

Why has the first Wisconsin Synod Christian Day  
School in Iowa failed to grow?

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Senior Church History

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Professor Fredrich

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On September 16, 1956 Lincoln Heights Ev. Lutheran Church of Des Moines, Iowa dedicated its new Christian Day School. The guest speaker was Professor Carl Lawrenz of Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Seminary in Mequon, Wisconsin. The new school was the first Lutheran Day School of any kind in the city of Des Moines and the first Christian Day School of the Wisconsin Synod in the state of Iowa. On that day the school had 25 pupils. Its first teacher was Mrs. Walmer Boehman. Today the same school still has one teacher, Mr. Joseph Brinkman, and an enrollment of only seventeen pupils. In this day in which the condition of public school education is widely deplored, in which even private schools are closing in great number and in which almost 20 new Christian Day Schools are opened each year by the congregations of the WELS, someone might well ask, "Why has the first Wisconsin Synod Christian Day School in Iowa failed to grow?" Though every school and every set of circumstances differ, and as such, the answer to this question would not necessarily help to answer similar questions elsewhere, it does give rise to incites into the ministry of the WELS in Iowa.

Lincoln Heights Ev. Lutheran Church is presently one of only sixteen WELS congregations, in the state of Iowa. The WELS has more with nineteen. Of the sixteen WELS congregations eleven are missions. Of the five self-supporting congregations Lincoln Heights is the first of only two with Christian Day Schools. The only other school is in Cedar Rapids. The congregation in Des Moines is among the older WELS congregations

in Iowa. Services began in July, 1943. The first pastor, E.A. Knief was installed in September of that year. The congregation became a member of the WELS in August, 1946.

When the second pastor, Hugo Fritze, was installed in February, 1947, the congregation still numbered only 17 communicants and 38 souls. The average church attendance had risen to about 50 by the time the congregation dedicated its first chapel in May, 1948. For five years the people had worshiped in a theatre. Though the year 1948 was a year of great growth, the congregation lost 20 souls in 1949 to a group from the Evangelical Lutheran Church that had begun services in the very theatre that Lincoln Heights had vacated the year before. By the time the congregation's third pastor, Milton Weishahn was installed in February, 1954, the congregation numbered 76 communicants and 127 souls. The average attendance through 1953 had been 68.

This congregation which had dedicated a chapel in 1948, and a newly built parsonage in April, 1951, began accepting donations for a Christian Day School in January, 1955. Interestingly enough 34 baptisms were performed that same year. Three and a half months after the tenth anniversary of the congregation that took place on June 3, 1946, a school of 25 was in operation.

The 34 baptisms performed in 1955 and the educational influence of Pastor Knief who had left Lincoln Heights to teach at Wisconsin Lutheran High School in Milwaukee, but who had continued to serve the congregation while living in

Milwaukee for the duration of the four month vacancy that followed his pastorate, may well have been factors that contributed to the decision to open a school.

In 1948 Mrs. Bachman resigned as the teacher at Lincoln Heights to accompany her husband who had been transferred to Davenport, Iowa. Her resignation began a pattern in which a number of teachers assigned as graduates from DMLC remained for relatively short periods of time in Des Moines until a chaotic 1966-1967 school year. All were single women isolated in a state rather sparsely populated with WELS Christian Day Schools (one), or for that matter with WELS congregations.

Miss Charlotte Rupprecht was assigned in 1958 to teach what to this point has been the school's largest enrollment of 33 pupils. She served her Lord faithfully at Lincoln heights for two years, accepting a call to Grace, Oshkosh, Wisconsin in 1960.

Miss Alice Goelz was assigned in 1960. Miss Goelz also served for two years resigning in 1962 to become Mrs. James Danell.

Miss Marcella Haefer was assigned in 1962 and served for four years until accepting a call to Trinity, Hoskins, Nebraska in 1966. During that time the congregation relocated and built a new church-school complex at its present site at S.W. 12th Place and Watrous Ave. in Des Moines. The project begun in 1963 was dedicated to the Lord's service on May 1, 1966.

Miss Ellen Klankowski was then assigned to serve in the new facilities in 1966. Miss Klankowski was forced to resign because of a nervous breakdown that fall. From the first of November, 1966 until the end of the first semester, a number of substitute teachers served the school including two emergency teachers from DMLC: Miss Ruth Peikert and Janice Schlomer. The first male teacher, Mr. Carl Eisenman, was called for the full second semester. The annals of the congregation seem to reflect a note of exhaustion, yet, also one of relief and returning stability, when they read, "At the end of the year, despite the frequent changes of teachers, 21 pupils were enrolled.

In the hope of providing greater stability, the mission board granted the congregation permission to call a full-time male teacher. Such a call imposed the greater financial responsibility of housing and supporting a teacher and his family. On August 13, 1967, Mr. William Helmreich, a graduate of DMLC who was assigned in the spring was installed as the principal and teacher at Lincoln Heights. Like the dedication of the new building the year before, the arrival of the first male teacher was accompanied by adverse circumstances. The summer and autumn of 1967 were filled with numerous moves and transfers of the members of the congregation including that of the pastor. Interestingly enough, Pastor Weishahn, like his predecessor Pastor Fritze accepted a call to Norfolk, Nebraska. The pastorate was to remain vacant for two years. Pastor Charles Flunker ( now serving in Puerto Rico) of Newton, Iowa

some 40 miles away became the vacancy pastor. At this time the congregation numbered 130 communicants and 210 souls.

Coincident with the vacancy began a long series of summer courses for Mr. Helmreich that were to continue from 1967-1972. The courses were necessitated by Iowa law which required the school's new principal to have an administrative degree. When the pastoral vacancy was finally filled on July 16, 1969 with the installation of Pastor Thomas Zarling, a seminary graduate, Mr. Helmreich, in accord with his status as an administrator according to state law (the only WELS administrator in the state) was soon enlisted to help a very troubled and struggling second WELS Day School in Mason City, Iowa some 120 miles to the north. He became the principal also in Mason City, a situation further complicated by the fact that though the Des Moines congregation was in the Nebraska District, the Mason City congregation was in the Minnesota District. His service in Mason City ended, after three years, with the closing of the troubled Mason City school and the termination of the pastor's call to that congregation by the Minnesota District.

Pastor Zarling accepted a call to Brookings, S.D. in January, 1974 and was succeeded by Pastor Martin Stuebs, who had previously served as acting dean at Northwestern College. Pastor Stuebs accepted a call to Lakeside Lutheran High School in January, 1977. Four seminary students took turns flying in from Mequon to conduct weekly services until July of that year when Pastor Keith Bender, a graduate of the seminary

that year who had also previously served in the Missouri Synod, was installed.

During the circumstances of this vacancy, Principal Helmreich also became nominal head of a third WELS Christian Day School in Cedar Rapids 120 miles to the east. He continued to serve there also until accepting a call to Midland, Michigan in 1979. Joseph Brinkman, (brother of Tony Brinkman who is now at the Seminary), a graduate of DMLC has subsequently been assigned to Lincoln Heights, and the administrative courses have begun once again.

Throughout Principal Helmreich's years of service in Des Moines, the enrollment at Lincoln Heights Christian Day School hovered around 25 pupils, never exceeding 33. At one time in the congregation's history the enrollment even fell as low as 12. Why has the first Wisconsin Synod Christian Day School in the state of Iowa failed to grow? Was it the frequent turnover of teachers in the school's formative early years? Does the answer lie in the inexperience of the graduates consistently assigned to it? Does the answer lie in the loaded duties of the school's only seasoned administrator? Does the deterrent of the added expense of a married man that must be shouldered by the parents supporting this small school or the isolation of the congregation itself play a part?

The answer may indeed lie in part with these considerations. However, the answer appears to lie more fully in the reason behind the resignation of the school's first teacher, Mrs. Bachman, the only Mrs. among the full-time teachers to serve

there. The answer seems to lie in the numerous moves and transfers that accompanied Pastor Weishahn's move in 1967. The city of Des Moines is the insurance capital of the midwest, the business center of the state, a city that even in the midwest typifies our mobile society. The congregation, like the city, has a fluid population. Today, the communicant membership is still the 130 that it was in 1967. Mr. Helmreich himself has observed that the frequent transfer of businessmen in and out of the congregation brings families into the congregation who settle in the newer part of Des Moines far from the south side near the church that is no longer growing. The long trips across a city of well over 100,000 every day for school, hinder new families in church from enrolling thier children in the school.

The Christian Day School in Mason City numbered about 15 pupils. The school in Cedar Rapids is growing at ten. Like the Lincoln Heights congregation, its school is holding at 17. It is holding not only 17 pupils, but also the message of forgiveness in Christ Jesus. Through thick and thin, the Lord has graciously preserved this school as a faithful arm of His kingdom work. Its students have gone on to attend MLA and WLS. Its numbers haven't grown, but its pupils and the members of the congregation who support it have grown steadily in faith.



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907 Mattes Dr., Midland MI 48640.