

Pastor Adolph von Rohr

~ A unique pastor with a unique history ~



Pastor Adolph von Rohr

Jonathan P. Hackbarth
Church History Project
Professor Korthals
May 1, 2001

Over the past two years, the Lord has seen fit to allow this author to serve the people of Peace Lutheran Church in Hartford, for one year to fill a vacancy, and for one year as a Senior Assistant while attending the final year at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. During that time, I have developed an appreciation for the unique history of this congregation, and its lasting influence. That unique history is more than anything tied to its unique pastor for 57 years, Pastor Adolph von Rohr.

This paper will serve primarily to share Adolph von Rohr's unique history. How this man came to be in America, eventually to serve at Peace in Hartford, Wisconsin, is in itself an amazing story. Then, the second part of the project – Adolph von Rohr as a unique pastor – will be covered briefly in this paper, but primarily in the video interviews that accompany it.

A Unique History

To consider the history of Pastor Adolph von Rohr, a person must go back to Germany, to the time of the Prussian Union. King Friedrich Wilhelm III, who ruled in Prussia from 1797-1830, established the Prussian Union, an attempt to combine the Lutherans and Reformed into one state religion. Many devout Lutherans could not accept this union, especially the compromised agenda containing the liturgies to be used in the union church, as much of the pure Lutheran doctrine was blanketed in the new liturgy.

Among those who stood up against the Union church was a captain in the Prussian military named Heinrich Karl Georg von Rohr (1797-1874), grandfather of Adolph. Captain von Rohr refused to attend the Union Church, and insisted that his child be baptized by a Lutheran pastor. Because of this, Heinrich lost his position, indeed his livelihood, in the Prussian military – a fine example of one standing up for his confession and accepting the consequences!

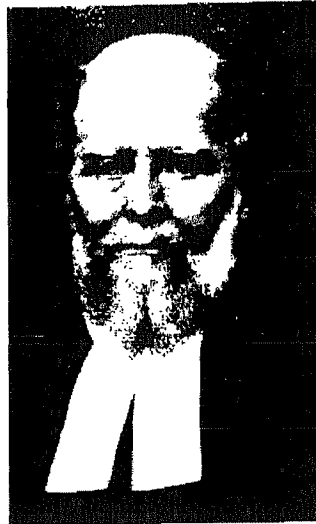
At about the time he lost his position in the military, Heinrich von Rohr came into contact with a Lutheran pastor who also lost his position for his refusal to accept the Union Agenda. John Grabau, who served at St. Andreas in Erfurt, was put in prison for his refusal to cooperate with the Union Church.

In ^{8,}~~18~~37, Heinrich von Rohr, together with another layman who opposed the union (Friedrich Mueller), broke John Grabau out of prison. While Mueller went in to get Grabau, von Rohr waited at the gate with the “getaway wagon.”

After about a year and a half, and another stint in prison for John Grabau, it became clear to these men that they would have to practice the pure Lutheran faith somewhere else. This was to be America. In 1839, a total of five shiploads of people came to New York, including Heinrich von Rohr and John Grabau.

Von Rohr settled in Freistadt, Wisconsin, working there as a farmer. But it was the Lord's design that he serve in the ministry. After graduating from the Lutheran seminary in Buffalo, New York, he formed what became known as the Buffalo Synod with his old friend John Grabau. Von Rohr served as a pastor in New Bergholz, New York for 28 years. Also, he served as president of the Buffalo Synod.

And so the von Rohr's were in America. Heinrich went from a high standing in the Prussian military to being a pastor and even president of a confessional Lutheran synod in America, with a mischievous jail-break and some farming in between.



Heinrich von Rohr
1797-1874
Prussian military officer,
Wisconsin pastor

How the Lord guides the history of his people and his church in unique ways!

It would be Heinrich's youngest son, Philipp von Rohr, who would have a great influence on the Wisconsin Synod. After some turmoil in the Buffalo Synod, Philipp von Rohr entered the Wisconsin Synod. And it was Philipp von Rohr, pastor at St. Martin's Church in Winona, Minnesota, who would become the Wisconsin Synod president in 1889.

Philipp von Rohr had a heart for education. During his time as president, the educational system of the Wisconsin Synod received much attention. Northwestern College was close to his heart, and during his term as president, he preached at the dedication of the new seminary building in Wauwaotsa.

And so it was in the house of a fine parish pastor and synod president that Adolph von Rohr grew up. Born on November 17, 1884, Adolph was the youngest of eight children (altogether, the von Rohr's had 13 children – 5 died).

Growing up in Winona, Adolph enjoyed quality time with his father fishing in the Mississippi River and the area rivers and streams. His mother, Emma, also taught him much about God's Word and getting along with others. In her, Adolph had a fine example of a godly mother and pastor's wife, who supported her husband's ministry and kept house for a large family.

Adolph graduated from Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary on June 11, 1909. What an emotional day that must have been, as his father had died earlier in that school year! While not there to see his son enter the gospel ministry, Philipp's influence on his son would no doubt last throughout Adolph's ministry.

A Unique Pastor

During the first year of his ministry, Adolph von Rohr served two rural congregations in the Fox Valley area – Zion in Omro, and another congregation in Rosendale. The very next summer, he accepted the call to serve at Peace Lutheran Church in Hartford, Wisconsin. On Sunday, August 28, he was installed to be the pastor at Peace, and God alone knew that he was to be pastor there for the next 57 years! Indeed, this unique pastor would serve at Peace from 1910 – 1967. Just imagine the change that he witnessed during that time, in the world and in the congregation. Consider the many people he baptized, confirmed, married, and even buried during those many years! The unique aspect of Adolph von Rohr's ministry has to be its long duration, and especially at the same congregation!

Pastor von Rohr married Elsie Dowidat in 1911. They had two children, John and Mary Beth. Elsie was taken to heaven in 1935, and Pastor von Rohr remarried in 1940 to Ida Dysterfekt from his hometown of Winona.

That Pastor von Rohr had tremendous influence on the congregation there is no doubt. Many today still harken back to the “von Rohr years,” even comparing things now to the standards they recall from his time. For many, Peace Lutheran is still “von Rohr’s church.”

Who better than those whom he served to give insight into the man and his ministry here at Peace! This writer has interviewed several members of Peace who were members in the von Rohr years. The accompanying videotape contains several such interviews. But several other members who were a bit “camera shy” also shared their thoughts of the man. For instance, one member recalls how von Rohr enjoyed fishing at Pike Lake with John Karrer, who also was a pastor in the area. He also described him as a very forceful preacher.¹ Another member especially remembered his Reformation sermons, during which von Rohr “really gave the Catholics hell!” He also recalled the wonderful Christmas Eve services in which the Sunday School children sang and recited. Part of this fond memory may also be related to the treat everyone received afterwards. “Then we all got a paper bag that had peanuts, hard candy, angel food candy, and best of all an orange, which was a real treat!”²

¹ Peace member Warren Luedtke

² Peace member Don Rexilius

But the one thing that stands out in the interviews, both those on tape and not on tape, is the high degree of respect that people had for Pastor von Rohr, and the lack of negative criticism. One cannot assume that von Rohr pleased everyone all the time for 57 years. But there can be no doubt that Pastor von Rohr had the utmost respect of those whom he served. Was this a merely a natural result of the times in which he served? This may certainly be part of it. But this author feels it had more to do with the man himself. Not that Pastor von Rohr demanded such respect. Rather, he commanded it in the way he carried himself, and carried out his ministry. He did so in a way that gained the respect and admiration of his people. He was professional, yet personable at the same time. And since he himself had the highest regard for the office to which he was called, so also did others.

Pastor von Rohr has not had a direct influence on this writer's life. But in an indirect way, he most certainly has. For I have had the opportunity to serve many who grew up in the church he served. And in this author's estimation, his influence on the people he served can only be described as positive and a blessing from God. For 57 years, God used a unique pastor with a unique past to serve his people with the Word and sacraments. To him be the glory!

Those who contributed in various ways to this project, either by video interview, oral interview, or just sharing some thoughts about Pastor von Rohr:

Al & Fern Bublitz
Marvin & Arlene Ohland
Mary Holtan
Myrtle Rexilius
Don Rexilius
Warren Luedtke

The following sources were used as background reading in preparation for this project. While not cited in the paper itself, they served as valuable and interesting resource materials.

Centennial booklet of Peace Evangelical Church. 1964

Dedication booklet for the new church. June 12, 1960

Guthmiller, Mark. *Winona Memorables: St. Martin's, von Rohr, and Sauer.* WLS Essay file

Holtan, Jeffrey O. *Reverend Adolph von Rohr: a faithful pastor for 58 years.* WLS Essay file

Lindke, Allen. *Heinrich von Rohr, strong believer, capable leader, practical theologian.* WLS Essay file

Lutz, Charles. *Church Roots.* Minneapolis; Augsburg Publishing House. 1985

Mueller, Bruce A. *The influence of Philip Andreas von Rohr on the early beginnings fo First Evangelical Lutheran Church, Minnesota City, Minnesota.* WLS Essay file

Nelson, E. Clifford. *The Lutherans in North America.* Philadelphia; Fortress Press. 1975

Neve, Dr. J.L. *A Brief History of the Lutheran Church in North America.* Burlington, Iowa; The German Literary Board. 1916

Peace Luther Church Album Directory. 1968