

THE TUCSON CASE

Thomas Kneser

Church History
Prof. E. Fredrich
April, 1981

Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Library
11831 N. Seminary Drive. 65W
Mequon, Wisconsin

The Tucson Case

During the fall of 1940 a case of disagreement came about between Grace Congregation, Tucson, Arizona, and the Southwest Wisconsin District Mission Board. Also involved was the Joint Synod's General Mission Board. The prominent men involved in this case are as follows: E. A. Sitz, pastor of Grace; F. Stern, General Missionary in Arizona; F. Uplegger, Arizona Conference Visitor until June, 1941; O. H. Hohenstein, Uplegger's successor; William Repke, chairman, General Mission Board; O. B. Nommensen, chairman, SEW District Mission Board; Richard Buerger, president, SEW District; Edgar Hoenecke, Executive Secretary for the Indian Mission; John Brenner, president, Joint Synod. The majority of information for this paper was gleaned from the correspondence collected by President Brenner. Unfortunately, there may be some gaps due to a lack of or missing correspondence, gaps which could not be filled by other sources of information.

Sometime during 1939 Pastor F. Stern began his duties as General Missionary in Arizona. In the course of his work he traveled many thousands of miles, visiting nearly all the cities, towns, and hamlets in the state. He made house to house canvasses, did follow-up work, preached and conducted services in all kinds of settings. Several preaching stations were opened through his efforts and in general, great progress was made in advancing the cause of the Gospel in Arizona.

However, Grace Congregation of Tucson and its pastor, E. Arnold Sitz, did not feel that the mission needs of its area were being adequately met by the district and synod mission boards. At this time Tucson was a city of about 50,000. Grace had 210 communicants but also was serving many wintertime residents, students, and people residing in hospitals and sanatoria, Tucson being a vacation, university, and health-center city. Because of these varied ministries Grace felt that the mission boards should have put more emphasis on the Tucson area than was being done. It should also be noted that a considerable number of the members at Grace, particularly of the church council, came from Missouri Synod congregations. The same is true for many of the part-time and institutional residents. Through various channels correspondence was begun between members of Grace and the president of the Southern California District of the Missouri Synod. He was asked how his synod might take care of the mission needs in Tucson. He also met with representatives of the congregation, including Pastor Sitz, during a trip through Tucson. When these affairs came to the attention of Pastor Stern, he took steps of warning and inhibition, and notified the SEW Mission Board.

Continued communication between members of Grace and the Missouri district president led to an invitation for him and the Missouri Synod's Executive Secretary for Home Missions to a congregational meeting on November 5, 1940.

In the meantime President Buerger directed Visitor Uplegger to look into the affairs at Grace, in accordance with the president's authority to regulate doctrine and practice.

Uplegger spoke with Sitz who wanted the matter discussed before the conference, which met late in October. At the conference Sitz declared it an omission of obligations that he and his congregation had not conferred with synod representatives but led discussions with Missouri officials come about without at least informing the Visitor of the situation. Subsequently, the Visitor was invited to the November 5 congregational meeting at Grace. It should also be noted that the General Missionary's answers to pertinent questions regarding the Tucson field were not satisfactory. It was apparently at this time that the idea of an Arizona-Colorado district was also being kicked around (more on this later).

Present at the November 5 meeting were the two Missouri officials, the Visitor, and the General Missionary, at the request of Buerger. At the meeting the Visitor declared his surprise at the presence of the Missouri men, taking it as an intrusion into the affairs of a sister synod. The Missouri District president spoke of our synod's setting aside of a "gentlemen's agreement" according to which we would refrain from working in areas where they had begun working and vice versa. The Visitor then stated that either synod was duty bound to work in areas where needs were not being met. However this must be done with-

out violation of brotherly love and the consideration sister synods owe each other. The discussion was in a polite and brotherly manner with the Missouri men declaring that they would not begin working in the Tucson area if our synod could and would take care of the needs. They made clear that they were still very much interested because they received reports in their own synod in which our efforts appeared unsatisfactory.

At this meeting the Visitor also suggested that a special committee be set up, composed of himself and members of the congregation, to report directly to the mission board because many in the congregation felt that Stern's reports had been and would be unsatisfactory. So, the affairs with Missouri were closed and a new way for cooperation with the Mission Board was opened.

In its report of November 23, 1940, this committee described the work it felt needed to be done in Tucson. It was of opinion that the workloads of Sitz and Stern was not conducive to taking on the additional mission work. Therefore it made three recommendations: 1) that an additional pastor be called to assist in the work of the Lutheran church in the Tucson field; 2) that this associate pastor be called to work in conjunction with our local pastor and that the mission endeavor of the local congregation be thus continued; 3) that in the establishment of new missions the associate pastor and our existing congregation look toward the establishment and organization of

daughter congregations rather than entirely independent congregations. They also stressed the need for clarification in the matter of administration of missions to be organized in an area where a Lutheran church already exists. They wanted to avoid fracturing their congregation among several smaller missions. They also stated that they were keeping open the possibility of turning to Missouri should Wisconsin fail to supply adequate mission aid. Such was the report to the SEW District Mission Board.

In his reply to Grace, Chairman Nommensen stated that the Board had agreed to send a man to work under its direction and that of Pastor Stern. He also mentioned that their report was in full accord with Stern's reports and that by this additional help the mission opportunities of Tucson would be met. Notably absent is any mention of guidelines for the administration of any new missions. In a letter he sent to President Brenner, Nommensen went so far as to say that if Grace Church would not work with the board and the General Missionary, they would attend to the work without Grace's assistance.

Because of an apparent delay in getting a man there and because the Board had not entered upon the wish for further discussions leading to an agreement on how the administration would be carried out, the Grace congregation took steps to initiate looking toward affiliation with the Missouri Synod. This was on January 8, 1941.

On January 11, Grace Church of Glendale wrote a letter

to Grace, Tucson offering the suggestion that the conference or at least some of its members meet with the congregation and the Visitor. A similar letter was sent to the General Missionary. These letters were sent in order to restore a sense of unity and to avoid a permanent rupture.

The council of Grace, Tucson, met with the Visitor to discuss the matter on January 25. At this time Uplegger stated that it was his conviction that the Mission Board declined discussion on administration because of some misunderstanding. The Visitor was then asked to set up a special session of the conference along with special representatives of the SEW Mission Board, the General Mission Board, and possibly, of the synodical presidency. They also suspended the resolutions toward seeking affiliation with Missouri.

The special conference was held February 19 and 20. Pastor John Gauss was present, representing SEW Mission Board as well as the district and synod presidents. Also present was Pastor Im. P. Frey, representing SEW and General Mission Boards. Grace Church was represented by its council and other representatives. The sole purpose of the meeting had to do with present and future relations between Grace and the Mission Boards.

On the 19th, at the request of the council correspondence of the November 5, 1940, meeting was read. As soon as Stern's report of that meeting was read a great ruckus arose among those who had been present. It was repudiated by the Visitor,

Pastor Sitz, and the council. The following morning the Visitor demanded that the report be corrected or else declared wrong or misleading. The erroneous points stated that the congregation wanted an assistant pastor who was salaried by synod but under the direction of Grace Church and its pastor, that he work for the congregation, and that mission stations established by him serve only as feeders to Grace. Over against these views were the clear statements of the committee which stated that such a man was not to be an assistant but only work in such harmony as associate pastors may work together or as a city missionary may work with pastors of congregations in the same city. In the discussion pastors Sitz and Stern confessed to blunders on their respective parts and asked each other's forgiveness.

In the evening, the synod representatives, the Visitor, and the council formed a 'conciliation committee.' In its report the following points were made: 1) It was the firm conviction of Grace congregation that Pastor Stern should not be kept in this field because almost everyone had lost confidence in him. They also stated that it would be best for the whole mission field of Arizona if Pastor Stern would be called out of the state; 2) Grace congregation ceased its negotiations with Missouri; 3) Grace congregation acknowledged undue haste and improper procedure in the things done to effect affiliation; 4) Grace congregation would concentrate its efforts to establish unity within the congregation. It

was also urged that the Mission Board should call a man for the Tucson area as city missionary. The committee hoped and anticipated that the Board would carry out the congregation's wishes, especially point number one.

On March 17, 1941, a meeting of Brenner, Buerger, the SEW District Mission Board, and Roepke (chairman GMB) was held at Milwaukee. At this meeting Pastor Gauss presented the conciliation committee's report. Especially distressing was the request for Stern's removal. His reports had given the GBM the impression of much faithful and energetic work. Zion congregation of Phoenix had also written the GMB expressing gratitude for Stern's work. Chairman Roepke stated as much in a letter to Gerhard Munding, secretary of Grace congregation. In the letter he stated that the matter would be dealt with at the GMB's meeting in May, but that more information on the why and wherefore and the Scriptural grounds for making such a request.

During all of this involvement with Pastor Stern, and to a great extent because of it, the idea of an Arizona-Colorado District was moving ahead rather swiftly. A status committee had been set up with Edgar Hoenecke as one of its members. However this interim committee ran into some problems for which another committee was set up to review the whole matter and report to the 1941 Synod Convention. Its report will be discussed later.

In the meantime, the GMB held its meeting in mid-May

at Milwaukee. The 'conciliation committee' gave its report to which Stern strongly objected when point #1 was presented. Apparently there was a misunderstanding that Stern was to be subjected to synodical discipline. This was not the case. It was just a desire to have him no longer connected with the mission work because of the peculiar situation in the particular field, his individuality, and the mistakes or blunders made by him. He still had not corrected his report of the Nov. 5, 1940 meeting on which the Board's judgment still seemed to rest. So the Board was left to judge between conflicting reports - Stern's and that of the committee which was backed by an oral report by Uplegger at this meeting.

The chairman of the District Board then drew up a letter for Uplegger to present to Grace church by which the matter would be discussed with the congregation. This meeting took place May 29th. In the meantime a letter had come from the chairman of the General Board stating the Board's decisions, namely, that it did not feel justified in removing Pastor Stern as General Missionary in Arizona. Also steps had been taken to avoid further friction between Grace congregation and Pastor Stern. What these steps were, no one seems to have known. Because there was no action taken the immediate reaction of many at Grace was a feeling of being free now to seek out Missouri's care because Wisconsin was not giving the field the care they thought it deserved. At this point in the meeting, however, the District chairman's letter was presented and was not found unacceptable by the members.

The intention of the District Board was to send a man of experience to do pretty much as Grace wanted, but with more emphasis on Synod's mission work. While this did please the members no definite stand was taken because of a fear of interference by the General Missionary. The Visitor made it clear, however, that he was of the understanding that Stern would have nothing further to do with the Tucson field. The outcome thus hinged apparently on the action the GMB would take toward the activity of the General Missionary.

A report of the entire situation was presented to the Arizona Conference at its meeting early in June by Pastor Uplegger. Pastors Sitz and Stern were present and other than a few brief questions by Pastor Stern no additions or corrections were made. A copy was also sent to Nommensen with an addenda stating the Visitor's personal objections to Stern's continued connection with the work in Tucson. These objections mainly involved fear that Stern might further slander Sitz as leading the congregation toward Missouri and his harsh judgment on the congregation for this action, and also fear of Stern's attitude toward and interference with any new missionary in his capacity as overseer of the field. Pastor Stern also received a copy of these addenda.

It is at this point that the district status issue comes into play. The committee assigned to report at the Saginaw convention in August, 1941 did so. However, in consultation with the interim committee and the two conferences it offered substitute recommendations. The gist of these were:

- 1) the creation of a new concept, the 'mission district;'
- 2) these mission districts would have their own mission boards which would function as any district mission board;
- 3) that the general missionary should function in agreement with his respective mission district Mission Board; and
- 4) that in all other aspects the mission district function as a conference of its District. The report was adopted.

The key point in regard to the 'Tucson case' is the third one mentioned. Pastor Stern would now be under the jurisdiction of the Arizona Mission District rather than the SEW District Mission Board. Apparently, he could see the handwriting on the wall for it was not long after, that he left Arizona and went to work in the Pacific-Northwest District, even though it wasn't until April, 1942 that the mission district was organized.

In summary, this case was a rather sticky issue in the SEW District and especially the Arizona Conference. It involved some strong personalities on the part of Pastors Sitz and Stern. This case is another step in a string of battles that Pastor Sitz and Grace congregation had in their dealings with the rest of the Synod. There was much misunderstanding on all sides, undoubtedly compounded by the distances between all the parties involved. The formation first of the 'mission district' and eventually of a full-fledged district, were positive steps to avoid such situations from occurring again. God grant that such cases be kept to a minimum in the future.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Correspondence and reports:

Grace Mission Committee, G. Munding, secretary, to O. B. Nommensen. November 23, 1940.

Edgar Hoenecke to Pres. John Brenner. May 1, 1941.

Edgar Hoenecke to Pres. John Brenner. May 4, 1942.

O. B. Nommensen to Grace Congregation. December 13, 1940.

O. B. Nommensen to Pres. John Brenner. December 15, 1940.

O. B. Nommensen to Pres. John Brenner. December 11, 1941.

W. Roepke to Gerhard Munding. January 27, 1941.

W. Roepke to Pres. John Brenner. March, 20, 1941.

W. Roepke to Gerhard Munding. March 20, 1941.

F. Uplegger to O. B. Nommensen. June 12, 1941.

Proceedings of the Twenty-sixth Convention, Saginaw, MI,
August 6-13, 1941.