

A HISTORY OF THE DEVELOPMENT AND ADMINISTRATION OF

ST. JOHN'S LUTHERAN CHURCH, ANTIGUA

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## PREFACE

Since this paper is without a bibliography a bit of explanation is in order. The lack of bibliographic detail does not mean this paper is without resources. The information upon which it is based has been gleaned from mission board and synodical reports, and/or personal letters, and/or personal conversations with the following men:

Pastor David Beckman: WELS pastor serving Antigua from 1976 - 1979.

Pastor Donald Burch: FAL pastor serving Antigua from 1973 - 1977.

Pastor John Guse: former South Atlantic District (SAD) Mission Board chairman and current SAD president.

Pastor John Huebner: current member SAD Mission Board, Antigua Coordinator.

Pastor Eugene Kauffeld: former FAL Mission Board chairman.

Mr. Thomas Thiele: former FAL Mission Board chairman.

Pastor Frederic Piepenbrink: WELS pastor serving Antigua from 1980 - 1984.

Pastor Richard Wiechmann: current SAD Mission Board chairman.

Pastor Larry Zwieg: former SAD Mission Board chairman, during the 1975 merger.

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Antigua is an island of one hundred and eight square miles set in the Eastern Caribbean Sea. Antigua's romantic history began with its discovery in 1493, by Christopher Columbus who named it for the Santa Maria la Antigua Church in Seville, Spain. The island was a much fought for prize between Spain, France, and England but except for a brief French occupancy remained British. Only a few short years ago did Antigua gain its independence. Still, the influence of British culture remains.

Although Lutheranism may have found its way onto the island in the early 1800's, Methodism and Roman Catholicism became the dominant religions. In the past decade, however, the Lutheran Church has taken a prominent place in the capital city of St. John's. A visitor to the island can't miss the beautiful building of St. John's Lutheran Church set on a hill above the deep water harbor and the tiny shacks. Not only is the building prominent but the Church's message of the gospel is prominent in the hearts of the growing number of her members.

It is the purpose of this paper to trace the Lutheran influence in Antigua from her weak association with the Missouri Synod (LC-MS), through

the short association with the Federation for Authentic Lutheranism (FAL), to her present ties with the Wisconsin Lutheran Synod (WELS). After reviewing this three-part history of St. John's we will examine the unique situation of WELS administration of the mission with an eye toward the future.

#### I. LC-MS influence (? - 1971)

Not much can be said about the earliest influence of Lutheranism on the island. Pastor Beckman recalled a 1977 conversation with an old black gentleman on a corner next to an old church in one of the small inland villages. "Inland" isn't too far when the island is only nine miles by twelve! This man insisted that a little old abandoned brick church used to be a Lutheran Church in the early 1800's. Of course, this can't be verified. It could well be that the man knew Pastor Beckman was a Lutheran preacher and was trying to impress him out of his Yankee dollars!

A native Antiguan, William O'Donoghue, conducted services on the island for several years beginning in the late 1960's. He had been a policeman on the island of Dominica and became interested in the Lutheran Church after he moved to Antigua and began listening to "Bringing Christ to the Nations," an overseas "Lutheran Hour."

Apparently Mr. O'Donoghue trained himself, called himself, and equipped himself. God used His and his peculiar ways to plant the seed of Lutheranism on the island. He ordered catechisms, hymnals, and clerical clothing from Concordia. He walked and invited and walked and invited and finally he conducted worship services on his own in a run-down old house about as big as most people's livingroom.

His group was mostly old women and children when Pastor Burch arrived in early 1973. At one time O'Donoghue ran a Lutheran "High School" in what now is the union hall of one of the island's political parties. Without formal education or degree, he taught such exotic subjects as cooking and French!

One of the most peculiar things about O'Donoghue is that he said he had invited leaders from different Lutheran synods to come down and survey the field. The names of several mission board representatives of the LCA and the LC-MS do appear in the church's first guest book, but the names and dates are all in O'Donoghue's handwriting!

After Pastor Burch arrived, O'Donoghue assisted with Scripture readings and prayers. Within two years, though, he had become more or less a self-imposed shut-in. In 1975 and '76 he came to church infrequently but still handled the Scripture readings and prayers when he was there.

Alcoholism is a common problem in Antigua where a

quart of rum can be had for about seventy-five cents. When O'Donoghue began showing up for the evening service drunk and arguing with the people on the bus, Pastor Beckman asked him not to come unless he was sober. He very seldom came back after that. He died in 1983 and was buried in disrepute by Pastor Piepenbrink.

## II. FAL (1972-1975)

The Federation for Authentic Lutheranism (FAL) held its constituting convention in November, 1971. It was formed by LC-MS members out of a concern to remain faithful to Christ's saving gospel and a compassion for troubled souls. An early FAL tract described its members as:

Lutheran congregations and individuals who for conscience reasons are withdrawing from synodical membership in heterodox Lutheran bodies and declaring themselves independent. The FAL wishes to aid those who are contemplating such a step.

Soon after this convention, the FAL Mission Board chairman, Pastor Kauffeld was sent by the Board on a survey trip of the island. It appeared to be a promising field and, considering all the facts, the Board decided to begin work there. The first public notice of this appeared in the bi-monthly FAL publication, Sola Scriptura:

(An) interesting situation has developed

in Antigua, in the British West Indies. A man has written to FAL and asked FAL to come in and take over his little mission. The result of my (Pastor Kauffeld) visit to Antigua has determined that both pastor and congregation are in complete doctrinal agreement with FAL. It is our joy to welcome St. John's Lutheran Church of Antigua, British West Indies, and its pastor, the Rev. William O'Donoghue into our fellowship. (Sola Scriptura, Vol. III, No. 1, July-August, 1972. p. 13.)

Pastor Burch was commissioned by the FAL in St. John's Lutheran Church, Watertown, WI, on December 31, 1972. One week later he and his wife and four young children left for Antigua. One week after that he held his first Sunday School class and worship service. He wrote back to the Mission Board:

On Januray 14, 1973 our first Sunday School classes were conducted at the Otto's Government School. I did not expect a large group, but the eight that gathered that first Sunday (including four of my own children) was far below my most conservative hopes. The worship service saw 34 attend. It was indeed a humble beginning that first Sunday.

God's blessing were evident. On March 15, 1973, he wrote:

Our Sunday School enrollment has increased to 36 so when the additional Sunday School material arrived, we could divide the Sunday School into three classes. We now hope to be able to add a fourth class...We thak God for the increase in attendance at the Sunday morning church service. Last Sunday 74 people attended the service.

Soon after this he wrote a Sunday School in the States saying:

We now have 45 children enrolled in Sunday School. We have 3 children from

the United States, seven children from India, one little girl from England, and the rest of the children are natives of Antigua.

Every Saturday I go to the Otto's Government School with my two older boys to help get things ready for the Sunday morning services...Some of the children saw us working at the school a few weeks ago and came over to help. Now every Saturday we have about 10 - 15 little helpers. The children move desks, clean, and look for chairs with four legs so we can use them for our Sunday School and worship. (Sola Scriptura, Vol. III, No. 4, January - February, 1973. p. 12.)

In October, 1973 Burch had this to say:

The prospects of the construction of the first unit of our church continue to brighten...Our August worship service attendance averaged 90. Sunday School attendance continues to average in the 50's. Interest in a school continues to run high and it is believed that we could open our doors to 50 students the first year. A group of about 40 will form the nucleus of our congregation and the baptized membership should be about 75 - 80.

Early in 1974, the decision was made by the FAL to open a parochial school in Antigua. Pastor Burch returned on a lecture tour and a special offering was raised for this purpose.

On May 5, 1974, the church and education wing was dedicated. By the end of May a principal, Mr. Henry Meyer and a teacher, Miss Helen Kuehl of the WELS had accepted calls to establish a parochial school.

Pastor Burch had landed on the island just two year earlier with only a couple suitcases and a box of hymnals! He pretty well had free reign to do as he pleased. Since Antigua was FAL's only foreign



mission, the newly formed Mission Board had little or no experience, and there was no paper work required of him except a monthly report on statistics. The zealous people of FAL supported their new world mission to the hilt and poured lots of money into it. Most of the money was sent directly to Burch who spent it on what he thought the mission needed. He did a good job of getting a thriving mission going, and St. John's ended up with a good peice of property and a nice facility (four room school with office, two rooms used as chapel) dedicated in 1974.

Pastor Burch had a difficult time adjusting to WELS when FAL disbanded. Perhaps this was because of the "tighter reins" under which he now had to operate. He felt compelled to leave in June of 1977. After serving a WELS congregation in Tampa for about two years, he left the WELS and returned to the LC-MS as development director of Concordia College, Seward, NE.

Interestingly, in 1980 our missionaries in Antigua received a letter from a mission board member in St. Louis asking about the potential for the LC-MS to start a mission on a neighboring island. Perhaps Burch's zeal for the Caribbean never died!

### III. WELS (1975 - Present)

This has been and continues to be a beautiful

story of God's grace. In its April 28, 1975, meeting the General Board for Home Missions (GBHM) was presented with a request by the FAL Mission Board to evaluate its Antiguan mission and the projected needs of the mission in view of the pending merger of the FAL with the WELS. At the end of June, 1975, after approval of two thirds of the FAL congregations, FAL disbanded and each congregation retained the right of joining the WELS, ELS, or remaining independent.

The dissolution of the FAL was in no way disgraceful or shameful. In the final issue of "Letter to the Churches," a FAL newsletter, the Board of Directors explained:

God has used FAL in a strange but wonderful way. He caused us to begin the blossoming work in Antigua. He enabled us to help refugees from the Missouri Synod, establish congregations and/or churches...All this God did with FAL from November 1 of 1971 to June of 1975. Surely God blessed FAL and it was a blessing for all of us to have been of service to Him at this time. (Letter to the Churches, June, 1975.)

The following average attendance figures show just how richly God blessed the work in Antigua during the FAL years.

	Church	Sunday School
January, '73	46	16
July, '73	83	49
January, '74	87	55
July, '74	115	75
January, '75	135	105
July, '75	155	120

Also, at the end of the school's second year, 1975, 44 children were enrolled.

Yes, God had richly blessed this field of mission work, but He was far from withdrawing that hand of blessing. Through the WELS St. John's continues to bring the gospel to the natives of Antigua. This endeavor began with the following recommendations by the GBHM to the forty-third WELS biennial convention in August of 1975.

1. We recommend that the WELS assume full administrative responsibility for St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church, Antigua, West, Indies.
2. We recommend that the Coordinating Council and the Board of Trustees increase the budget of the General Board for Home Missions (GBHM) to include \$52,100 for the subsidy of the Antiguan mission.
3. We recommend that St. John's Lutheran Church, Antigua, be placed under the supervision of the South Atlantic District Mission Board and the GBHM.

What has happened in this little church under the WELS? The following table demonstrates the power of the Word.

<u>Year</u>	<u>Communicants</u>	<u>Souls</u>	<u>Confirmations</u>
1975	61	129	12
1976	73	159	16
1977	76	178	8
1978	77	195	8
1979	79	196	4
1980	89	202	10
1981	100	210	27
1982	109	217	21
1983	132	234	30
1984	145	230	26

The congregational offerings have also increased from almost \$3,000 in 1975, to almost \$18,000 in 1984.

Under God's richest blessings and grace the success of St. John's congregation to win souls for Christ over the past decade can be seen from this table. The number of communicants has grown steadily over the last ten years and significantly during the past four. The number of confirmations has been somewhat erratic but a substantial increase has occurred in the last few years. As a result of increased communicant membership and better stewardship practices a substantial increase in plate offerings has also been observed in the past two years.

St. John's has not grown as a result of WELS transfers. Over 94% of all the communicants who were members in 1984 were previously non-Lutheran and non-church members.

The school has played an important role in the growth of the church. The significant rise in confirmations since 1981 has been the direct result of children going through the school. Not only do many of these children become confirmed members, but their parents are also brought into the church through adult information classes.

There is some dissatisfaction among many parents with the government schools and other private schools on the island. Many don't seem to have the proper supplies, equipment, and qualified teachers. By carefully choosing those students and their parents

who have no church affiliation, St. John's can offer these lost sheep not only an education for their child, but also a church home within the household of faith for their whole family.

Pastors in Antigua have sensed an intangible growth and development at St. John's which a table can't show. There is a general willingness to take responsibility for the affairs of their own church and to be a contributing, not dependent, member of the WELS. For example the church council and voters' assembly have organized themselves much like any other WELS congregation. Other church organizations include: Mission Lights, LWMS, Boy and Girl Pioneers, and Lutheran Youth for Christ. A Board of Deacons has been organized to gain greater participation of lay workers in the ministry. Several young people have expressed an interest in attending either DMLC or NWC to prepare for the public ministry. One girl will complete her freshman year at DMLC this spring.

St. John's isn't sitting on its heels, though. In a study done in 1984, the congregation developed the following goals:

1. Continue to foster the attitude of an indigenous, independent church.
2. Use the Deacon program for "grass-roots" evangelism.
3. Relieve as much as possible the financial burden

on the Synod by assuming more of the expenses to run the church and school...to become self-supporting.

4. Supply young people to our synodical schools for training in the full time ministry...to be used by our Synod in whatever area they see fit.

5. To strengthen and enlarge the school.

Do these sound like energetic goals? I'm afraid their zeal for God's work might cause some of our state-side congregation to hang their heads. Praise God for His wonderful works!

#### IV. Administration

Already in 1975, questions arose regarding the recommendation that the home missions division rather than the world mission division assume responsibility for the administration of the mission. On the face of it there are a number of reasons why one would have assumed that the Board for World Missions (BWM) would assume responsibility. Antigua is a foreign country and is off the continent of North America. The field probably faced long term subsidy, as in many of the world mission fields. Nevertheless, the FAL mission board and the mission itself requested that the home mission division take over the administration.

There are two sides to every debate. First, we shall see the reasons given by the GBHM for home

mission administration.

1. Antigua is Western in culture and does exclusively use the English language. The island is becoming increasingly "Americanized."

2. The school program in Antigua corresponds with that of our schools.

3. The members of the mission have been and will continue to support their church and their school through a school registration fee. This conforms with the GBHM policy regarding school financial support. (The percent of household income which is paid in the form of this fee is greater than the percent of household income in the U.S. given for all church purposes!)

4. Several practical reasons for administration by the South Atlantic District Mission Board:

a.) mutual interest of the teachers regarding curriculum.

b.) mutual interests of the teachers could be expressed in teacher's conventions.

c.) the proximity of the mission to the SAD.

The GBHM also proposed several goals for the mission. The first goal was a stepped up evangelism program. Secondly, a larger chapel would be needed. Thirdly, they proposed that the school not be expanded beyond four American teachers. Presently, a young Antiguan is serving as a teacher's aid. The farthest reaching goal is to prepare both national

teachers and pastors.

The BWM also had (has) its reasons for administrating St. John's through the world missions division. In early August of 1976, Pastor Ernst Wendland was requested by the GBHM to survey the field from a world missionary's view and offer his opinions on 1.) what the scope of an evangelist's work should be, and 2.) what can actually be expected of such a man, and 3.) how to go about training him in relation to curriculum and overall program. Perhaps more relevant to this paper, Pastor Wendland was asked to evaluate the work of the GBHM on the island. Had they done too much too fast?

Pastor Wendland's summary conclusions seem to indicate that he favored a world mission division administration. A lack of male candidates prevented the instituting of a lay training program at the time. That is no longer true and training materials have been in use among the deacons.

He did not agree with sending young Antiguan's to the U.S. for training. This would reduce or eliminate the indigenous church goal.

He cautioned against expanding the school too quickly, but admitted that curtailing the school now would be devastating. I think he was saying that the GBHM and/or FAL had already given and done too much for the Antiguan's.

Pastor Wendland concluded his report to the GBHM



by admitting that Antigua is a "hybrid" situation. "Much of the program is home-mission oriented. Yet I can't see how expansion work can be thought of in any other terms than in a world-mission context."

With these remarks the matter was closed, at least publicly, for several years. Most of those involved assumed that if there would be expansion onto other islands then the world mission division would have to be involved.

The question surfaced again in 1983-1984. The Administration Survey Committee, in the Report to the Twelve Districts, concluded;

- Whereas 1) Antigua is not necessarily beyond the normal geographic bounds of the responsibility of the GBHM; and
- Whereas 2) Antigua members are proud of their membership in the SAD and in the home mission field and of their school which operates under policies of the GBHM; and
- Whereas 3) the English language, the western culture, and the goals of the Antigua congregation better suit conditions under which the GBHM operates; and
- Whereas 4) the SADMB through its Antigua coordinator has demonstrated its ability to serve the field well; and
- Whereas 5) The objective of the World Mission Board is to establish independent church bodies and the objective of the GBHM is to establish independent congregations and it appears that these goals are incompatible; therefore be it

Resolved, that we express our reservations about the transfer of Antigua from the SAD and the GBHM to the World Mission Board.

Will this be the end of the debate? I doubt it. I believe the end of the debate will come when St. John's is a national church and no longer needs WELS administration! I think it is obvious that either division could serve as administrator of St. John's, each one emphasizing it's own strengths. Whichever division administers the mission, I thank God that he has prospered his kingdom among the Antiguans, and that He has blessed us with the privilege of being his vehicle to spread the gospel.