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Church History
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The WELS in Prairie du Chien

I think it's a safe bet to make the assumption that when a person brings up the subject of our church body's affiliation in the small southwestern Wisconsin town of Prairie du Chien, the first thing we think of at this point in time is the subject of the history of Martin Luther Preparatory School (MLPS). To be sure, this topic of one of our synodical schools could and would warrant much discussion under the general topic of The Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS) in Prairie du Chien. I suppose the second notion to arise would be the subject of the local congregation that started, because Grace Lutheran Church owes much of its history to the fact that Martin Luther Preparatory School was started.

Originally, I myself thought this would be the extent and scope of the topic as well. But on further investigation, two additional factors played into the content of this paper. The first is that there was an established WELS congregation in Prairie du Chien long before there was even a thought of a campus called MLPS. The second factor is that a very thorough paper has already been documented on the subject of How MLA in New Ulm became MLPS in Prairie du Chien. So the scope of this paper has

been narrowed down to what exactly occurred as far as WELS congregations in Prairie du Chien are concerned.

Prairie du Chien (PdC) itself is actually the second oldest city in Wisconsin, only Green Bay was established before PdC. The very earliest settlement was established by early French-Canadian explorers, Fr. Marquette and Louis Jolliet. Originally the town was started because of the abundant fur trading that went on due to the ideal location near the junction of two greatly travelled rivers, the Wisconsin and Mississippi.

Almost two-hundred years progressed from the town's inception in the mid 1650's, until the first Lutheran congregation was started, but...

...Prairie du Chien did have several other churches before 1860. Rev. Alfred Brunson, the famous Wisconsin Methodist missionary who lived in this city, had built up a faithful following at their church in the central residential section. The pioneer rock-walled St. Gabriel sanctuary was located several blocks north on the same street. The "Holy Trinity" Episcopal Church building on South Michigan Street had been erected in 1855. A Congregational Church in the first block of North Michigan Street was built in 1858. (1)

Although the congregation, according to Crawford County records, was actually started in 1862, the earliest church records from 1867 reveal the initial roster. It includes over forty individuals, from which several families have been identified as having come from Mecklenburg, Deutschland (Germany). (2)

During this initial period, the Lutheran group began action on establishing their fledgling church. "Trustees, Louis Beese and Henry Parthun, appeared before Judge Ira B.

Brunson on March 29, 1862, to acquire a plot of ground for church purposes." (3) The parcel they bought was located on South Michigan Street, measured 50'x140', and was sold for \$1.00 by H.L. Dousman Sr. and his wife Jane. "On this lot a parochial school of native rock was erected 'for the study of Holy Scriptures,' in 1866."(4)

The man who is actually credited with founding this first lutheran congregation was Rev. Johannes C. Himmler. It appears that Rev. Himmler was possibly acting in a travelling missionary role serving German Protestant immigrants, under the direction of the Iowa Synod. It is also very evident that Lutheran mission work was indeed done prior to St. Peter's beginning in 1862.

...Pastor Himmler organized a small congregation in Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin, where Pastor Enderes had once ministered for a longer period without success.(5)

I never did find any more references to this Pastor Enderes or his whereabouts, but it is quite evident that even at this early stage in the life of St. Peter's that the members would be accustomed to "sailing through rough water." Very shortly afterwards, in a report dated April 13, 1863, from the Executive Committee of the Iowa Synod, it states that "Pastor Himmler reported that he terminated his ministry at Prairie du Chien due to insufficient income."(6) This is where the facts get a little fuzzy, since the congregation reported to the Synod that Rev. Himmler "had not followed the Christian course of order when he closed his ministry"(7), so they asked to be served again by an Iowa Synod pastor after Himmler's departure. (It's at this point

where a little historical trivia plays a role. Church records list that the first baptism at St. Peter's was of Theodore Alfred Ringling from the town of McGregor in 1861 - probably by Rev. Himmler. This is the famous "circus Ringlings" who had moved to McGregor in '60, and eventually to Baraboo where their circus dynasty began.)

Apparently the Iowa Synod agreed with St. Peter's, for their request to be served again was filled when Pastor Schorr from nearby McGregor, Iowa took over pastoral duties and served both McGregor and PdC very well for nearly six years. In 1867 it was evident, due to health reasons, that Pastor Schorr could no longer carry-on, so he left St. Peter's and eventually on Christmas Eve, 1870, he succumbed to the dreaded tuberculosis.

In February of 1868, Rev. Carl Wiederaenders took the Prairie congregation under his guidance and began to encourage an ambitious building program. Eventually, on July 16, 1870, more land was purchased for this building program. A lot directly to the south of the original lot on South Michigan Street was bought, again from the Dousman family. But since Hercules Sr. (Dousman - who sold the initial plot) had died in '68, the price of land soared 100%, forcing the church to pay \$100.00 to continue their project. Construction of a small wooden church was completed and apparently in use by the fall of 1871. Altogether, the estimated cost of that first frame church was reported to have been around \$1,000.00.(8)

It is in connection with this building project that

another red warning flag was waving, warning the members of St. Peter's to return the straight and narrow. Cash flow for this building project had been a problem, so in the course of solving the dilemma it was suggested that the Lutheran chief trustee (Mr. Reinhold) request a contribution from one of the city's richest, founding fathers, John Lawler, who also happened to be a very devout Catholic. To make a long story short, at the request of Mr. Reinhold, Mr. Lawler wrote out a check for \$100.00 toward the local protestant church. (This little episode appears to be a rather important stepping stone in the eventual doctrinal outcome of the church since the writer of the church's 125th anniversary booklet writes, "Ecumenism in Prairie du Chien had progressed one small step that day.") (9)

On June 9, 1872, a new pastor was installed at St. Peter's, Rev. Hermann Kretzschmar. This is about all that is mentioned about his short tenure, for on Dec. 15, 1873, Rev. Joseph Westenberger took over the leadership. As far as our WELS history is concerned this is when we sit up and take notice since this is when St. Peter's left the Iowa Synod in 1875 for doctrinal reasons. It is unclear whether Westenberger was responsible for this switch from Iowa to Wisconsin, but it can be assumed that he did approve of the switch. (Pastor Westenberger was a graduate of the Iowa Synod's seminary in St. Sebald, Iowa.) (10)

Technically, Westenberger left Prairie du Chien before St. Peter's was officially accepted into the fold of the WELS. On October 24, 1875, Rev. Johannes Dejung, Sr. began

his service, also technically in the ranks of the Iowa Synod clergy, but it wasn't long before the pastor and congregation were accepted into the Wisconsin Synod.

(Dejung also was a St. Sebald graduate.)

The Lord has also added a considerable number of veteran workers in part from the Missouri Synod, in part occasioned by the well-known crisis in the Iowa Synod.(11)

The Pastors J.H. Westenberger,, J. Vollmar, and J. Dejung indeed could not present certificates of character from the Iowa Synod, members of which they had previously been. Nevertheless the Synod resolves to receive them since it considers the withholding of the pertinent documents as unjust.
(12)

Prairie du Chien had been caught up in another popular movement of the late 19th century and boasted at least seven active lodges in the city. In 1880 some of the local Germans in Prairie decided to organize a branch of "Deutscher Order Harugari." The principal objective of this lodge was to preserve the German language and characteristics in America. Very soon after its inception, bylaws were added for payment of sick benefits and insurance to the heirs of deceased lodge brothers. "The combination of social activities and 'fraternal life insurance' made it popular. Most of the charter members of 'Mississippi Lodge No. 423' were from St. Peter's Congregation." (13) This subject and/or problem with lodges in connection with St. Peter's will raise its head a few years down the road.

The next forty years in the history of St. Peter's could be summarized and described as a quiet, slow, steady growth. The biggest concern that had to be dealt with at

St. Peter's, as well as all other German speaking churches, was the addition of English services at the turn of the century. As in most other Germanic congregations, the older generations preferred to keep the language and customs of the old country while the younger people would drift away to churches that held English services. Church records from this era report that there were approximately thirty to forty families as members of St. Peter's at this time.

In 1881, Pastor Dejung accepted a call out of Prairie du Chien and was succeeded by a string of seven pastors during this forty year period of relative peace and quiet. These seven men were Rev. Christoph Gewers who served from February 5, 1882 - January 6, 1889; Rev. Max Busack who served from January 20, 1889 - August 21, 1892; Rev. Gotthold Frederick Gruber who served from October 14, 1892 - February 22, 1899; Rev. Theophil S. Brenner who served from May 7, 1899 - April 22, 1906; Rev. Paul G. Lorenz who served from July 30, 1906 - October 18, 1908; Rev. Wilhelm F. Rader who served from November 15, 1908 - April 20, 1919; and Rev. Immanuel M. Brackebusch who served from June 30, 1919 - April 15, 1923. (14)

In the writer's mind, the most interesting note out of these seven names is the fact that Rev. Rader organized St. John's congregation in Wauwatosa and served it for twenty-three years until he was called to Prairie du Chien. Another point of interest arises in reference to the previously mentioned problem of lodges in PdC.

(in 1923)...Pastor Brackebusch had received a call to the newly combined Victory-Stoddard

church, where he had been assisting with services. He would only consider staying in Prairie du Chien if unanimous cooperation was given toward immediate enforcement of the Synod's restriction on lodge membership, and certain other doctrinal issues not clearly specified. (15)

Looking from hind-sight, Pastor Brackenbusch was the last pastoral defender of Biblical orthodoxy at St. Peter's. Brackenbusch was adamant in his decision to leave, and recommended that because of the lodge question, "a call be made for a man who would be willing to work as an independent pastor - possibly one from Canada." (16) It seems obvious that the congregation had little room for complete adherence to Biblical truth since they allowed Brackenbusch to leave and started considering replacements. Approval was given and the decision was made to extend a call to Rev. Walter K. Bodamer who was currently teaching at Northwestern College in Watertown, Wisconsin. Again from hind-sight, and in the opinion of the writer, this decision made by the congregation was the "point of no-return" in their "snow-balling" degression from Biblical truth and purity.

Walter K. Bodamer was born February 1, 1897 in Toledo, Ohio. His father was the pastor at Zion Ev. Lutheran Church in Toledo. He graduated from Northwestern College and enrolled at the Ev. Luth. Seminary in Wauwatosa, where he graduated in 1921. He immediately returned to NWC after graduation as an instructor for two years and then received the call to Prairie du Chien. Bodamer's installation was held on July 15, 1923.

His installation proved to be the start of a long,

sometimes difficult ministry. This small, Germanic Lutheran congregation was already involved in a traumatic re-evaluation of its theological views, and the young minister inevitably played a major role in the drama. (17)

In May of 1924, Bodamer received a call to Rice Lake and then to Hurley, Wisconsin, whereupon the problem with the local lodges raised its head again. At this point it appears that Bodamer will indeed be an echt minister of the gospel since he needed assurance from his members that they would meet with him in regards to the Lodge problem, in order for him to remain in PdC. This facade wouldn't last long.

1927 was the year that brought drastic change to the Lutheran church in PdC. Rev. Bodamer got caught up in the Beitz Paper affair and sided with the Koehler Protestant movement. In my research of Synodical proceedings, I never did run across letters or references to the fact that Bodamer was a ring leader in the whole affair. But one can make a fairly accurate guess that he became quite heavily involved since he was an instructor at NWC from 1921 until 1923 while Karl Koehler was also on the faculty.

The congregation at PdC remained very loyal to their pastor, and the insider account to the members of what happened in connection with this affair obviously sides heavily in Bodamer's favor. The following excerpt from the congregation's 125th anniversary booklet reflects that many people, including the church council, may have had blinders on since there are some mis-interpretations of what exactly happened in those turbulent years.

when the Synod announced its intent to dismiss Rev. Bodamer (also several other pastors and professors) for failure to enforce Synod regulations. After many letters and meetings, Council President Louis Silberschmidt was appointed to appear as a delegate to the District Conference at Watertown, Wisconsin. His report back to the congregation described the hearing as a "kangaroo court." Further attempts to secure an impartial hearing were unsatisfactory. The eventual decision was to support and retain Pastor Bodamer, accept the Wisconsin Synod's Decision, and operate St. Peter's as an independent Lutheran church. (18)

Again, I never did find a single correspondence between Bodamer himself and the Synod officials who were being attacked. Bodamer was in the Western Wisconsin District and I did find the memorial to Synod from the Western Wisconsin District which stated the grievances concerning the whole Beitz paper affair, but Bodamer's name was not signed here either. This makes me wonder how much he actually was involved. Did he just jump on the band wagon since there was nothing better to do, or was he genuinely concerned about the situation since he probably was a first-hand witness to the happenings at NWC from '21 - '23.

What I did find were the letters exchanged between St. Peter's president, Louis Silberschmidt, and the Western Wisconsin District President, G. W. Thurow. These letters reflect very well the prevailing attitude which the members had toward their pastor, as well as the averse attitude toward synodical officials. The first letter from Mr. Silberschmidt is dated May 15, 1927.

Dear Rev. Thurow: It has come to our hearing from a reliable source that our pastor, W.K. Bodamer, is to be dismissed from our Synod. From our present knowledge and understanding this could not meet with our approval and would cause great dissatisfaction to the congregation and

the public in general.

For this reason we are very anxious to hear the causes for this action and any charges preferred against our minister fully explained. As we have but heard the minister's side of these questions, we would kindly invite you or your representatives to come to Prairie du Chien at your earliest convenience and in the presence of our pastor, the undersigned Church Council, and the congregation to give full explanation regarding this matter.

Yours respectfully in the name of
St. Peter's Lutheran Church,
(Unterschreiben von neun Vorstehern.) (19)

From Waterloo, Thurow responded on May 26, 1927.

My dear Mr. Silberschmidt: The letter of your Church Council was received, and after consulting with the other officers of the District, I can state that we shall be able to come to Prairie du Chien by the middle of June. The meetings of the Joint Synodical Committee, Committee on Assignment of Calls, and other synodical work will keep us very busy the first part of the month. Will you be satisfied to let us select some date after the 15th of June? Please!

We have always had the highest regard for your pastor. If the Synod and Rev. Bodamer must come to the parting of the waves, believe me, it shall not be the Synod's fault. The Word of our Lord must then, as always, guide us and determine our decisions. Would to God that such a parting of the ways can and will be avoided!

Fraternal greetings to you and the entire Church Council from your humble servant in Christ,
G. W. Thurow (20)

Again, I could not determine what exactly occurred for the next six months, but apparently there never was a meeting of explanation in Prairie du Chien since there was no reference to it in the extra W. Wisconsin District Proceedings. Invitations were sent to all the congregations which were involved in the controversy to discuss the situation between the accused, suspended pastors and the Synod. This synodical proceeding took place in November of 1927, at Watertown, Wisconsin.

St. Peter's Luth. Church

Prairie du Chien, Wis., 11/26/27.

Prof. H. Schmeling
Watertown, Wis.

To the Committee of Twelve:-

We wish to answer a request of the secretary of your committee. We are sending it to the chairman of the committee as the secretary instructed. We would inform you at the outset that this answer is not the answer of the whole congregation, but of the Board of the congregation. The reason for this is that it was impossible on such short notice, to call a meeting of the congregation. We shall place the matter before the congregation next Sunday.

When we heard the report of our delegate, Mr. L. Silberschmidt, we were to say the least, shocked at the procedure of the Synod at Watertown. We had received an invitation to attend this meeting which called for the express purpose of investigating and, above all, hearing the case of all the Protest'ants. We sent a delegate in order that nothing be left undone that might aid in adjusting the differences which exist between synod and our pastor. We were disappointed when we heard the report that our case had not even been taken up and that our pastor was condemned just the same in the resolution which synod passed in which all who stood for the paper of Rev. Beitz were simply declared heretics. During the time of synod's sessions neither our pastor nor our delegate were given the liberty to speak freely - the reason for the restrictions being the pastor's suspension - and we do not believe that we are ready now to present anything to a committee. We shall state just a few reasons why we take this stand:

Our case was discussed freely and without interference by the officials in their Bericht to Synod. That was done before the whole body. We hold that it is just as necessary that our version of the whole affair be heard before that whole body. We believe that it is unfair to throw our case into committee after the same has been discussed in open meeting by our opponents.

Our pastor was suspended on account of his stand to the paper of Beitz. We hold that that paper did not dare to be finally disposed of before our pastor was heard, especially not since our pastor asked to be heard before Synod's disposition to the paper. By doing so just the same synod condemned our pastor before he was heard. For the reason we shall present nothing to this committee which also acceded to that condemnation. We hold this to be doubly useless when we review the unfairness of the Watertown meeting. We have an appeal before Joint Synod and shall let our case rest there. For we are convinced more than ever before that this District cannot, under the circumstances, judge us fairly.

We also wish you to know that we still stand by our

pastor inspite of Watertown for he is preaching to us very biblically the Gospel of Jesus. But Watertown has forced us to see that we must refuse.

Respectfully yours,
Council of St. Peter's Lutheran Church
F.M. Elvert (21)

On March 5, 1928, Secretary pro tem of the Committee of Twelve, H. Geiger, responded to St. Peter's Curch Council letter which was dated November 26, 1927.

To the secretary of the St. Peter's
Ev. Luth. Church of Prairie du Chien,
to be presented to the Congregation.

Dear Congregation:-

From the writing of Mr. Elvert to us it seems that the report Mr. Silberschmidt gave to you was erroneous. And as you as a congregation have not yet heard the Synod's side of its controversy with Rev. Beitz, and whereas your pastor, Rev. W. Bodamer, has taken sides with Rev. Beitz and severed from our synod, though our synod officials have been to Prairie du Chien already, it will be necessary to fully present the synod's side to you. Rev. Beitz in his paper: "The Just Shall Live By Faith" commits two grievous errors. The first is, that he slanders the majority of our Christians in our synod; the second is that he plainly teaches false doctrine. Now to this paper of Rev. Beitz your pastor, W. Bodamer, is adhering and has been severed from our synod. And you as a congregation have stood by him. But you no doubt as fairminded people will be willing to give us a hearing, so that you are able to judge for yourself, whether the synod together with all of its theological professors stand on the pure doctrine of Scripture, or whether it is Rev. Beitz. You surely would not be willing to follow the word of a mere man rather than the Word of God, and surely would not be willing to condemn synod without hearing it. For that would be popery in the highest degree. And the personal liking you may have had towards your pastor surely cannot induce you to follow his errors. For our Lord says: "He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me." I would therefore earnestly beg of you to give our District a chance to talk to you (St. Peter's Congregation) for the salvation of your own souls. May I hope for an answer to this letter as soon as possible?

May God grant that you do in this what is pleasing unto him.

With hearty greetings and the hope of a mutual God-pleasing settlement of this matter, I remain,

Yours,
H. Geiger,

Secretary pro tem of the Committee of Twelve (22)

To be sure, St. Peter's did respond with its defense, and on March 30, 1928 sent a lengthy reply stating its final position. The following are excerpts from this last correspondence which give the flavor of feelings that St. Peter's had.

As far as we are concerned we believe that there is only one who will ever right the wrong done in this fight, the Just and Gracious God; and we believe that only Judgment Day will finally reveal who was right and who was wrong. Our pastor is willing to rest his case with his God.

We do not believe it necessary for you to come again. We are not in need of having you come here to try to tell us that our minister is all wrong. We have some ability and the duty to judge for ourselves. And we will be decided in our judgments by what "we have seen and heard," by what we know, and not by what you or any other man might have to say about our minister.

We will let you come here under one condition only, that is that Rev. Beitz and his friends be here at the same time and that his paper be read and discussed paragraph by paragraph before the entire congregation.

If you are motivated by "concern for our souls" and not by the desire to satisfy a grudge against our pastor, nor by the hope that you can put one over him by splitting this congregation and sowing distrust and dissatisfaction, we think you might come to Prairie du Chien. Again we say it, under no other condition will we let you enter this congregation.

St. Peter's v. Luth. Congregation,
P.M. Elvert, Secretary (23)

The final act of divorce was now done. The congregation would accept the Wisconsin Synod's decision, and operate as an independent church. An interesting side-note after the confrontation finally ended in a split, was that "In March 1929, Council President Silberschmidt, who had served

faithfully during the controversial years, resigned, and moved out of Prairie du Chien." It is not known whether his departure was connected with his involvement in this obviously heated turmoil, but Bodamer himself followed up this incident with some questionable conduct when he allowed himself to be elected as church council president of the newly independent church in 1930. (24)

Even though the split with the WELS has been completed, there are some occurrences in the years ahead of St. Peter's which may be of some interest.

- Even though the controversy was over the Beitz paper, the congregation never officially became Protestant.

- In March, 1959, the congregation was incorporated into the Evangelical Lutheran Church which later merged into the American Lutheran Church, and which has now formed into the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America.

- Rev. Walter K. Bodamer spent his entire 45 year ministry in Prairie du Chien. He died on September 6, 1968, and is buried at lowertown's Evergreen Cemetery.

- An "exciting" first for the congregation was recorded when Stephanie Steiner (daughter of St. Peter's) applied for admission to Wartburg Seminary.

- A unique ecumenical event took place in August 1982, when pastor Grindeland of St. Peter's and Father E. Raymond Sims of Holy Trinity Episcopal Church exchanged pulpits for Sunday services.

- Diane Joseph was assigned to St. Peter's for her year of internship in 1984. "She was the first young woman to serve as pastor in this congregation on a regular basis."

It would take forty-five years until the WELS would be officially involved and committed to sharing and spreading the gospel in Prairie du Chien. There are many people who have the false notion that a local congregation was formed and started simply because MLPS was going to be located there, because it's only natural that the professors and their families would need some kind of a setting, besides

the school, which would take care of their spiritual needs. In all reality, the idea and request for starting work on another WELS church had already begun on April 12, 1973, when a letter, written by Mr. and Mrs. Dennis Riebe, was read to the Board for Home Missions regarding Prairie du Chien. This letter was in turn, referred to the Mississippi River Valley Conference for further investigation.

Pastor David Liggett from St. Matthew's in Stoddard, Wisconsin was charged with this investigation and made his initial report concerning the area on September 24, 1973. This also is the date when the decision was made to request permission from the General Board for Home Missions (GBHM) to begin exploratory services in Prairie du Chien. A few weeks later Pastor Liggett together with a number of Lutheran collegians canvassed the area exploring the possibility and feasibility of starting exploratory services, and at the GBHM meeting held on October 23, 1973, the Western Wisconsin District Mission Board (WWDMB) requested that exploratory services be started with the existing manpower in November. (26)

In February of 1974, a proposed plan was worked out which involved the small congregation in Lancaster, Wisconsin (Lancaster is 31 miles from PdC.) and basically called for the two fields to be a dual parish, even though technically there wasn't an official parish or congregation in Prairie du Chien. The Lancaster congregation was on record to provide \$4000.00 towards the pastor's salary and also to provide housing. The motion was made and seconded

at this same February meeting of the WWDMB to ask for mission status for Prairie du Chien in view of the development of this plan. It was also adopted at the same meeting to ask for a candidate for the Lancaster-Prairie du Chien field. (27)

Pastor Jeff Kutil was called to serve this dual field in 1974, and in September of that same year he reported to the WWDMB that the Prairie du Chien field included seventeen souls, thirteen communicants, who met at the local Seventh Day Adventist nursing home for a nominal rent. The growth rate at Prairie du Chien was not phenominal, but in April, 1975 it was determined to continue exploratory status at Prairie du Chien with the eighteen souls who continued to attend and who also sent \$125 per month to Lancaster.

All through 1976 and most of 1977 there were really no major positive or negative developments, until September 26, 1977 when Pastor Kutil asked the WWDMB for mission status at Prairie du Chien, whereupon the board adopted the motion. On March 13, 1978, it was reported to the GBHM that since 1973, Prairie du Chien numbered 25 souls - 18 communicants - 10 families - and was now sending \$140.00 per month to Lancaster. With this report in hand, the motion was made, seconded, and adopted at this GBHM meeting to give mission status for Prairie du Chien. (28) With such official status a pastor was called to do full-time work in the community. A parsonage was purchased, and on February 11, 1979, Pastor Clarke Sievert was installed as the first full-time minister of Grace Lutheran Church.

total account of the complete story. This case of starting a mission congregation in Prairie du Chien was no ordinary affair as it may have seemed so far. Interwoven throughout the congregation's history, after it became mission status, is the complicated connection it had in dealing with the decisions that would be made in New Ulm about the future of Martin Luther Academy (MLA). The exploratory status in Prairie du Chien was given an unexpected shot in the arm when the possibility of closing MLA in New Ulm arose, and in turn opening a new synodical prep school on the vacant campus of the closed Campion Jesuit high-school in Prairie du Chien. The decision to close and relocate MLA was made at a special Synod convention in the summer of 1978, but not before much time and effort went into the planning of how exactly to provide for the spiritual needs of the future MLPS faculty and families.

Already at the Synod convention held in 1977, the Western Wisconsin District Mission Board and the General Board for Home Missions were requested to establish a mission congregation with a day school at Prairie du Chien. On August 13, 1978, an informational meeting was held in Prairie du Chien with the exploratory group.

Meeting with the representatives of the Commission on Higher Education (CHE), the Western Wisconsin District Mission Board (DBM), and the General Board for Home Missions (GBHM) to discuss the effects of the Synodical resolution requesting the formation of a mission congregation in Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin. The resolution reads:

"That the Synod request the Mission Board of the Western Wisconsin District and the General Board for Home Missions to convert the exploratory group at Prairie du Chien into a mission congregation,

with a school, taking advantage of the proposals submitted by the Commission on Higher Education regarding facilities."

The proposals of the CHE to the GBHM are:

- 1) - Worship Facilities - That the CHE offer to the GBHM (Western Wisconsin District) to make available at no cost to the mission the church on the campus as worship facilities for the mission and that this arrangement continue as long as it is mutually beneficial.
- 2) - School Facilities - That the CHE offer to the GBHM (Western Wisconsin District) facilities for two classrooms on campus as long as this arrangement is mutually agreeable, with the understanding that the maintenance costs would be borne by the mission.

The convention gave the interpretation that the establishment of the mission congregation and of the day school would proceed according to the GBHM policies governing such establishment. (29)

Pastor Sievert certainly had a tremendous challenge lying before him. Not only did he have the responsibility of caring for the people already in Prairie du Chien, he also had the task of coordinating the actions and decisions which had to be made in starting a mission church and school with the future members who were still living in New Ulm. An example of how important the input was of those future members in New Ulm can be given simply through numbers. Without the faculty of MLA in Prairie du Chien, the numbers that made up the congregation were as follows - families: 10; souls: 33; communicants: 20. After the faculty would be included, the numbers would change drastically - families: 28; souls: 88; communicants: 64. It certainly was imperative to coordinate between the two groups separated some 200 miles away from one another, and Pastor Sievert did an excellent job in doing just that! It is also obvious

that there was also tremendous cooperation between both the new Ulm and Prairie du Chien camps.

It was evident that the faculty members are looking forward eagerly to being part of a mission outreach program. Pastors Berg (GBHM) and Laper (WWDBM) indicated their excitement at the prospects of a mission program under the unusual circumstances at Prairie du Chien. They also pledged their full support in the sincere confidence that the congregation with its dedicated nucleus and strong addition will have its committed efforts blessed by the Holy Spirit.
(30)

Many special considerations had to be made by both the Synod officials involved as well as the members of the church itself with this commitment toward a new church and school. "Ordinarily a communicant strength of at least 75 must be attained before a day school is opened to assure a continuing base of support." (31) From the numbers mentioned previously, this ordinary pre-requisite was not reached, but was waved due to the unique circumstances of the situation. In connection with this, there also had to be tremendous dedication or commitment concerning the financial feasibility of the whole project. In a normal, ideal situation where a mission congregation begins to operate a school, the GBHM estimated that with no subsidy, the commitment required per communicant would be \$350.00 a year. In the case of Prairie du Chien, that financial commitment per communicant would be raised to over \$400.00 a year! (32) There is no doubt that numerous irregular decisions had to be made, as well as strong personal commitments of dedication on the part of the church members.

Things were made much easier when in the summer of 1979

the monumental task of moving an entire high-school and faculty was, for the most part, completed. In that same summer, Mrs. Linda Travis (a current member of Grace) was called as the first full-time teacher, and was there when the doors opened that Fall, teaching 17 children in grades K-8. As the 1978 special Synod convention resolved, MLPS was to provide two classrooms for the fledgling day school, and this was done by using the north half of the first floor of the boy's dormitory (old Xavier Hall).

The members of Grace Lutheran Church had already completed a monumental task simply by getting things organized and started in a very limited amount of time. But they did not stop and look back at their accomplishments. Instead they looked eagerly to the future and the goal of having an identification apart from MLPS since the majority of the people in Prairie du Chien associated Grace Church as being part of MLPS, which really wasn't the case at all. To accomplish this, a Land and Building Committee was formed in March, 1980, and consisted of Harold Schewe (secretary), Dennis Riebe and Myron Duin (chairman). (33)

This committee wasted no time in preparing different options which the congregation might follow - probably the most important ones being, "Build a school first and a church second perhaps in eight to ten years", and/or "Build a church building first to make a greater impact in the community." (34) When it comes right down to it, both of these options would lead to the eventual goal of self-identity apart from MLPS. In March of 1981, permission

was given regarding authority for land search in Prairie du Chien, and shortly thereafter three plots of land were chosen by the Land and Building Committee and submitted to the Synod Board for Home Missions. At the Special Voter's Meeting on March 29, 1981, Pastor Sievert "stated that the GBHM has told Grace congregation that we may purchase land on our own if we wish, as has been determined by the Synod Board of Trustees. This means that we can expect no help from CEF in the matter of land purchase." (35)

On October 24, 1982, the voters of Grace resolved to "proceed with the purchase of property and the construction of a facility for grade school classes and fellowship activities, using Synod funds and the GBHM time table." (36) The congregation was committed to their goal of identity independence, but since it placed itself on the timetable of the GBHM, it will be a number of years before land is actually purchased.

Whether the congregation had its own building/identity or not, the church and the school grew steadily through the years. By the beginning of 1984, the projected enrollment of the school for the coming year was 33 students. With this in mind, a Special Voter's Meeting was called for February 12, 1984, to discuss the calling of a second teacher. The School Board was given authority to specify the qualifications for this call, and also to draw up a call list for a principal from the field. After two calls were returned from the field, Grace requested a graduate to be assigned through the Assignment Committee, and on July 8,

1984, Mr. Jason Muench was installed as the new principal of Grace Lutheran School. (37)

1984 brought another distinct change for Grace Lutheran church when on November 11, Pastor Sievert received a call to serve at Round Lake, Illinois, and on January 6, 1985 he informed the congregation that he had accepted it. This obviously left a vacancy which was filled in a rather unique way since the church was in a very unique situation. The pastoral duties were to be divided up among some of the men of the congregation who were also faculty members of MLPS. Prof. Robert Krueger was elected as the official Vacancy Pastor, with James Schneider, Oscar Siegler, Steven Thiesfeldt, Dennis Hayes, and Harold Schewe serving as assistants, taking care of the various duties ranging from catechism instruction, shut-in calls, and Bible class instruction etc. (38)

In all, six calls were issued and returned until on October 6, 1984 the call was extended to Rev. Douglas Bode of Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. Pastor Bode accepted this new call to serve and was installed on January 12, 1986.

Planning authority was granted in April, 1986 for the education-fellowship facility to be built on land purchased in 1985 (1515 South 15th Street). An architect was engaged and in 1987 funding was approved for the 5500 square foot building by the Synod's Church Extension Fund. The groundbreaking ceremony was held on July 24, 1988. After 16 years of planning and hard work, the new Education-Fellowship building was dedicated on January 29,

1989. Expansion of the school and the fellowship facility and the construction of a church and new parsonage will easily be accomodated by the sizeable property which was purchased in 1985.

At the present time, Pastor Douglas Bode still serves Grace Lutheran Church, with Mr. Ron Wintrone as principal and teaching the upper grades, while Mrs. Linda Travis teaches the lower grades, continuing her service from the beginning of the school in 1979.

1) Griff Williams, Seasons of Change - Celebrating the 125th Anniversary of St. Peter's Evangelical Lutheran Church.

2) Williams, p. 12.

3) Williams, p. 14.

4) Williams, p. 14.

5) Williams, p. 15.

6) Williams, p. 15.

7) Williams, p. 15.

8) Williams, p. 16.

9) Williams, p. 18.

10) Williams, p. 18.

11) 1876 Proceedings of the German Ev. Lutheran Synod of Wisconsin and other States, p. 8.

12) 1876 Proceedings, p. 23.

13) Williams, p. 24.

14) Williams, pp. 26-37.

15) Williams, p. 38.

16) Williams, p. 38.

17) Williams, p. 39.

18) Williams, p.40.

19) Western Wisconsin District Proceedings (extra), 11-27 and 2-28, p. 42.

20) WWDP, 11-27 & 2-28, p. 42.

21) WWDP, 11-27 & 2-28, p. 58.

22) WWDP, 11-27 & 2-28, p. 71.

23) WWDP, 11-27 & 2-28, p. 72.

24) Williams, p. 40.

25) Williams, pp. 60-67.

- 26) Western Wisconsin District Mission Board Minutes.
- 27) WWDMB minutes.
- 28) WWDMB minutes.
- 29) Informational Meeting with Exploratory Group minutes.
- 30) Report on Informational Meeting with MLA Faculty/Families re. Church/School Program at Grace, Prairie du Chien, (New Ulm - 12/4/78).
- 31) Mission Day School Policies and Procedures - GBHM: April 1978.
- 32) Meeting of Mission Boards with Grace, PdC, WI, - 5/13/79.
- 33) Minutes of Grace Lutheran Church Council - 3/80.
- 34) Minutes of the Land Search Committee - 3/25/80.
- 35) Minutes of Special Voter's Meeting - 3/29/81.
- 36) Minutes of Voter's Meeting - 10/24/82
- 37) Minutes of Special Voter's Meeting - 2/12&26/84.
- 38) Church Council Pastoral Vacancy Plan - 2/3/85.

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