

Proclaim Peace Through Jesus: Outreach to
North America

The Story of Louis Ott and the WELS in
Florida

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One of the things most often heard by a history student is that one can learn from the past. Or, history will repeat itself. The current situation of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod is much of history repeating itself. For a time the Wisconsin Synod enjoyed financial prosperity. During this time the Wisconsin Synod was able to send missionaries abroad. Home missions were started with every graduating class from the Seminary. However, more years than not throughout its history, the Wisconsin Synod was faced with financial problems and lack of workers from the Seminary. While the second is not a problem today, the first certainly is. Today, the Wisconsin Synod is financially struggling. As there are many reasons for these problems, one must not necessarily be focused on and try to assign blame to what caused these problems. Rather the Wisconsin Synod must figure out what to do despite these problems. One thing certainly must be done. The Gospel must continue to be preached.

That was the mindset of the Wisconsin Synod throughout its history. Again, much of that history has been years and years of financial struggle. Yet, the Gospel was still proclaimed. New churches were still being opened despite the financial challenges. There was one man who was responsible for the Gospel continuing to spread in the United States. This man was not a missionary. This man was not a pastor or a teacher. Louis Ott was a layman from the quiet farmlands of Mid-Michigan. But his faithful work as a servant of the Lord, as a faithful layman in God's church, has had a profound effect on the history of the church to which he belonged, as well as to the Wisconsin Synod.

Louis Ott's life is best described by saying that 'he served.' Louis Ott served his country,

his community, his home congregation, and the Michigan District of the Wisconsin Synod. This essay will walk through Louis Ott's life to see how he served his Lord in so many ways. The bulk of the paper will be dedicated to Louis Ott's work as a member of the Michigan District Mission Board and the effect that it had on the mission work of the Wisconsin Synod.

This information about Louis Ott's life was obtained through interviews with his son, Mr. Ervin Ott, from Bay City, Michigan. The interviews were conducted on October 2, 2004 in Mr. Ervin Ott's home and also via telephone on December 7, 2004.

Mr. Louis Ott was born in 1896 to a farmer in Bay County, Michigan. His father, Christian, was one of the founding members of a Michigan Synod church in the farming community outside of Kawkawlin, Michigan. St. Bartholomew Evangelical Lutheran Church was founded in 1888 three miles north and three miles west of the village of Kawkawlin. The church was to serve the many farming families in that part of Bay County. Christian Ott's farm was located about 3 miles northwest of St. Bartholomew Church. Louis Ott grew up on this farm and, no doubt, regularly attended worship at the church that his father helped to establish.

As noted above, Louis Ott's life was one of service. The first item to note was his service to his country. Louis Ott was eighteen years old at the outbreak of World War One. When the United States declared war on Germany in the middle of 1917, it was Louis Ott's opportunity to serve his country. For this one year that the United States fought in Europe, Louis Ott served the army as a cook. World War One ended only a year and a half after the United States entered it. So, in 1918 Louis Ott returned to Michigan. Unfortunately, Mr. Ott had sustained hearing loss during his time in Europe. On June 1, 1919, Louis Ott became united in marriage to his lifelong partner, Elsie. Louis and Elsie had two sons, Ervin and Bill.

Upon returning to his father's home in Kawkawlin, Louis Ott began to take an active role in St. Bartholomew congregation. Minutes from the church's congregational meetings note that Louis Ott became a voting member of St. Bartholomew in 1920¹. For many years Louis Ott would serve in many positions of the congregation. The congregational minutes mentioned that he served as Sunday School Superintendent already in 1921 when he was twenty-five years old. Louis Ott also served on various councils and committees throughout the mid-century. The minutes of the congregation note that Louis Ott served as 'collector' from 1923-1928, as Elder from 1930-1932, as Treasurer from 1933-1937, and on the School Board from 1945-1946. Not only did Louis Ott serve on these council positions, he also served on the church's building committee in 1944-1945, as the congregation built a whole new sanctuary at the Three Churches Corner in Kawkawlin.² The last two positions that Louis Ott served, on the School Board in 1945-1946 and on the Building Committee in 1944-1945, will be of importance later in the paper. It is obvious that Louis Ott had an active, leadership role in St. Bartholomew for several years. The word "servant" certainly describes Louis Ott's work for his home church.

As noted above, when Louis Ott returned home from World War I, he settled back on his father's farm in Kawkawlin, northwest of St. Bartholomew. Louis Ott and his family worked this farm until 1938. During 1938 Louis Ott moved his family and opened a gas station and grocery store on Huron Road, now State-Highway Thirteen, north of the village of Kawkawlin and south

¹*The Proceedings of St. Bartholomew Evangelical Lutheran Church: A Detailed History.* (This is a translation of the minutes of the congregations meetings from September 3, 1888 until October 10, 1965. They were translated from German by Rev. Conrad Frey. There are no page numbers. Hereafter cited as *The Proceedings of St. Bartholomew.*)

²Ibid.

of the village of Linwood. But this gas station and grocery store was not necessarily Louis Ott's main work during this time. It was in 1930 that Louis Ott began his work serving his community.

Louis Ott's community work began when he became the Kawkawlin Township Supervisor. He remained in that position through 1934. In 1936, Louis was about to take another step in his community service as he ran for Treasurer of Bay County. He was defeated in the 1936 election. But that did not stop him. Louis Ott ran for the same position of Bay County Treasurer again in 1938 and this time he won the election. Louis Ott served as the Bay County Treasurer for fourteen years, until 1952. This would have been an interesting time for any sort of a treasurer to work in the years following the ^G ^D great depression and through all of World War Two. It was also during his time as Bay County Treasurer that the new "high rise" county building and court house were built in downtown Bay City. As well as the family store and gas station, Louis Ott served his community in public office for eighteen years.

It had been only ten years when Mr. Ott moved out of the gas station and grocery store business. In 1948, Louis Ott, the business man he was, started a new endeavor with his two sons, Ervin and Bill. On several acres of land, seven miles west of Bay City, Louis and his sons built and opened one of the county's first golf courses in 1948. White Birch Hills Golf Course is still open today, although no longer part of the Ott family. The golf course and clubhouse served for many social activities over the years. It is also to note that many pastors enjoyed the eighteen holes at White Birch when the Michigan District met for convention in Saginaw. Many of these rounds of golf played by the pastors were free of charge. It was at this time that Louis Ott and his wife moved their home adjacent to the golf course, with their son, Ervin living across the road, which was aptly named, "Ott Road."

It is obvious what sort of man Louis Ott was. From his time in Europe, to his four years of township supervisor, to his fourteen years as county treasurer, and his many, many years of active involvement at St. Bartholomew, it is obvious that Louis Ott was a servant. Louis served his Lord, his church, his country, and his community. But the most amazing service that Louis Ott did, he did for twenty-four years. It was during this time that Louis Ott had the greatest impact on the greatest amount of people. That impact is still felt today. From 1944 until 1968, Louis Ott served on the Michigan District Mission Board.

The 1944 Michigan District Proceedings note that Louis Ott was elected to the six year District Mission Board lay position.³ In order to understand how important Louis Ott's position on the District Mission Board was, one must understand what the District Mission Board was responsible for. Each of the District Mission Boards were responsible for the exploration of new mission fields. Upon the exploration, the Board would decide whether or not to call a pastor to serve that particular community. Sometimes these pastors were sent on money from the Wisconsin Synod, but many times were also subsidized by money from the district and even from individual congregation many miles from where the mission work was going on. Often times it was the responsibility of the Mission Board to solicit these funds.

One may sense that this would be a pretty easy "job." But two things must be noted. First, this is the Michigan District that is being talked about.

The cause of missions has always been dear to the heart of the Michigan District. This is evidenced by the great strides in Home Mission Work made through the years. . . A great interest in and zeal

³*Proceedings of the 72^h Biennial Convention of the Michigan District of the Evangelical Lutheran Joint Synod of Wisconsin and Other States, 1944*, 4. (Hereafter cited as *Proceedings, Michigan District, 1944.*)

for the cause of missions has always characterized the Michigan District. . . The old, time-honored “Michigan Spirit” inculcated in us the love of missions and the promotion of mission work at home and at large.⁴

The Michigan District was known for its mission fervor. Louis Ott and the District Mission Board were the heart and soul of this work. Because of the mission zeal of the Michigan District, the District Mission Board worked tirelessly to spread the Gospel throughout the District. Despite all of the Mission Board work that these men had, this was not their main job. The pastors served their parishes. The laymen had their jobs. As for Louis Ott, he had the gas station/grocery store, the golf course, and also was Bay County Treasurer for most of his years on the District Mission Board. He must have been a busy man.

But one might ask, “How much can one Mission Board actually do? They are only working in one district.” The Michigan District is not just the state of Michigan. Just to give an idea of how large the district was, the Proceedings from the 1961 Synod convention noted that the Michigan District included an area with the population of 22 million people!⁵ How big of a geographical area was this? The Michigan District stretched from Ottawa, Canada, all the way down to Florida. The district stretched from the Atlantic coast west to Ohio, Kentucky, and Alabama. The Michigan District not only included the metropolitan area of Detroit, but also New York City, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Atlanta, Miami, Cleveland, and Cincinnati. Huge does not even describe how large the Michigan District was at mid-century. Knowing this certainly helps

⁴Pastor Karl Krauss, *Michigan District History: 1833-1970*, (Ann Arbor: LithoCrafters Inc., 1972), 13 -16.

⁵*Proceedings of the 28th Convention of the Evangelical Lutheran Joint Synod of Wisconsin and Other States, 1961*, p28.

to put in perspective just how much work the Michigan District Mission Board had to do. These men, including Louis Ott put in a great amount of work.

How much work goes into doing mission work in a district this size? There was so much work already during World War II that the Proceedings of the 1944 District convention mentioned that there were thirty-three visits made to mission churches in that biennia.⁶ One can only imagine what this was like with the transportation of the 1940's. The work became so much that the Mission Board even needed to meet more times to keep up. The 1946 Proceedings of the District Convention noted that the Board began to meet on a monthly basis.⁷ The report of the Mission Board to the 1948 District Convention reads,

Your District Board of Missions met in regular monthly meetings during the biennium. The schedule proved necessary to conduct the many-sided business of our missions with proper dispatch. The *regularity with which our lay members on the board attended and the devotion with which they accepted their responsibility* is herewith gratefully acknowledged (emphasis mine).⁸

Louis Ott's faithful work as a layman on the District Mission Board was not only noted in 1948 but also in 1950. "This board met in regular monthly meetings during the biennium to transact the many sided business entrusted to it. The faithfulness and devotion with which all members, *especially also the lay members*, accepted this responsibility deserves mention (emphasis mine).⁹

⁶*Proceedings, Michigan District, 1944, 28.*

⁷*Proceedings of the 73^h Biennial Convention of the Michigan District of the Evangelical Lutheran Joint Synod of Wisconsin and Other States, 1946, 28.*

⁸*Proceedings of the 74^h Biennial Convention of the Michigan District of the Evangelical Lutheran Joint Synod of Wisconsin and Other States, 1948, 33.*

⁹*Proceedings of the 75^h Biennial Convention of the Michigan District of the Evangelical Lutheran Joint Synod of Wisconsin and Other States, 1950, 98.*

It truly seems the laymen on the District Mission Board these years took their positions very seriously and worked very hard. Those previous reports mentioned 'business' and all the work that needed to be done. This certainly include a great amount of financial responsibility as the Mission Board not only paid the workers of these missions, but also in many cases surveyed and bought the land which the churches were built on. In several instances, the members of the Mission Board needed to encourage the District to continue funding and finding money to pay for these missions. More on this subject will come later in the essay.

But not all of the work of the Mission Board happened around a table at meetings. Although they did meet on a monthly basis, there was a lot of work that went on apart from the meetings. "Your Board visited nearly all of the stations the past two years, some being visited several times. Your Mission Board has met monthly and is happy to report that all members of it have shown marked personal interest in attending regularly and devotion to their respective obligations."¹⁰ The statistic report from the same year noted that there were twenty-four mission stations in that biennia. It was the responsibility of the Mission Board to "check-up" on the work being done at the various mission stations throughout the District. Again, in the 1950's, this would not have been quite as easy as it is in 2004. But the diligence of the Mission Board to their work was again to be noted. As Louis Ott was one of the laymen, there is no doubt these compliments apply to him and his work.

While there was much work to be done in Louis Ott's first few years on the Mission Board, the 1950's would bring the work of the Mission Board to a much larger area. The great

¹⁰*Proceedings of the 76th Biennial Convention of the Michigan District of the Evangelical Lutheran Joint Synod of Wisconsin and Other States, 1952, 103.*

amount of Mission Board work was already quite extensive, as mentioned earlier, but this report to the District in 1954 indicates a huge change in the amount of work.

In the past biennium the members of your District Mission Board had personal contact with all but six of the twenty-seven subsidized congregations, visiting some of them again and again because of local circumstances. Trips made by the members of the Board in the interest of missions aggregated about 28,000 miles. It should be added too, that many a trip was made at no expense to Synod, because the individual chose not to turn in his expenses or forgot to record the trip.¹¹

The greatest change, obviously, is the distance traveled by the Mission Board to do their work. But what brought this change? One needs to recall how large the Michigan District is. It stretched the whole Atlantic coast. Who was the person who brought about this increase in the distance of the work of the Mission Board? Answer: The Board's own Louis Ott.

In the interview on October 1, 2004, Louis Ott's son Ervin indicated that in 1949-1950, Louis and his wife, Elsie, began to spend their winters in Florida. It is understandable why a Michigander would want to flee the cold, snowy weather of a Michigan winter in favor of the warm climate of Florida. Louis Ott made his "winter home" near St. Petersburg, Florida. While he and his wife were living in Florida during the winter, they certainly wanted to continue to worship. In the 1950's this would not have been too big of a problem. After all, the Synodical Conference still existed, and the Wisconsin Synod was in fellowship with the Missouri Synod. Since there were no Wisconsin Synod churches in Florida, Louis Ott attended worship at a

¹¹*Proceedings of the 77th Biennial Convention of the Michigan District of the Evangelical Lutheran Joint Synod of Wisconsin and Other States, 1954*, 61. (Hereafter cited as *Proceedings, Michigan District, 1954*.)

Missouri Synod church in St. Petersburg.¹² However, the 1950's was a stormy time for Wisconsin Synod and Missouri Synod relations. The situation among the churches in Florida was no different. Louis' son, Ervin, noted that his father was not pleased with the situation in the Missouri Synod and was especially concerned with the church in St. Petersburg. Ervin mentioned that his father Louis felt that the church in St. Petersburg, along with the Missouri Synod had become too 'liberal.'¹³ During his first four winters in Florida, Louis Ott became more and more uncomfortable with the Missouri Synod. As part of the Michigan District Mission Board, Louis thought that the Florida field was ripe for the Wisconsin Synod to move into.

But Louis Ott was not the only Wisconsin Synod person in Florida. The state had become popular for the retired people from the northern states to 'migrate' to every winter. Those who moved to warmer climates for the winter months were often called 'snowbirds.' Wisconsin Synod President Oscar Naumann noted in his report to the nine districts, "Our Synod has been called to preach the Gospel in Florida, especially in the St. Petersburg area. Many of our members have already moved into this area and are requesting our services."¹⁴ But, as hinted at in the Mission Board's report of 1954 above, money was a problem. There it was noted that the traveling expenses of the Mission Board was not costing the Synod any money. The Michigan District Mission Board report to the Synod convention in 1955 shows the frustration of trying to start new missions.

Growth would be rapid and independence possible in five years.

¹²Interviews with Mr. Ervin Ott, October 1, 2004 and December 7, 2004.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴*Proceedings, Michigan District, 1954, 3.*

Membership of our District would increase, Synod's revenue as well. We have already lost our opportunity in some excellent locations because of lack of funds, making the work of the District Mission Board most discouraging. The District Board urges and immediate, long range plan to be inaugurated to increase the CEF.¹⁵

So, shall the lack of funds stop the Wisconsin Synod from reaching out to places it does not exist? May that never happen! It certainly did not happen in the 1950's. So, how was the Mission Board to get around the lack of money from the Wisconsin Synod? Again, Louis Ott came up with a solution of sorts. Louis Ott had been wintering in Florida for a couple of years. He knew the area around St. Petersburg well. During the early months of 1954, Louis Ott invited the rest of the Michigan District Mission Board to Florida for a week. But this trip was by no means a vacation. The extensive, "special" report of the Mission Board's work in Florida was attached to the Board's report to the 1954 Michigan District convention. The report noted that although there were no funds from Synod, exploratory work needed to be done. From February 8-17, 1954, three pastors from the Mission Board traveled to Florida to conduct the "mission survey."¹⁶ The report also indicates that these three pastors actually raised money from their home churches to fund their exploratory work in Florida.¹⁷ So already, there were many people in Michigan who were taking the responsibility to move the Wisconsin Synod into Florida with their individual gifts and offerings.

When the three pastors arrived in Florida, they began their work immediately. The same

¹⁵*Reports and Memorials of the 33rd Convention of the Joint Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Wisconsin and Other States, 1955, 25.*

¹⁶*Proceedings, Michigan District, 1954, 67.*

¹⁷*Ibid.*

report to the 1954 District convention stated that Louis Ott provided his car for transportation to do the exploratory work.¹⁸ The report also mentioned that Louis Ott had become very familiar with the St. Petersburg area in the five winters that he had lived there.¹⁹ This proved to be helpful to the Mission Board as they began their work. The report almost seems to indicate that Mr. Ott had already been doing some exploratory work on his own.²⁰ This excerpt from the special report to the District Convention commented on how much work the Mission Board put in. It is somewhat amusing to note that there were some who thought this was indeed a vacation for the Mission Board.

The members of the Board resent the inferences, not all of which were made in jest, that the trip was an expense paid vacation in Florida. St. Paul explored mission fields too on expense money provided by the church in Philippi and no one thinks he was on vacation. One does not relax and rest when traveling 1400 miles in eight days and checking city after city for mission possibilities.²¹

One cannot even imagine what that week must have been like for those four men. This mission survey indicated everything that Louis Ott had been saying all the time. The Wisconsin Synod needed to move into Florida. The tough question was how this was going to happen with the Synod in a tight financial situation.

But money or no money, the Michigan District was not about to stop. The ripe harvest field in Florida needed workers. So the Michigan District took it upon itself to call and send a

¹⁸*Proceedings, Michigan District, 1954, 67.*

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Ibid.

worker into this harvest field.

The District Mission Board has been given the green light to send one missionary to Florida for the time being. To send this one man there without a chapel is like putting a ditch digger to work without a digger, pick, or shovel. We pray that a chapel may become a reality soon after the missionary is settled. Through the personal sacrifice of Mr. Louis Ott, we already have the land in St. Petersburg on which the chapel can be built."²²

No money? No problem! Louis Ott not only offered his time, his car, and his knowledge of the St. Petersburg area, but he secured the land for the Wisconsin Synod to begin proclaiming Jesus in the state of Florida. The green light to call a missionary that had been given to the Mission Board was from the Michigan District and not by the Wisconsin Synod. In fact, the Wisconsin Synod reprimanded the Michigan District for calling the missionary to a location outside of the district without permission from the Synod.²³ With this green light from the District and despite what the Wisconsin Synod said, the District Mission Board called Pastor William Steih to begin the mission work in Florida.²⁴

When he received this call, Pastor Steih was serving St. Bartholomew congregation in Kawkawlin, Michigan, Louis Ott's home church. Coincidence? Possibly. Above it was noted that Louis Ott was very active at St. Bartholomew. Especially, it was mentioned above that Mr. Ott served on the building committee for the new church in 1944-1945 and also on the first St. Bartholomew School Board in 1945. These are important to note, because Louis Ott and Pastor

²²*Proceedings, Michigan District, 1954, 68.*

²³Dan Gieschen, *Faith Evangelical Lutheran Church, St. Petersburg, Florida 1955-1980*, 1. (this was a small booklet put together for the twenty-fifth anniversary of the congregation. Hereafter cited as *Gieschen*.)

²⁴*Michigan District History 1833-2000, 85.*

Steih would have been working together on these projects. There is no doubt that Louis Ott and Pastor Steih had a good relationship with each other and could work together very well.

The reason that Pastor Steih was called to Florida was not because one of his members from Michigan was living there. Pastor Steih was a special man, with special gifts, and a passion for spreading God's Word. Louis Ott's son, Ervin, when asked, "Why Pastor Steih?" he said, "Pastor Steih was the guy to send down there for that. He had the charisma to talk."²⁵ Ervin Ott also mentioned some of the 'mission work' that Pastor Steih did in Kawkawlin. Pastor Steih was passionate about starting a school. His desire to start a Christian Day School was noted in the minutes of the January congregational meeting of St. Bartholomew.²⁶ One month later, the minutes record the formation of the first school board, which Louis Ott was a part of. St. Bartholomew Lutheran School opened in the fall of 1945.²⁷ Talk about quick work! But the amazing thing is how it started. Pastor Steih was the teacher. Not only was he the teacher, he was also the "bus driver." Ervin Ott explained that Pastor Steih would drive around the surrounding farm community and pick up just about every child he saw, whether they belonged to the church or not.²⁸ Pastor Steih's zeal to reach out with God's Word is certainly seen in his passion in starting the school.

Not only was Pastor Steih Louis Ott's home pastor. In many ways he had been a colleague of Louis Ott as the two worked side by side through building a new church to starting a

²⁵Interviews with Mr. Ervin Ott, October 1, 2004 and December 7, 2004.

²⁶*The Proceedings of St. Bartholomew.*

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸Interviews with Mr. Ervin Ott, October 1, 2004 and December 7, 2004.

Christian elementary school. It is easy to see why Pastor Steih was the man to go to Florida. Even he knew how serious and urgent the situation down south was. The minutes of St. Bartholomew indicate that in June 1954, Pastor Steih received a call to East Tawas, Michigan. "The call of Pastor Steih's from Emmanuel in East Tawas was to be returned. The vote was taken by a rising vote."²⁹ It was the will of the voters of St. Bartholomew for Pastor Steih to stay there. But in a special voters' meeting in July of the same year, the minutes record: "Pastor Steih received a call to a mission church in St. Petersburg, Florida. After explaining the need, he asked the congregation for his release to accept the call. The release was granted effective Aug. 31st."³⁰

Pastor Steih was on his way to a place where the Wisconsin Synod had never been. What a feeling that must have been! But knowing the financial situation of the Wisconsin Synod and remembering their reprimand to the District noted above, how was this missionary going to be funded? One must never underestimate the Michigan District. The Michigan District started a special collection. "About \$15,000 was raised; to my knowledge never before had district congregations voluntarily raised that much for one home mission venture."³¹ Congregations from all over the Michigan District collected special offerings to help fund Pastor Steih's work in Florida. This would include St. Bartholomew Church as well, as indicated in the July 1955 congregational meeting minutes.³²

The "stepping stone," that plot of land donated by Louis Ott in St. Petersburg, Florida was

²⁹*The Proceedings of St. Bartholomew.*

³⁰Ibid.

³¹Gieschen, 1.

³²*The Proceedings of St. Bartholomew.*

used by Pastor Steih to bring the Wisconsin Synod into Florida. Pastor Steih went to work immediately and the Lord richly blessed his work.

We have nothing to be ashamed of in our first venture in Florida. Wisconsin Synod vacationers, who have attended services there, have expressed their joy in our mission. . . Pastor Steih has also inaugurated preaching services in Tampa. A second missionary was requested for October.³³

It had been only a year and a half and there was a need for more workers in the harvest field of Florida. The Lord richly blessed the efforts and hard work of the saints in St. Petersburg. Faith Lutheran Church became self supporting in only three and a half years.³⁴ But the Gospel and work did not stop at St. Petersburg. The Michigan District had a hand in starting seven more congregations in Florida while Louis Ott was on the Mission Board. Today there are forty-eight Wisconsin Synod churches in the state of Florida.³⁵ What a tremendous impact these men of the Michigan District Mission Board had on the Wisconsin Synod!

Yet, there is even a far greater impact. "Faith Lutheran Church of St. Petersburg will always occupy a unique and important place in the history of the WELS and thanks be to God, the congregation was used in a unique way for the expansion of our Lord's kingdom."³⁶ But what makes this church, in this city, in this state so unique? "This had a 'domino' effect on the home mission zeal of the Synod, and it did play a big part in preparing us for our rapid mission

³³*Proceedings of the 78th Biennial Convention of the Michigan District of the Evangelical Lutheran Joint Synod of Wisconsin and Other States, 1956, 13.*

³⁴*Michigan District History 1833-2000, 85.*

³⁵*2003 Yearbook: Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2002), 40-42.

³⁶Gieschen, 1.

expansion of the '60's'.”³⁷ It can be easily said that Louis Ott was the person who knocked over that very first domino to start this chain reaction. Louis Ott was the one who moved to Florida and saw the need for the Wisconsin Synod to be there. Louis Ott was the one who took advantage of his position on the Michigan District Mission Board to do the exploratory work and to call a missionary to work in Florida. Louis Ott was the one who provided the first piece of Wisconsin Synod ‘owned’ property in the state of Florida.

Louis Ott remained on the Michigan District Mission Board until 1968, making the total twenty-four years. In those twenty-four years, from 1944-1968, sixty congregations were founded in the Michigan District, many under the direction of the Mission Board that Louis Ott was a part of. These missions stretched as far north as Lincoln, Michigan, on the state’s “Sunrise Side,” to as far south as St. Petersburg, Florida, to as far east as South Windsor, Connecticut.

When a person thinks of names of people who have had a great impact on the Wisconsin Synod, the names Hoenecke, Pieper, Meyer, and Lawrenz will almost certainly be mentioned. But one probably will not hear the name Louis Ott. Through this man, the gracious Lord of the harvest started a chain reaction that began a mindset that has stuck with the Wisconsin Synod and hopefully will continue to stick for many years to come. The Synod’s theme for the 2003-2004 biennia is, “Proclaim Peace Through Jesus: Outreach to North America.” The work that Louis Ott did ought to be the model for this current effort. Much of this work needs to be done by the *members* of the churches of the Wisconsin Synod. What Pastor Norman Berg wrote in 1966 is especially applicable today.

May we now also continue to use the blessings of lay leadership and

³⁷Gieschen, 1.

of new approaches to the administration of our gifts and talents. Willing workers, lay and clergy, are God's blessings to the church, not the product of our own scheming, efforts, and programming. But we must grasp the opportunity of developing and using them lest they or we fall into a lethargic state.³⁸

The lay leaders of the Wisconsin Synod need to be always ~~be~~ informed of the situation that the Synod is in, and to be always looking for ways for the Synod to reach out and proclaim the Gospel.

Does history repeat itself? It is certainly evident from time to time. Yes, the Wisconsin Synod is again in a financial crunch. History certainly repeats itself in this aspect. But history is repeating itself in the Michigan District. The zeal for mission work that was in the Michigan District when Louis Ott was on the Mission Board is alive and well today. The Michigan District is now undertaking nearly the exact same program that was used to do the mission work in Florida. The Michigan District has begun exploratory work on its own in Cadillac, Michigan. This work is being funded by generous offering given by many congregations of the district and being funded outside of Wisconsin Synod subsidy. As with the mission work in Florida in the 1950's, so even this day the Lord continues to pour out his blessings on the mission work of the Michigan District.

For some people, a small, quiet farm in Mid-Michigan would be paradise. For more people, eighteen holes of golf on a beautiful Michigan summer day would be paradise. For even more, fleeing Michigan during the winter for the warm climates of Florida would be paradise. Louis Ott was able to enjoy all of these. But now, Mr. Ott is enjoying the far, far greater paradise

³⁸*Proceedings of the 83rd Biennial Convention of the Michigan District of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, 1966, 5.*

that the gracious Lord had prepared for him. Louis Ott was called to spend eternity in the paradise of heaven on February 26, 1990 at the age of ninety-five years.

It is necessary in this situation to give credit where credit is due. In all that is done, God is to be given the credit and the glory. May the Wisconsin Synod *always thank God* for Louis Ott and the work he did as a servant to his country, his community, his church, and his Synod. May the Wisconsin Synod pray to God to raise more faithful servants like Louis Ott from the members of its churches.

Soli Deo Gloria!

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