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LET THEM SHOUT FROM THE MOUNTAINTOPS
(A brief history of the beginning of WELS mission work in
Colorado.)

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Senior Church History
Prof. Fredrich

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Kenneth Frey

PREFACE

The original intent of this paper was to examine the work of the General Missionary and to determine the whys and wherefores behind the decisions for work in particular cities or areas. For two reasons this intent was not carried out. The first being that most of the records and correspondence of the General Missionary to Colorado were lost. The second reason is that no history of this particular subject has been written. Thus the author would have had to fill in the general history of the WELS in Colorado. Therefore this paper will be a general history of early WELS work in Colorado in the 1930's and 1940's.

Today, when we think of Colorado we think of mountains, skiing and the old west. And today Colorado is predominantly a tourist state. Yet, Colorado, as a geographical area, was virtually ignored for many centuries. The only reason it was explored at all in the beginning was because of gold. Early Spanish explorers, such as Coronado, reached what is now Colorado in search of the "Seven cities of gold." When these explorations failed in their purpose Colorado was virtually forgotten. The land was considered worthless for raising crops and the mountains uninhabitable. Fur traders were the first to find anything profitable in the Rocky Mountain region but they were scattered and nomadic. It wasn't until the Pike's Peak gold rush of 1859 that people began to inhabit Colorado in large numbers. The gold rush brought fortune seekers looking for gold. But more than that it brought fortune seekers of another kind, the merchants. Cities began to develop as merchants moved into the area hoping to make a living off of the gold miners pouring into the region. When the gold played out, so did the people. Colorado's population began to decline sharply until silver was discovered in Leadville. This began the silver boom which solidified the state's population and created a permanent home for many.

Religion came to Colorado with the people seeking their fortune in gold-mining. For the most part churches were a welcome sight to many of these miners because the churches reminded them of home. The first churches to begin organized work in Colorado were the Methodists and Episcopalians. The former sending missionaries in 1859 and building the first church

in Denver. The latter followed in 1860. Close behind them were¹
the Presbyterians and Catholics.

Lutheranism did not enter Colorado until 1872. It was in this year that the Missouri Synod sent a Pastor Hilgendorf to Colorado. According to the proceeding of the Colo. Dist. of the LCMS in 1921, Hilgendorf travelled extensively and organized congregations. By 1893, the establishment of the Kansas Dist. of LCMS, there were four congregations affiliated with the Missouri² Synod in Colorado. LCMS was not alone in Colorado however. The Augustana Synod had organized a church, Augustana Lutheran of³ Denver, as early as 1878.

Compared to these other synods the Joint Synod of Wisc. a.o.s. (from now on designated simply by WELS) was a late comer to the Rocky Mountain State. WELS came to Colorado via Nebraska. Rev. A. C. Bauman had resigned from his parish in Minnesota and had moved to Sugar City, Colorado for the health of a member of his family. Apparently while he was there he began serving a group of Lutherans. He also began preaching in nearby towns in the Arkansas Valley. In 1933 Pastor Bauman appeared at the Neb. Dist. Convention with a report and a request. Rev. IM. P. Frey reports what happened:

He reported that the demands made upon him were greater than he could take care of and expressed the opinion that there was room for much mission work in the state. After hearing the report and weighing the matter, our Synod through the Mission Board of the Nebraska District entered upon work in the state of Colorado.⁴

These first mission efforts may seem meager by our standards. A candidate was sent to work under Pastor Bauman in the vicinity of Sugar City. In 1934 two men were sent to the same area of the

Arkansas Valley, one to serve in LaJunta and the other in Lamar. I say it may seem meager to us because they concentrated in one small area of the state for the most part. But we must remember this was depression era and our synod had a large deficit. The watch word at the time was "No expansion". Also we ought to remember that Pastor Bauman was carrying on all exploratory work by himself until these men arrived. They went where he had done the leg work.

While Pastor Bauman was bringing the WELS into the Arkansas Valley of Colorado, another door opened in the northeast part of the state, the Platte River Valley area. For in the city of Ft. Morgan a small group of Lutherans were having trouble finding a church home. An old German congregation affiliated with the Iowa Synod had split in 1927 over communion doctrine and practice. The remaining Lutherans were not able to support the large church building and were denied support by the Iowa Synod. They disbanded their congregation and joined Trinity Lutheran Church of the LCMS. Because of doctrinal problems in this congregation the Lutherans from the old German congregation left. They sought to reestablish Zion Congregation and to this end sought support from the WELS. In 1933 this congregation reorganized with support from the WELS, thus becoming the first organized WELS congregation in Colorado.

From these two areas on the eastern prairies WELS mission work spread to the rest of the state. Progress was restricted to the eastern part of the state, the non-mountainous area, particularly in the Arkansas Valley. Exceptions to this are Platteville, Hillrose and Elizabeth. Platteville was one of the

first preaching stations begun. Platteville is located in the northern part of the state (the Arkansas Valley is in the south) and much closer to the mountains than any other preaching station. Work here was begun in 1934.

Hillrose is located near Ft. Morgan on the Platte River. Work began in this town in 1935. Until 1938 all other work was restricted to the Arkansas Valley where mission work was begun in such places as Ordway and Rocky Ford.

In 1938 the Synod approved the Exploration Fund for exploratory work. With the help of this fund work was begun in Elizabeth, a small town near the foothills of the Rocky Mountains and only forty miles south of Denver. This mission was the result of the work of a retired pastor who had been working the eastern slope.⁶ This was the first exploration by our synod in the area where the largest cities are located.

In looking back at this early period of work in Colorado there has been some criticism concerning the choice of towns where our Synod began work. While it is true that many of these first mission efforts were in small farm or ranch communities where there may have been little growth, we must keep in mind the situation of these first missionaries. Pastor Bauman has been criticized for always working in haystack towns. But he worked on his own where he happened to live. In the first couple years he received no support from Synod. Even after 1933 the manpower he received was placed where he had done work by himself. To expect that missions should have been started in the large cities when there was no contact with them as yet is unrealistic. Also it must be remembered that very little money was being dished out

for exploratory work. The Synod did not as yet have the money to send men to explore the large cities. Finally we must take into consideration the great distances that existed and the transportation at that time. For a man like Bauman to run to the big city would have taken much time and money. In all fairness to these early missionaries, they built on what little foundation they had in the state.

The problem of distance mentioned earlier played a large part in the history of Colorado, not only in missions but in the state as well. Distance from territorial government led to the formation of the territory of Colorado and statehood in 1876.

Carl Ubbelohde states:

Too distant for effective control from any one of them (the existing territorial governments), the gold seekers were left to provide their own devices for law and order in the diggings... Yet no matter how effectively the mining districts and the people's courts took care of local criminals, the Pike's Peakers sought more legitimate, recognized government. 7

Thus distance from existing governments led to the formation of the state of Colorado. This same problem of distance repeats itself in the history of WELS mission work in Colorado. For in 1937 the Colo. Conf. of the Nebraska Dist. appealed to Synod for district status. Note the reason for the appeal.

Whereas the state of Colorado offers at the present time wonderful opportunities for several new and promising mission fields in which work should begin immediately;

Whereas the present fields need a closer supervision;

Whereas such supervision under present conditions is almost impossible because of the great distance separating the fields and the officials of the Nebraska District;

Whereas a supervision at such great distance entails large and unnecessary expenses and causes many delays and misunderstandings;

Whereas we are of the unanimous opinion that the growth of the Kingdom of God can be greatly furthered by the establishment of local supervision;

It was therefore resolved by said Conference that we petition the Joint Synod to be released from the Nebraska District and granted to formulate and organize a new district to be known as the Colorado District of the Joint Synod of Wisconsin and Other States. 8

The missionaries in Colorado recognized the problem of distance in getting things done efficiently. However Synod rejected their request simply because there were not enough men in the state to create a separate district. Nevertheless the Synod saw the need for more effective work in the state. They therefore passed a resolution for President Brenner to appoint a two man committee to explore Arizona (a similar request had come from this state) and Colorado.

Pres. Brenner appointed J. Gauss and Im. P. Frey to conduct that exploration of the two states. These two men conducted a survey of Arizona and Colorado from March 6 to April 5, 1938. In May of that year they reported their findings to the General Synodical Committee.

Their exploration of Colorado began in the Arkansas Valley. They explored the cities where missionaries were active and met with these men to discuss the mission opportunities in the area. They then covered much of the eastern prairies including the Ft. Morgan area. More importantly they explored the eastern slope from Pueblo in the south to Ft. Collins in the north, paying special attention to Denver and the surrounding area.

The largest half of the state was not surveyed directly by the committee. They explain in their report:

Pastor Siffring gave us also a report on an exploration tour on the western slope which he had made a few weeks previously with Mr. Stolte of Ft. Morgan. Since they had been handicapped by deep snows, a complete report could not be given. It may be stated

at this time that your committee had planned to visit the Western Slope, but because of great snowfall which blocked the mountain passes this plan had to be abandoned. 10

Their report was flavored with the need for the Gospel in Colorado and the opportunities for our Synod in the state. Concerning the Denver area they wrote:

It should be remembered that quite a few of our Wisconsin Synod Lutherans have in the past moved, and still are moving, into Denver, and we should earnestly consider whether we should not hold what we have and take advantage of the opportunity to work among the unchurched which is offered us in Denver. 11

Although they left the decision to the Synod leaders it would appear that these men saw that this was the time to enter Colorado.

The result of this report was the calling of a General Missionary for Colorado. The idea for a General Missionary came from the synod itself. In the resolution which called for a survey committee at the 1937 Synod this paragraph was also adopted:

That the General Mission Board, in conjunction with the General Synodical Committee, shall be empowered to advise the calling of a general missionary for each of the two conferences, if the report of the afore-mentioned committee warrants such a step. 12

The General Synodical Committee was moved by the report to request the calling of a General Missionary by the Mission Board. To the praise of Synod at this time it must be noted that they went ahead with calling general missionaries to Arizona and Colorado even though the Synod financial scene was still not very pretty. The depression was still holding on. Crops were failing. The Synod still had a large, though decreasing, debt. Yet they boldly went ahead because they did not want to pass up

the excellent opportunity to spread the Kingdom of God.

Rev. Immanuel Paul Jacob Frey was called as the General Missionary for Colorado. He quickly accepted. He served in this capacity from May 1939 until 1942. To round out the story, Colorado never received District status. However, when the General Missionary finished his work, the Conference was granted District Mission status, which it continues to hold today.

WELS mission work in Colorado can be divided into three eras. Simply, these are the pre-general missionary era, the general missionary era and the post-general missionary era. We enter now the second era, the era of the General Missionary to Colorado. Im. P. Frey was born October 18, 1889 in Moltke Township, Sibley County, Minnesota. He was the son of one of the last practical ministers in WELS. ¹³ He graduated from the Wauwatosa Seminary in 1913. He served parishes in Phoenix, Arizona(1913-1924), Graceville, Minnesota(1924-1930) and Hoskins, Nebraska(1930-1939) before being called as the General Missionary to Colorado. When his work as General Missionary was concluded he served Mt. Olive, Denver, Colorado until his death in 1964. He was a contributing editor to the Northwestern Lutheran. He served on the Neb. Dist. School Board, Neb. Dist. Mission Board, General Mission Board, Colorado Mission Dist. Mission Board, the Synod Doctrinal Committee(CI-CR) and as Neb. Dist. President(1943-1958).

His work as General Missionary officially began May 1, 1939. He set up shop in Denver, the capitol of Colorado and the largest city. Due to the problem of distance and money he concentrated in this area. The Neb. Dist. Mission Board reports, "For

geographical and financial reasons the General Missionary's work¹⁴ has centered largely in the Denver area of the State."

Pastor Frey also worked the western slope on several visits across the mountains. The western slope is the area of Colorado west of the Continental divide, which is approximately one-half of the state. Due to travel conditions of the day and again the problem of distance, work on the western slope was difficult and not as complete as one would have liked. He was aided in this area by other pastors who took leaves of absence to explore certain areas, particularly Mancos-Cortez and Montorse-Gunnison. Before the General Missionary began work in Colorado men had gone to survey these fields and conduct services.

Pastor Frey canvassed every major and not so major city in the state of Colorado both in the mountains and in the prairies. The result of his work can best be seen by the statistics from this period. In 1936 there were 6 pastors, 9 congregations and 559 souls in the Colorado Conference. In 1938 that had increased just slightly with only one additional worker in the state. By 1942 when Pastor Frey finished his work as General Missionary, there were 13 pastors, 17 congregations, 9 preaching stations and 933 souls. During the era of the General Missionary the number of pastors and souls in WELS congregations nearly doubled. To put it another way, the Synod may not have come in on the ground floor of mission work in Colorado, but it caught the elevator going up. What is more important, though, is where the new work was located. By 1942 there were two churches in Denver, one each in Pueblo, Greeley and Golden. These cities, all on the eastern slope, were the larger cities in the state. No WELS

churches existed in these cities before Pastor Frey began exploring the state. All of those churches are the direct result of his leg work.

But it was not all a bed of roses in the Rocky Mountains. The Devil was at work there also. In fact he had been working there a long time. When people came to Colorado they came at first looking to get rich quick in silver or gold. They did not come to the region for their spiritual health. Quite the contrary, the calling card of Colorado was that it was a state to improve financial health through easy-to-find ores or to improve physical health through the excellent climate and hot springs. In general the people of Colorado were apathetic to religion of any kind. They were this-world minded. Pastor Frey made this observation:

No man by nature has any love for the preaching of the Cross, but in the West there seems to exist an unusual indifference to the Church and to church-going. Even many of those who came from the states to the East as Lutherans have succumbed to this churchless spirit and are hard to draw back to church, especially when pastors neglect to forward their names promptly to the nearest Lutheran pastor. 15

Unlike the Midwest where religion is strong, one may have to look for a long time to find a person in the west who even knows what a Lutheran is.

The Devil was also at work "on the home front." The depression and the Synod debt were making the work in Colorado difficult. One problem that resulted was the lack of chapels where they were needed. Pastor Frey comments, "One of the heavy handicaps in our work has been the lack of chapels. This is a problem which must be solved if effective work is to be

done." ¹⁶ Another problem that resulted from the financial crunch was the lack of manpower. Many opportunities were missed because the finances were not available to place men on the western slope and in the large cities. Pastor A. C. Bauman, chairman of the mission board at this time, reports:

At the time of this writing there are 5 vacancies in our midst. Our mission opportunities in the State are so great, and the fields to be opened so many that we hardly dare to speak about them. Thinking only of our larger cities such as Pueblo, Denver, Colorado Springs, Grand Junction, Ft. Collins, and others we could state that we could use a resident pastor in each one of the places in addition to the men working in some of these fields. 17

Another problem that surfaced for work in Colorado was a lack of referrals from the east. Rev. John Brenner, former pastor at Hillrose, Colorado, recalls Pastor Frey bemoaning the fact that pastors in the midwest were sending their members to established LCMS congregations instead of to WELS missions that could have used strong members. This seems to be supported by a comment of Pastor Frey in "Expansion" of March, 1940. He states, "So-called 'feeders' have been largely conspicuous by their absence." ¹⁸

Another problem, not unique to Colorado, was the friction with LCMS in a few places such as Ft. Morgan, Mancos and Greeley. The degree to which this particular problem hindered growth in Colorado mission work by WELS is impossible to determine. Only questions with no answers can be raised. Was manpower wasted in areas where LCMS already was working? Were opportunities passed up because WELS did not want to cause more friction with LCMS? The examination of these questions lies

beyond the scope of this paper and the questions will probably never be answered with certainty.

These hindrances to mission work had three results. First, individual congregations would not grow as fast as midwestern congregations and thus would be a financial burden to Synod for a longer period of time. Second, this was a time of great opportunity in Colorado yet our Synod was not able to keep up with all the chances to bring the gospel to the unchurched. Third, possible opportunities were passed up completely because of friction with LCMS.

But let us not think that growth was slow. It has already been reported that the membership of Synod in Colorado nearly doubled in this period. The opportunities were there. The growth shows this. The question is whether the Synod met all those opportunities. It seems they did not. There was still much to do. And so mission work in Colorado entered into the third era of operation, the post-general missionary days.

The General Missionary concluded his work in the summer of 1942. He had canvassed much of the state and established exploratory fields. It was time for a new plan of mission work in Colorado. Part of that plan included the creation of the Colo. Mission Dist. to oversee the work in the state. The Colorado Conference was still part of the Neb. Dist. Yet as far as mission work went, Colorado was equal to the other districts in self-government and representation on the General Mission Board. This era of mission work in Colorado extends right up to this very day. But, so as not to get carried away, only the period up to 1950 will be discussed here in order to round out

the story of WELS beginnings in the state.

There were many changes in the state of Colorado at this time that had an effect on mission work. The first of these is the increased ease in travel and the resulting tourism boom.

Ubbelohde writes:

It was the mechanical triumphs--the radio, the airplane, and the automobile--that most dramatically changed society between the two world wars. The state seemed suddenly to dwindle in size with the new transportation and communication techniques; mountain ranges no longer isolated the state as they had in the past. 19

Of course these changes were not unique to Colorado, but with Colorado's scenery it had already been marked as a tourist mecca. These new innovations made tourism a practical reality.

But probably the greatest change in Colorado was a result of the Second World War. Ubbelohde states, "No other single event in its history and no other national crisis...brought to Colorado such great change." ²⁰ What the war did to Colorado was to bring military installations and scientific developments. Along with these came support personnel, factories and other developments that brought a great metamorphosis to the state.

A third consideration is the increase in population at this time. This may be legitimately called a result of the other factors. But it is important enough here to list it separately. During the 1940's the state's population increased by over 200,000. This was a larger increase than any other mountain state except Arizona. And particularly it should be noted that most of the growth was urban along the eastern slope. By 1950, ²¹ 42.5 percent of the population lived in or near Denver.

In this decade from 1940-1950 Synod membership in Colorado

again nearly doubled from 933 souls in 1942 to 1796 souls in 1950. In the report of the Neb. Dist Convention of 1946 the General Mission Board reported that much mission work was going on. This was particularly directed toward the north in Wyoming, especially Cheyenne. ²² But this was not so much a period of exploration as it was a time of consolidation and realignment. As people were moving to the larger cities many of the smaller exploratories were shut down. Attempts were made in several areas, but if they showed no promise support was withdrawn. Exceptions to this were Greeley, Mancos and Wiggins. All three of these congregations were closed down because of the LCMS. These were churches that started with a core of disgruntled Missourians. When WELS could no longer supply them regularly they forgot their differences with Missouri and returned to that Synod.

While they shut down unpromising exploratories they continued to concentrate in the larger cities. During this decade work was begun in Englewood and Littleton, both suburbs of Denver. Work was also begun in Colorado Springs, another large city on the eastern slope. The population of Colorado was changing, as was the rest of the country. People were moving to the larger cities. Mission work needed to keep up with that change. It would appear that the attempt was made to do just that.

As one looks back on the beginnings in Colorado several observations can be made. First of all one notices that the General Missionary was not a new innovation but a return to the early history of the WELS, especially the work of travelling

missionaries Boetcher and Fachtmann. Going to the other end of the time line it is interesting to note the present "new mode" approach to mission work carried on today. One has to wonder just how new the new mode really is. The idea of reaching into completely virgin areas with canvass and exploratory work was the primary task of the General Missionary.

To this point it is interesting to note the attitude of Pastor Frey in regard to this work. In "Expansion", March 1940 he said, "If it is expected that within a short time many large congregations will come into being, we will be disappointed; but if we intend to bring the Gospel to people who are without it, the opportunities are there."²³ Pastor Frey was not a church growth advocate. In the comment above and the one following he speaks to the importance of the individual soul. In an article written for the Northwestern Lutheran he explains his objectives for mission work.

The Savior never said, Go ye into those fields where there is a good prospect of organizing sizeable congregations. No, He said, Go ye into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature. We are to bring the Gospel to those who have it not or who would not have it, if we, through our missionaries, did not proclaim to them the glad tidings of salvation. If our aim is only to organize good-sized congregation then we are intent only upon building an outward institution instead of winning souls. It is good and right that we organize congregations where a number have been gathered in with the net of the Gospel, the Apostle Paul did that too, but that is not the end of mission work but the means of prosecuting it more thoroughly and efficiently.

We have pastors and missionaries who are doing a great Gospel work without gaining outward members for their local congregations and without thereby drawing money into their local congregational treasury. That is the case in such climates where there are many healthseekers whose illness prevents them from attending the services of the church but to whose bedside the Gospel is brought...Jesus once said

something about leaving the 99 sheep that are safe in the wilderness and going after the one that is lost. Let us not forget how precious the individual soul is in the sight of the Savior. 24

Another interesting observation that can be made about mission work in Colorado is that the General Missionary set up shop in Denver, the largest city and centrally located, to concentrate his work in that area. This method reminds one of the Apostle Paul who centered his mission work in the large city of Ephesus in Asia Minor.

As we look back on the beginnings in Colorado one cannot avoid using hindsight. From our modern perspective we could criticize the work done there for not having concentrated in the larger cities more than they did. We could criticize them for not using better judgment and passing up some of the small towns and agricultural communities in order to spend more money and manpower on the eastern slope. But the facts show that in the pre-general missionary days little was able to be done in Denver and surrounding area because of the distance between Pastor Bauman and the eastern slope. During the days of the General Missionary the concentration was on the large population centers of the day although the rest of the state was not ignored. In the post-general missionary period the work shifted even more from the small communities to the large cities.

It must also be remembered that these men saw the need for work in the larger population centers of the state but those needs were often not met because of financial stringencies on mission work. In the report of the Colo. Mission Dist. Board of 1945 reports that because the Synod could not supply a man for

Glenwood Springs on the western slope the people there called a man from LCMS and received one. ²⁵ Such missed opportunities were the largest detriment to WELS mission work in Colorado.

Finally, it would be good for us to keep in mind Pastor Frey's comments about mission work. The main objective of any mission work should be to reach out with the Gospel to lost sinners. While it is true that we want to do this in the most efficient way possible, reaching the most people with the least outlay, hindsight criticism of the work in Colorado which centers on the lack of sizeable congregations and large number of Synod supported churches may show a church growth mentality.

Mission work by WELS in Colorado is over 50 years old now. In the last three decades the intensity of mission work has not matched the original push of the 1930's and 1940's. Colorado is still a growing field. The opportunities still exist. One hopes that those opportunities will not also be passed by. May the Gospel continue to water this spiritually dry land. May WELS missionaries continue to "Shout from the mountaintops."

ENDNOTES

- 1
Carl Ubbelohde, Maxine Benson and Duane A. Smith, A Colorado History (Boulder, Co.: Pruett Pub. Co., 1976) pp. 85,86.
- 2
Proceedings of the Colorado District of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, 1921, pp. 56,57.
- 3
Minutes of the Augustana Synod, 1837
- 4
Im. P. Frey, "Our Mission Work in Colorado," The Northwestern Lutheran Vol. 28, p. 282.
- 5
"History of Zion Lutheran Church, 1933-1983".
- 6
Frey, NWL, Vol. 28, p. 282.
- 7
Ubbelohde, pp. 93,97.
- 8
Report of the Joint Synod of Wisc. a. o. s. 1937, pp.55,56.
- 9
37 Synod, pp. 59,60.
- 10
J. Gauss and Im. P. Frey, Report of Exploration Committee. pp. 8,9.
- 11
Exploration Report, p. 10.
- 12
37 Synod, p. 60.
- 13
The information here was determined by circumstantial evidence from two different sources. In "The History of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, 1863-1963", Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly, Vol. 60, p. 197, Im P. Frey mentions a Jacob Frey that received a colloquy in 1884 as a practical minister. Since Jacob Frey came to this country in 1883, we assume it is his father. This is supported by evidence found in Minnesota District Golden Jubilee History. On p. 133 Jacob Frey is listed as a pastor in Moltke Township at the time of Im. P. Frey's birth.

14
Report of the Convention of the Nebraska District of the
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15
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"Colorado Mission District Report(biennium 41-43)."

18
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19
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22
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