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Interview Summary

Summary of Interview with Former Missionary Mark Wendland

I held an interview on November 5<sup>th</sup>, 2007 in Beaver Dam, Wisconsin with former missionary Mark Wendland, who currently serves as a pastor at St. Stephen's in Beaver Dam. During my vicar year in Beaver Dam, I often heard Pastor Wendland tell stories and memories of his extensive mission work in Africa. This project gave an opportunity to ask Pastor Wendland an organized set of questions about his experiences.

I kept the interview rather general to allow Pastor Wendland to take the discussion in the direction he felt would be most helpful. He talked about the influence of his supervisors and the more experienced missionaries he knew, even his own father. Overall, he commends Pastor Tate Sauer as his most influential guide during his years in Africa because of their close proximity, but also recognizes the help given to him by those WELS missionaries who served at a greater distance, with whom he had the opportunity to meet only occasionally.

Pastor shared insights about raising his family overseas and the time he spent in Africa as a teenager. Pastor Wendland considers the opportunity to have raised his children in Africa a blessing; the culture calls for a work day that begins with sunrise and ends with sunset, allowing a father to spend night time with his family, with no meetings or church activities scheduled during those hours. He also senses that having lived in Africa as a teenager while his father, Ernst, worked as a missionary helped him prepare for his future work there.

We also discussed his specific work building up and establishing new mission work in Malawi and, later in his time, working in a more established mission setting in Blantyre. In this regard, Pastor Wendland compares and contrasts some of the advantages and disadvantages of working in an urban mission setting versus working in “the bush,” an rural African setting.

I found it especially interesting listening to Pastor Wendland talk about his worship services and Bible studies in “the bush” of Malawi, particularly the difficulties of sharing the gospel in a somewhat illiterate society that is all-too wrapped up in its own pagan religious ideas. In this regard, I think Pastor Wendland gave an intriguing answer to a question about how he shared the gospel with the typical African for the first time as he basically answered, “People are people. Everyone needs the forgiveness of Christ. That’s simply what I told them, because everyone needs that message, no matter what their background or culture.” In the past I’ve heard answers like that labeled “simplistic,” but Pastor Wendland seems to view that strategy as simple – but not simplistic. He also noted that sharing God’s Word in a largely illiterate society means telling the accounts from God’s Word often – and well. Africa is a highly oral society that is fond of storytelling. Because of this, the historical accounts and parables from the Bible resonate in African culture.

Pastor Wendland also shared his greatest discouragement: just not being able to take the gospel to as many people as he would have liked. Of all the possible challenges and discouragements that could confront a missionary, I found that answer fascinating. It wasn’t government opposition, fear of rejection, loneliness, or anything else that challenged him the most. It was the sad reality of the limitations that human jars of clay

face. There just isn't enough time or resources for sinful men to take the gospel to everyone they want.

There was also a surprising (at least to me) strength that he gained from friendships with other missionaries not of his fellowship. Somewhat surprisingly, Pastor Wendland said he met with very little resistance from secular governments while spreading the gospel, but did meet more barriers from Africans who saw him as a threat to their traditional religions.

What I learned from Pastor Wendland could probably be summed up best by his general answer to the last question: "What advice would you give to a WELS pastor leaving to be a missionary in Africa?" In essence, he answered, "Things will be very different, but the gospel is always the same. Stay rooted in Christ, and everything else falls into place even as the world swirls around you." This seems to summarize Pastor Wendland's overall message about his time in Africa: the gospel is central. Whatever the circumstances or challenges, the gospel is central in the missionary's mind, heart and proclamation.