth the church could have met it's debts. The church averaged 82 souls from 1954-1978 and 42 communicants. A number of churches remain open that have the same number of members. Some churches may be able to make it with those numbers. Good Hope couldn't.

At first glance it may seem difficult to understand why there was no substantial growth. (in 1954 there were 86 souls and in 1978 there were 73 souls). Good Hope was located in a city that had 500,000 people to draw from. It was near the city of Bellevue, the fastest growing city in the state. There were only 3 or 4 other WELS churches in the area and they are not that large. It would seem as if this would be an ideal area to begin mission work. So why was there no growth? There seems to be a number of reasons.

Pastor Hartley came to Good Hope in 1975 after graduating from the Seminary. He came into a very difficult situation, especially for a candidate. Pastor Roth expressed those thoughts in a letter to Pastor Gruendeman on June 29, 1973, "Good Hope's situation hardly seems to be the kind into which a candidate from the Seminary would fit. There is discouragement bred from years of history and uncertainty of the more recent past." This is in no way to belittle Pastor Hartley. He did a very commendable job at Good Hope. Under this man Good Hope grew to 103 souls. What is even more remarkable is that Pastor Hartley

accomplished this while serving other congregations. Pastor J. Frank, chairman of the Nebraska Mission Board, wrote to Pastor Berg, "Our DMB has requested Pastor Hartley to serve area congregations in all but four months of his service at Good Hope. We feel that this may not have left enough time for the home congregation." One can't help but wonder what additional growth Good Hope might have experienced if Pastor Hartley could have spent all his time with his own flock.

There were other difficulties too for Pastor Hartley. The building itself may have hindered some growth. It just didn't look like a church. It was a "basement" church. That isn't to say that it was all under ground. It was built into a hill. At one end of the church the flat roof was at ground level. The other end was however completely above ground. Granted the place of worship isn't what is important. But the outside of the church wasn't too attractive. Mr. "Red" Newmaster, a former member of Good Hope felt that the appearance of the church was a hinderance to growth, "Except the people who attended, I doubt even if many people at all knew our building was a church." This "basement" church wasn't to serve as the church of Good Hope for all times. It was to be the initial place of worship and then later it would serve as the basement for a superstructure. The superstructure never became a reality. Pastor Hartley also felt that the basement church and the fact that the superstructure never became a reality hindered growth too, "It is my opinion that the basement worship facility, regardless how worshipful it was, said to the community, 'we aren't able to complete our program.' I'm also convinced that the members of Good Hope simply accepted the idea that this incomplete structure was all they could ever hope to see. They could no longer envision

building a chapel atop what they had and were not able to make their "basement" into a finished structure." Perhaps if it would have been more "church-like" in appearance Good Hope would have grown.

Another problem that Pastor Hartley had to contend with was the location of the church. Pastor D. Bode had the call to Good Hope in 1969. In a letter addressed to him Pastor Gruendeman said of the church's location, "It must be said that the church property is not in a populated area." This isn't to say that Good Hope was built completely in the sticks. SAC was an air force base was nearby. Now this was good for the church and bad. Any WELS people serving at the base had a church nearby to attend. But at the same time the area to the south and west of Good Hope would remain undeveloped because of the runway approach to the base. Bellvue was close but Pastor Hartley felt that since it was 2-3 miles away it only had, "a remote mission potential". And Omaha didn't grow as people thought it would. Instead of growing to the south as people thought it would and where Good Hope was located, it grew to the west. Pastor Gray, who served Good Hope from 1965-69, wrote, "With the advent of the interstate through Omaha in an east to west direction, the growth in Omaha followed the freeway instead of north and south along the Missouri River. This meant that the potential for growth at Good Hope was 20-25 years away." In addition, canvas work in the area indicated that the area was made up of 60% Catholic people. A large Catholic high school is only a few miles away from the church.

Pastor Hartley may have encountered one other difficulty. This was a church that was just down in the dumps. In a letter to Pastor Redlin who had the call to Good Hope in 1970 Pastor

Free wrote, "There is no doubt that after better than a years vacancy it (the spirit of the church) is down." If it was down after one year one must wonder what it was like when Pastor Hartley arrived. The church had been vacant for about 6 years! It had been served by three vacancy Pastors; Pastor G. Free, Pastor C. Otto, and Pastor J. Enderle. This is not to slight these men. They are all good faithful men. Yet how can a church be expected to grow much if it is served by a vacancy Pastor? These men had their own flocks to tend to. To be sure they gave Good Hope as much attention as possible. In various correspondence it was learned that all worked hard at Good Hope in the areas of Evangelism and Stewardship. They had the people out making the calls. These three men and others did all they could for Good Hope. Yet the pastors had spread themselves too thin. Pastor R. Roth wrote to Pastor Gruendeman, "The man power situation in the O-CB (Omaha-Council Bluffs) area is extremely stretched. We will have three men to serve six areas. In addition one is district president and many hours are required each month in hospital work for WELS churches outside the area."

One final point that Pastor Hartley made and that Pastor Free also expressed was that there were very few members who lived in the nearby vicinity of Good Hope. Only four families lived in a three mile radius of the church. Of those there was only one family that lived within a $1\frac{1}{2}$ mile radius. This greatly limited personal evangelism. A considerable number of members lived just as close to if not closer to other WELS churches. Due to these facts Pastor Hartley wrote, "you begin to see that the apparent need to maintain a congregation was rather small."

As was already stated Pastor Gray served the church from 1965-69. He faced basically the same obstacles that Pastor

Hartley did. During his years Good Hope grew slightly. Pastor Gray also stated that part of the problem at Good Hope was the fact that the families "were lower middle class to poor. They were hard workers but had very little extra cash to spare. A number of our families were on welfare." Mr. Newmaster touched on that very point in his letter. He said that there were a number of retired elderly who had no income and couldn't afford to give much to church. In addition there were one parent families (either no husband or wife, or the spouse was of a different religion) who could not afford to give much either. And finally Mr. Newmaster stated that there were younger people attending whose parents did not attend regularly if at all.

Besides these problems Pastor Gray had a more immediate problem to deal with. This problem may not have affected the other men who served Good Hope as much. The problem that faced Pastor Gray was the shaky beginnings of Good Hope.

Good Hope began to hold services back in 1946. The man who started the services was Pastor Laper. He began the exploratory work. Four years later Pastor Martin came to serve the church. Pastor Martin was an elderly man when he began his work at Good Hope. According to Pastor Eckert, who dealt with Good Hope often as the chairman of the Board of Trustees, Good Hope didn't grow as anticipated. Yes, there was growth, but the mission zeal just wasn't there it seemed. Pastor Eckert felt that this could have been due to the lack of involvement of the members. They looked to their Pastor in the early years to get the work done. In the later years of the church that still seemed to be the case according to Pastor G. Free.

But back to the early history. Just as the basement church was in a bad location so was the original building, referred

to as the "bird house". It was very near the stockyards. Again Pastor Eckert did not feel that this was a good location. Pastor Eckert and the Board of Trustees came to the conclusion that in order to keep Good Hope operative it had to be moved. Basically it came down to move it or close it.

Relocate! That was the word awaiting Pastor Chester Cone, Sr. a candidate from the Seminary. Pastor Cone was an energetic man. He wanted to get things accomplished, get the church going. He was told to relocate and that is what he did.

It didn't take long before Pastor Cone noticed that 10-11 acres of land was available and it had a home on the property. Pastor Cone felt that this would serve the needs of the church. Pastor Cone envisioned building a large church on the land and hoped that someday this land would serve the Synod as a place to hold Synod youth rallies.

When Pastor Cone noticed that the land was for sale he informed the Nebraska Mission Board, "We need a school, a church, etc. and that means enough land upon which to build when the time is ripe...if we act immediately we can secure our future with a plot large enough to accomadated all our future needs... It is my desire to stay in line with the Mission Board, but I will not be hamstrung by its inability to help us - it is hard enough to shepherd and develope this little flock without being held back by any board for any reason at any time - We need help, not a noose around our neck."

It is easy to see the attitude this man displayed. He didn't like to answer to any man. He had no liking for any boards. This was borne out in numerous letters from Pastors and laymen.

The answer to this letter by the NDMB has not been located. But in speaking with a member of the Board, who wishes to remain

anonymous, it seems as if the Nebraska Mission Board did not give any approval to the purchase of the land. Pastor Eckert said basically the samething. All of a sudden though the member of the Nebraska Mission Board was asked to attend a meeting at Good Hope. Pastor Eckert and Pastor R. Wiechman were also there. Pastor Wiechman was on the General Mission Board.

When these three men arrived they were greatly surprised. Pastor Cone informed them that he had purchased the land without the ok from anyone. After seeing the sight all three men felt that the location was poor. But the papers had been signed. It was too late to get out of the contract. The Boards had no choice but to ok the purchase now and loan Good Hope \$24,000. The Board of Trustees also stipulated that some of the 11 acres would be sold in the future to help finance any future building projects. Good Hope had relocated.

Pastor Cone was ready for the next step, building a church. Pastor Cone had opted to live in a home that was on the newly acquired property rather than live in the parsonage in Council Bluffs, Iowa. The reason is obvious. There he could be closer to his church and the land. Pastor Cone though now went through the District Mission Board to get an ok to live there. But the way he worded the reason for wanting to live there caused the Board of Trustees to raise their eyebrows. Pastor H. Eckert wrote to Pastor Grundeman, "There, however, is something in point two in the motion regarding this that Pastor Cone and family move into the parsonage on the 11 acres for the following reasons:...living in this parsonage...will also give him the opportunity to supervise the pending building project...Let us have a clear understanding here that Pastor Cone is not to undertake any building project before the entire project...has the approval of the DMB, the GMB, and the Board of Trustees...We

do not care for a repetition of what happened with the purchase of the land...His first step was taken in ignorance of rules and regulations, but his second surely cannot be after all this information." A copy of this letter was also sent to Pastor Cone.

Pastor Cone's plans did not die when that letter was received. His plans continued. Now he wanted to open a school. All this is taking place in less than a year. He wrote to Pastor Groth, chairman of the Nebraska Mission Board, "God is blessing us here at Good Hope with a healthy growth, but it is obvious that outside pressure on our youngsters is a great detriment to a still faster growth - we must open school soon Sept. of 1962. The plans are nearly ready for the congregations scrutiny."

The request was denied. The reason was because there was no building to hold classes in and it was evident that the congregation hadn't been involved in the plans. Plus this would put too much of a burden on a congregation that had just purchased land for \$24,000.

Pastor Cone gave up the idea for a school. He still pressed on to build the church. He never did get the desired approval. Instead he called a special meeting held on May 31, 1962. In that meeting, Good Hope, following the lead of it's Pastor (who had also assumed the presidency of the congregation), "unanimously voted to relieve Synod of all financial burdens in subsidy so we can help ourselves that those less fortunate than we may be helped by Synod...that we...do declare self-support and refuse all financial subsidy and all support from Synod...as of June 1, 1962." Ten men signed the letter. The last signature was Chester E. Cone, Sr. Pres. and Pastor.

This step also hurt a church that was struggling to be-

gin with. Now Pastor Cone could act on his own. He was free from the boards and all their regulations. In June of 1962 a sign with a picture of the proposed superstructure was put up on the site. It was going to be a big beautiful church. But Pastor Cone realized that now he would have to slow up a bit. He would have to proceed cautiously. He first built that basement church. This would serve them until they had the funds to build the main structure. This basement church was large. One estimate said that it could seat 300 people. There were only 88 souls at that time. The cost of this project, just the basement part was roughly \$20,000. To get the money Pastor Cone obtained personal loans.

These quick steps, the purchase of the land, declaring themselves to be self-supporting, and building their basement church put a great strain on the members of Good Hope. They could not afford to pay Pastor Cone. Graciously he said that they could pass on that and pay him when they had the money. To supplement their income Pastor Cone and his wife had to find other jobs. Loans were taken out to meet their family expenses. All of these things took their toll on Pastor Cone. He was middle aged when he graduated and all this strain put him in bad shape physically.

Finally Pastor Cone came to realize that his plans weren't going to develop as he had intended. It was impossible for him to continue without pay, to work outside the church, and to meet the needs of the congregation. The congregation itself was in a bad way. They couldn't afford to pay on the loans for the land and the building. The only course of action to follow was to ask the District Mission Board if they could become a mission congregation again. On July 29, 1964, Good

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Hope was again recognized as a mission congregation. A week earlier Pastor Cone had accepted a call to Washington.

Pastor H. Fritze, President of the Nebraska District, perhaps summed up the situation the best in a letter to Pastor Ed Stelter who had a call to Good Hope, "When the Board of Trustees and the GBHM did not immediately supply funds for a new church, he (Pastor Cone) talked the members into becoming self-supporting. The plans for real fast growth did not materialized much to his own tacklessness. I am speaking frankly...He did not like the idea of being told to make out reports and the like."

When Pastor Cone left Good Hope they had a debt of around \$40,000. On more than one occasion in it's history Good Hope failed to meet it's payments on Synod loans. Meanwhile their debt increased through the years. Repairs had to be made to the basement church. More loans had to be procured. While Pastor Gray was still at Good Hope it was necessary to build a new parsonage. This really placed an extra burden on the small congregation. Pastor Schaefer and Pastor Berg met with the congregation to set up a Stewardship program. The people realized their obligations and tried their hardest to fulfill those obligations. In 1978 the Nebraska Mission Board approved a present salary support rate of \$4.00 per communicant. This is well below the standard set by the General Board for Home Missions. It was hoped that by 1979 the people would be up to Synod standards. But we must remember that the people of Good Hope were not that wealthy. They struggled to make their payments. Finally they came to the realization that they could not make their payments. When the church closed in 1979 their debt was over \$70,000.

To be sure there are a number of events that eventually led to the closing of Good Hope; the poor location of the church, the church building itself, the long, numerous vacancies, the debt incurred, the lack of mission zeal among the members, and it's very shaky beginning. Perhaps Pastor Gray's statement holds some truth, "I guess when a church gets off to a poor shaky start, it is hard to make a go of it." In addition Pastor Eckert wrote, "Regulations are there to be followed. God is a God of order." Can we expect God to bless our work if rules and regulations are ignored? Any one of the reasons listed above could cause a church to close. But when all of these plague one church the future of that church isn't that bright.

On May 27, 1979, the last hymn was sung at Good Hope, the last sermon preached, the last prayers offered. But God's purpose was served at Good Hope. Pastor Hartley wrote, "let me assure you that many blessings from God were realized through Good Hope of Omaha. Each worship service, communion celebration, baptism, confirmation, Sunday School class was an indication that God was working with His people." Many pleasant memories remain from Good Hope.

But we can't live in the past. There are still only three churches in Omaha. The southwest part of the city still has not been explored. There has been some initial talk of attempting to establish a mission in that area. Perhaps those dreams of the former members could be fulfilled in the southwest part of the city, dreams of a large church and a flourishing congregation. Perhaps someday there will be a church in that part of town and maybe, just maybe, that church could be called Good Hope. Deo volente!