

Waldemar J. Zarling:
A Leader from the Lord

Senior Church History
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"Give thanks to the Lord, call on his name; make known among the nations what he has done. Sing to him, sing praise to him; tell of all his wonderful acts. Glory in his holy name; let the hearts of those who seek the Lord rejoice. Look to the Lord and his strength; seek his face always. Remember the wonders he has done, his miracles, and the judgments he pronounced" (1 Chronicles 16:8-12).

With these words of King David, taken from Scripture, Michigan District President W.J. Zarling introduced a history book. This book, Michigan District History: 1833-1970, was compiled with the express purpose of glorifying God's name for all his blessings of the past. King David was urging his people not to forget but always remember the great deeds, works, and wonders which their God, the one and only Triune God had done for them. President Zarling also was exhorting, especially the members of the Michigan District, anyone who might pick up this book and read through it. He was urging them on to remember and never forget the almighty hand of God and his direct involvement with the development of what we call the Michigan District of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod. We are to glorify God's name in all that we do and thank him for all the wonderful things he has done for us, miserable sinners, through his Word and Holy Spirit.

These words of encouragement to his brothers in the ministry and the lay people of his district go a long way in describing the ministry of Pastor Waldemar Zarling. His was a ministry that was dedicated to the service of his Lord and carried out in glory and thanks to his Savior. Although I never had the privilege of meeting or knowing Pastor Zarling personally, I have come to know a little bit about the man who served as Michigan District president from 1968 until his retirement in 1984. Through the reading of President Zarling's Michigan District convention addresses, and Michigan District histories, and through personal conversations with his family, friends, and coworkers, I have acquired some insights into the man who led the Michigan District into the 1980's and beyond.

Upon his retirement from the pastoral ministry in June of 1984, President Zarling had agreed to write a history of the Michigan District from World War II until the present. Of course, such a written history would have made it much easier for me to understand the times and issues of President Zarling's administration. The district itself would have benefited much from this precise recreation of its history, but the Lord had bigger and better plans for Pastor Zarling. Called to his eternal home in 1984, President Zarling left behind a district that still embodied that bold "Michigan Spirit."

This "Michigan Spirit" is not easy to define, but it exists. It is something that needs to be experienced. President Zarling wasn't born in Michigan, and his first calls took him from Minnesota to Arizona to Wisconsin, but his "spirit" was evident when he arrived after receiving the call to serve Good Shepherd in Benton Harbor, Michigan. Pastor Zarling ascended to the presidency of the district because he too embodied this "Michigan Spirit." In his Michigan District history essay, former District President Karl Krauss defined this "Michigan Spirit":

It is born of an intense loyalty to our synodical body, an earnest zeal for our synodical work, and exercise of vision, a determination to go forward for Christ, a profound desire to carry out our Savior's command to go into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature. We regard this as our foremost responsibility and our primary purpose, as individuals, as congregations, as a district, and as a synod.

The old, time-honored "Michigan Spirit" inculcated in us the love of missions and the promotion of mission work at home and at large. It is my humble conviction that this has been our contribution to the life of our Synod. Everything progressive, constructive, and forward-moving which we (the Michigan District) have initiated and promoted has had but one moving thought and purpose: the proclamation, preservation, and propagation of the Gospel of Salvation (p. 11).

President Zarling promoted this "spirit" as he served as District President. Of course, the Lord had plans for Pastor Zarling as he entered the world on February 11th, 1913. He was born in the small town of Rockford, Minnesota. From these humble

beginnings Pastor Zarling went on to Dr. Martin Luther High School in New Ulm, Minnesota. Upon graduation from high school, he enrolled at Northwestern College in Watertown, Wisconsin. From Northwestern College, Pastor Zarling moved on to Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Mequon, Wisconsin.

After graduation from the Seminary in 1938, he took his first call as an assistant pastor at the congregation in Arlington, Minnesota. There Pastor Zarling gained valuable experience and insight into the Lutheran elementary school, as he taught grades one through five. In December of 1940 he was called to be a missionary serving the WELS Indian Mission at Fort Apache, Canyon Day and Cedar Creek, Arizona working among the White Mountain Apaches. The work (which also included building a log chapel and toting a collapsible organ from service to service) was often difficult, but very rewarding. While a missionary in Arizona, Pastor Zarling married Ruth Zell on June 29th, 1941. The couple remained in Arizona until 1945. During that time, he also served as a civilian chaplain at Douglas, Arizona (1943-1945). In 1945, Pastor Zarling accepted a call to serve Mount Calvary Evangelical Lutheran Church in Waukesha, Wisconsin. After five years at Mount Calvary, he took the call to become pastor of St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church, near the Seminary in Newburg, Wisconsin.

Then came the move to Michigan in February of 1956. Pastor Zarling became the first called worker of Good Shepherd Lutheran Church in Fairplain. The church had been organized the previous year in this suburb of Benton Harbor. St. Matthew's and Grace of Benton Harbor were the two churches that supplied members for Good Shepherd. As a daughter congregation, Good Shepherd struggled for recognition and growth. However, through the tireless efforts of Pastor Zarling our Lord saw to the congregation's significant growth. Beginning with 33 souls in 1955, Good Shepherd has prospered, serving 433 souls these days. Pastor Zarling shepherded the congregation for the last 28 years of his ministry.

Originally, services were held in the St. Joseph Township Hall in nearby St. Joseph, Michigan. Good Shepherd's worship facilities were built and dedicated already in May of 1959. Even more surprising than the quick move to construct a church building was the fact that the parsonage was the first building put up, dedicated in May of 1957. Two classrooms and a social room were added in 1970. Following the lead of their pastor, who realized the importance of Christian education, Good Shepherd started their own Lutheran Elementary school in 1978. Another important note was the amazing fact that the congregation became "self-supporting," independent of Synod financial assistance, in January 1958, a mere two and a half years after its conception.

Many people feel that a congregation takes on the personality of its pastor. Well, Good Shepherd was no different. It became a "self-supporting" group that was interested in education and focused on the work of the WELS. This is evident from the description of Pastor Zarling's congregation given in **Michigan District History: 1833-1970:**

[Good Shepherd is] a young, hard-working congregation, which under the Lord's immense blessing, has succeeded in paying substantial sums on its indebtedness, fully supports its pastor, pays tuition for its children to neighboring parochial schools (before 1978), while continuously increasing its subscription for The Synod's work (p. 225).

As the Lord led Pastor Zarling and Good Shepherd through its greatest periods of growth, Pastor Zarling took on many additional responsibilities. Of course, his family was a high priority. The Zarlings had five sons by the time they arrived in Michigan. Influenced by their parents, four of the boys became pastors and one the president of his congregation. Pastor Zarling also began to get deeply involved in the work of the Michigan District. He served as Chairman of the Southwestern Michigan Conference. He also was the chairman of the Michigan District Stewardship Board. In 1960 Pastor Zarling was elected to the Michigan District praesidium. Then in 1968, he succeeded to the office of district president.

Over the sixteen years that he spent in that capacity, Pastor Zarling presided over many difficult issues, witnessed tremendous mission expansion, and led the Michigan District with a firm voice and an evangelical spirit. Many of the issues which President Zarling encountered -such as the role of women in the church, terms for reinstatement into the ministry, colloquy regulations, the church growth movement, and stewardship concerns- are strikingly similar to the issues confronting our synod today.

President Zarling oversaw the Michigan District during its greatest growth in number of souls and congregations. As our Wisconsin Synod expanded to the north, south, and east, the Michigan District included such far-flung places as Canada, Virginia, and Florida to name a few. President Zarling did a yeoman's work as he fostered that Michigan Spirit, the desire to share the gospel with those who had yet to hear of their Savior. Because it was getting too difficult to administer such a large and expansive district, President Zarling was instrumental in helping set up the organization for two more districts of the Synod. Geography dictated the separation into two new districts, the North Atlantic and the South Atlantic.

Traveling from Michigan to the outer reaches of the district on the East Coast and the Southeast caused President Zarling to spend a lot of time away from his own family and congregation. Although he was many times away from home, President Zarling tried his best to make it back for church on Sunday. He felt that to be important, since the members of Good Shepherd had called him to be their shepherd. The Synod did supply the congregation with a vicar every year to aid President Zarling in his ministry at home. President Zarling felt his being away frequently was beneficial in some ways for the membership of Good Shepherd. Having a vicar was a wonderful opportunity for them to help and assist future pastors in their training. The congregation also got plugged into the Synod this way, seeing their synod mission offerings allowing the Synod to train pastors well. The church leaders became very prominent and involved. They had to be, in order to keep things going while President Zarling was away on district business. Having

committed and strong church leadership was a fine example for the rest of the congregation.

However, his absence did have its drawbacks. President Zarling felt he wasn't able to accomplish and implement many things he had hoped for at Good Shepherd because of district presidency obligations. Mrs. Zarling also mentioned the late night (cheapest rate!) phone calls from the outer reaches of the district, which made sleep hard to come by on some nights.

Another big concern during President Zarling's years in office was the colloquy issue. Up until this time, it was rather easy for a pastor to leave his synod and become a member of the WELS ministerium. A cursory oral examination was all that was required. With the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod going through many changes at this time, quite a few pastors were requesting colloquies with the WELS. However, because he had had a bad experience or two in the past, President Zarling thought it would be in everyone's best interests if the requirements were made more stringent. Occasionally men not in full doctrinal agreement with us would slip by. Sometimes a pastor would pass his interview with flying colors, meaning he was doctrinally sound, but he had the wrong "spirit." Now that he had the truth, the pastor would become very pietistic. To try and avoid these problems, President Zarling felt it would be best if a man requesting a colloquy, in addition to the oral exam administered by the Seminary's professors, would be required to attend the Seminary for a semester. This way it would be harder for a man lacking the proper "spirit" or not in full doctrinal agreement with us to slip through the cracks. Another benefit of attending the Seminary would be getting a feel for the "spirit" of the WELS, which is not legalistic. The WELS "spirit" means getting back into the Scriptures, and then slowly and evangelically moving towards practice and application. President Zarling felt strongly about this "peopleness" with which we are to minister to God's children. Our Synod now abides by the aforementioned new requirements. They have worked out rather well, as President Zarling thought they would.

During President Zarling's term, he was forced to address several doctrinal issues. Many pastors in the WELS, and quite a few from Michigan, raised questions about the methods employed in several of our synod's fund-raising efforts and stewardship programs. Reaching Out, the synod's fund drive in 1983, was just the latest in the line of fund-raising programs which was under scrutiny. Although he didn't agree with the methods used, President Zarling had to support it. He was caught between a rock and a hard place. As District President, he needed to support the Synod's program, so as not to give Synod a bad reputation. President Zarling also knew how much this offering was needed, so he didn't want to jeopardize it. However, he also had some real concerns about the methods used in the Reaching Out program.

A related issue to fund-raising was fund-soliciting. In the early 1970's many questions arose about the fellowship implications of accepting moneys from church-related insurance companies. President Zarling definitely felt this practice was out of line with Scripture's fellowship principles. Some fears were set aside when the companies involved changed their bylaws, but all was not right. Led by the sentiments of their district president, many Michigan pastors strongly opposed such fund-soliciting practices. The dangers and disadvantages of receiving such grants bothered many throughout the Synod. President Zarling, although his final term was coming to a close, wrote concerning the hot topic at hand:

Another of the moods and trends characteristic of this period was the desire to maintain purity of doctrine and practice. Careful scrutiny is given to all practices and policies so that our help and strength may be of God and not of man. It is a sign of wholesome health in a district when its pastors, teachers, and members are concerned about purity of doctrine as well as expansion of the kingdom (Tiefel, p. 299).

One other important item that I would like to note is the impact President Zarling had on the Seminary's calling procedure. At the time, Michigan was opening many new missions(in state and in Ohio and the East Coast), so the Michigan District's demand for

Seminary graduates was high. Under the old procedure, each district got to take its one turn in each round of the graduate selections. A district like Michigan, with so many vacancies to be filled, would have a rather small and limited choice when the selection process was winding down, and only a few graduates were left. President Zarling, with some difficult assignments to fill, namely some young and feisty mission congregations that had been old LC-MS churches, felt he needed a wider selection of graduates to choose from to fill those congregations' needs adequately. In order to allow each district to better satisfy its needs, President Zarling suggested allowing those districts with more spots to fill to have a greater number of early selections. This so-called "Zarling rule" is still in effect today. It has allowed our District Presidents more freedom in selecting for need, and has benefited many congregations, who received the graduate best suited to their situation.

President Zarling dealt with many people, many pastors, numerous issues, and any number of district problems. Yet, he remained a leader for his district by setting a positive example. A soft-spoken leader, he was very supportive of the pastors under his jurisdiction. He made the point of visiting pastors personally, when they had concerns, or he had some advice to offer. President Zarling was very concerned with the pastoral side of the ministry. Intellect was never a pastor's greatest gift, the ability to deal with and get along with people was. This "peopleness" was something President Zarling practiced and promoted. Along those same lines, he was very sensitive to legalism, for the gospel should be our motivation.

Most importantly, President Zarling remembered that the Lord was in charge. His ministry and his important office were gifts from his Heavenly Father to be practiced responsibly and to God's glory. President Zarling didn't have the final say on issues, God's Word was the rule and guide. President Zarling spoke of the awesome responsibility pastors have:

As members of an orthodox church body we must say "no" to every custom, practice, policy, or interpretation in the church which is out of harmony with the Lord's revelation. It isn't the easiest thing in the world to be opposed to things which the majority of the people believe to be good and wholesome. Yet our Lord doesn't ask us to be popular; He asks us to be faithful (Proceedings, p. 3).

Only a few months into his retirement from the pastoral ministry in 1984, President Zarling passed away and joined his Savior in heaven. He left behind the most prized possession of his earthly life, the gospel of Jesus Christ. God used Pastor Zarling to uphold and promote this great treasure, the gospel of salvation, for future generations. The following hymn verse was sung at the retirement service of Pastor Zarling at Good Shepherd. Our Lord gives us his life-giving Word, which we are to cling to and to share, the Word which Pastor Zarling lived by and for:

God has spoken by his prophets,
Spoken his unchanging Word
Each from age to age proclaiming
God, the one, the righteous Lord.
In the world's despair and turmoil,
One the firm anchor holds us fast:
God is King, His throne eternal;
God the first, and God the last.

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