

A PARTIAL HISTORY OF THE WISCONSIN SYNOD  
IN THE STATE-OF-ARKANSAS

by

Daniel M. Gawrlich

1982

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

A PARTIAL HISTORY OF THE WISCONSIN SYNOD  
IN THE STATE OF ARKANSAS

"Hear this, you elders; listen, all who live in the land. Has anything like this ever happened in your days or in the days of your forefathers? Tell it to your children, and let your children tell it to their children, and their children to the next generation." (Joel 1:2,3)

With these words the prophet Joel was giving the elders of Israel the responsibility to preserve their history. One might say that the prophet Joel had assigned the elders to write a history term paper. The topic which the elders of Israel were to preserve was the destructive invasion of an army of locusts. It is the topic of this writer to record a partial history of the Wisconsin Synod in the state of Arkansas.

Work was first done toward the establishing of a Wisconsin Synod mission church in razorback country in 1969 by Rev. Samuel Kugler. Unfortunately, the nucleus of this group of Wisconsin Synod families had more moves by its members than Julius Erving of the Philadelphia 76ers. and was forced to close in 1971. In 1973, a number of Wisconsin Synod families were again living in Little Rock, Ark., and Rev. Paul Soukop, of Overland Park, Kansas, served them on a monthly basis. Later that year, Rev. Arlyn Schmeling, of Alexandria, Louisiana, the Nebraska District Missionary, began to drive up for monthly services. When he was called to Scotts Bluff, Nebraska, Rev. Gerhard Schapekahn, of Tulsa, Oklahoma, took over the monthly services.

Three days before the 200th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, on July 1, 1976, the group was given the religious freedom to begin exploratory services. This meant that Rev. Schapekahn came from Tulsa to Little Rock every week to preach the Gospel. This continued until July 1977 when Rev. Arlyn Schmeling was called back to

Little Rock, Ark. With a full-time pastor in Little Rock, King of Kings Ev. Lutheran Church really started to grow. On Nov. 1, 1977, the congregation was granted Mission Status.

In March, 1978, the congregation requested permission to search for land and permission to call their own resident Pastor. Both requests were approved, and on May 16, 1978, in the Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary draft, the call was given to John W. Gawrisch. Rev. John Gawrisch was ordained and installed as the first resident pastor of King of Kings on June 25, 1978. Prof. Wilbert Gawrisch, his father, conducted the Installation Service.

On Dec. 6, 1978, the present church site on W. Markam was purchased. On September 7, 1980, the Ground Breaking Ceremony was held. On January 25, 1981, the cornerstone of this building was set in place following a special service. Finally after all the snakes had been exterminated, numerous trees had been cut down, and the problems that go along with any building project had been solved, King of Kings Ev. Lutheran Church was dedicated on May 24, 1981.

This past Easter, the pioneer spirit within me, led me to brave the blizzard conditions of Interstate 57 in Illinois, and the sleet of Missouri to obtain a personal interview with Rev. John Gawrisch. Rev. John Gawrisch felt the year 1979 could best be described with these words of Scripture. "The Lord hath not dealt with us after our sins; nor rewarded us according to our iniquities. For as the heaven is high above the earth, so great is his mercy toward them that fear him." (Ps. 103:10,11)

A look at the 1979 membership report reveals how God had richly blessed King of Kings Ev. Lutheran Church. Seven members were received by letter of Transfer from WELS congregations, 6 members were received by profession of faith, and 8 were received by rite of Confirmation.

In addition, through the Sacrament of Holy Baptism 6 infants were brought to God's Kingdom, and 484 members attended the Sacrament of the Altar.

During 1979 51 Sunday morning services were conducted with an average attendance of 49. Also thirteen services were held at Fort Smith, Ark., where Pastor Gawrisch served as a military contact pastor. The average attendance from WELS members in Fort Smith and the military camp was 17.

The Church Council for 1979 consisted of Mr. Robert Estes - President, Duane Duescher - Secretary, George Ragan - Treasurer, Tom Aderman - Financial Secretary, Bill Runge - Trustee, and Steve Hoffman - Elder.

To help beautify the Christmas Eve service, a choir of 10 united with the Sunday School children to sing praises to God. More of the same sort of success was to follow in 1980.

In 1980, at a time when it was almost impossible to borrow money, King of Kings, was granted a Church Extension Fund loan in February, in order to plan a worship, education, fellowship unit. The Building Committee was composed of Steve Hoffman - Chairman, Tom Aderman - Vice-Chairman, William Runge, Leonard Hawkins, and John Zylma. They selected Raymond Branton/ Associates/ Architects to design this unit, and Wedaman Corporation to do the construction.

During 1980 the members of King of Kings were again blessed with the privilege to hear God's Word. This Word produced results. Eleven were received as members by letter of transfer, 6 members were added by profession of faith, 4 were added by rite of Confirmation, and there was one baptism.

With all these new members one would think the congregation would be growing. But transfers to other WELS congregations hit hard as 10 requested and received their letters of transfer. But although for many the year of 1980 had been difficult, one can still see how

God blessed King of Kings Ev. Lutheran Church. The members of King of Kings had good reason to "make a joyful noise unto the Lord, all ye lands. Serve the Lord with gladness. Come before His presence with singing. Know ye that the Lord He is God."

In 1981 when many people were complaining because of cutbacks in the benefits received from the Federal and State governments, in a year when it was becoming more and more difficult to put food on the table for the family, at a moment when jobs were insecure and uncertain, in a society filled with rampant crime and moral depravity, yet in 1981 when one looks at King of Kings, one must confess, "What shall I render unto the Lord for all His benefits toward me."(Ps. 116:12)

In 1981 two members were received by letter of transfer, 26 members were received by profession of faith, 4 were received by rite of Confirmation, and there were 6 infant baptisms.

1981 also saw the completion and dedication of the first WELS church building, King of Kings Ev. Lutheran Church, in the state of Arkansas. And who would have expected the work the Lord had planned in Russelville? One warm evening Pastor Gawrisch received a phone call from an irate Missouri Synod member. He requested that Pastor Gawrisch would come to his home for a talk concerning the problems they were having in their Missouri Synod Church. Unfortunately, that meeting was scheduled for Super Bowl Sunday.

Although Pastor Gawrisch lost out on being able to watch the Oakland Raiders gain the victory, a much more important victory was won on January 22, 1981. Pastor Gawrisch walked into a house filled with irate Missouri Synod members. Members upset with the new liberalism in the Missouri Synod, and rightly so. My brother told me that one Missouri Synod pastor held the Lord's Supper with his Young Peoples' Group by using grape juice and hot dog buns.

Now the Lord has permitted Exploratory services to be held in the Russelville area and granted them the right to call their own pastor. On Easter Sunday the people of Fort Smith and Russelville combined for an attendance of 54.

Although the history of the WELS in the state of Arkansas is at this time small, Pastor Gawrisch feels the growth of the WELS in the state of Arkansas looks promising. Something definitely worth telling our children, as the elders of Israel were requested to tell their children.

Michael W. Gawrisch