



Tri-City Area
WELS Lutherans

A Background and History

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Project Share: A Christ centered ministry to the Tri-Cities community, sponsored
by area WELS Lutherans

Introduction

Project Share is the name given to a unique type of ministry. In the Tri-City area of Michigan, WELS Lutherans in the communities of Bay City, Saginaw, and Midland have gathered together to reach out with the Gospel to a section of society that has at times been overlooked. Project Share was created in order to bring the Gospel of Jesus Christ to those in the Tri-City area who do not enjoy all of the physical, material blessings and stability in life that many in our nation enjoy today. It is an unique ministry at the time of this writing because it involves fellow believers from many different WELS congregations within the Tri-City area working together alongside of and in support of a called Staff Minister to do outreach to the economically disadvantaged.

A Field in need of the Word

While Christians in joy and in thanksgiving to God seek to reach out with the Gospel there is a natural tendency to do so within one's own socio-economic group. It is not always a WELS Lutheran's first instinct or inclination to evangelize the poor. With so many mission fields around the world crying out for attention from us as a Synod and as individual believers this section of the population of our own nation can go unnoticed. The need was great for a ministry like Project Share.

Scripture tells us that God wishes all people to be saved, even the poor. It also gives us many passages that specifically mention God's concern, physically and spiritually, for the poor. However, the WELS is predominantly a middle-class church body. There is also a growing cultural, economic and educational gap between America's middle-class and lower-class, making it increasingly difficult for our congregations to reach out effectively to the poor. Few of our synod's new mission openings are intentionally targeting the poor. And while the difficulties mentioned are true with the entire lower-class population of America,

they are especially true of those on the lowest rung of the socio-economic ladder – the truly indigent. For this reason, if we wish to follow the Great Commission and reach out to all people without being “Respecters of persons,” WELS congregations will have to intentionally plan, fund, and carry out evangelism efforts among our nation’s poor.¹

These are the words of a man who recognized that there was a gap of sorts in our church body’s approach and scope of outreach. Dr. Glen Thompson served as a Missionary in New York City and as a member of the Synod’s Multi-Cultural Mission Committee. He was especially sensitive to the need for work with the poor and as part of a subcommittee involved with evangelizing the disadvantaged he, “was put in charge to make sure that this work was not forgotten”²

Planning to meet the needs of this Field

Dr. Thompson and the Multi-Cultural Mission Committee sought out ways to fill this gap. As a basic mission statement they stated, “The mission of this committee is to create awareness, acceptance and partnership by the members of the WELS in evangelistic activity among North America’s poor.”³ With their guiding principles the committee showed that they realized how the work in this mission field would be unique in what, humanly speaking, could be expected.

#2 Since it is unrealistic to expect a large number of the economically disadvantaged to be “folded” into normal congregational life, congregational membership and integration will not be used as a measure of effective ministry.

¹ Glen Thompson, *Evangelizing the Poor: A Rationale, Encouragement, and Example*: Unpublished Paper, Hereafter cited as Thompson, *Evangelizing the Poor...*

² Glen Thompson, Telephone interview 4-12-99.

³ Glen Thompson, *Committee for the Evangelism of the Economically Disadvantaged*: 10-26-93.

#3 Since it is unrealistic to expect a large number of economically disadvantaged Christians to become congregational leaders in the traditional sense, this too will not be used as a measure of effective ministry.⁴

They also showed an understanding of how the work in this field would be able to be judged.

#4 The sharing of the Gospel (i.e. presenting Law and Gospel and deepening faith through Bible study) in a meaningful way with a significant number of the unevangelized poor will be the chief measure of effective ministry.

Not only would these evaluations of the ministry be different so also would its approach have to be.

#5 Because of the social barriers separating our congregations from the vast majority of poor Americans, we Christians must cross those barriers and minister to the poor on their own terms and their own "turf."

#6 Care will be taken that the committee's outreach efforts do not demean the poor by an attitude of self-righteous condescension.

The committee and this ministry would always keep the Gospel in its proper place as the center of all the work but at the same time they would not ignore the call to care for other's physical needs as well.

#7 Because the love of Christ also constrains us to alleviate the physical suffering of our fellow human beings, the committee will encourage those involved in its projects to work with the WELS Committee on Relief and other synodical agencies to show the love of Christ also in physical ways within their spheres of influence. The committee thus encourages a holistic approach to outreach wherever possible.

This work would not become just a pet project of one man or one committee. Part of their objective was to raise awareness so that all could have opportunity to be involved in and support the work in this mission field.

⁴ Ibid.

#8 Since the economically disadvantaged make up a significant part of “all nations,” it is not just the calling of an interested few but rather of the Church as a whole to evangelize the poor. Thus the committee will seek support for its work both from interested individuals and groups (through a restricted fund) and from the WELS (through the BHM budget).

With these guiding principles to work with, the committee stated its intentions as to how they would go about putting them into action.

As funding becomes available, the committee would seek to have at least one project from each of the following 2 categories approved and ready to go:

1. Research an existing congregation interested in beginning or increasing its evangelistic outreach to the poor in its community.
2. Research a new area in which evangelism among the poor is especially needed and feasible.⁵

Finding a place to work in this Field

Because of the unique nature of this mission work the committee would make a careful search for an area and a congregation that would fit these needs. Dr. Thompson gives a general description of such a place.

A congregation that will have a successful evangelistic outreach to the poor will have most of these same characteristics:

- it will be located in a central city (25,000+) environment
- it will have a pastoral staff and people dedicated to local outreach
- it will have a deep commitment to ministry in its neighborhood
- it will be willing to face up to racial and socio-economic prejudices and tensions
- it will have a proper understanding of holistic ministry⁶

The committee’s search for an existing congregation in which it could encourage and give direction for outreach to the poor led it to Bay City, Michigan, in general and Trinity Lutheran Church in particular. Trinity is a congregation that numbers approximately 750 communicants, 1050 baptized members, operates a 108 student K-8 school, and a 22 student pre-

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Thompson, *Evangelizing the Poor...*

school. Of course this did not happen by chance. When asked about what made Trinity an attractive place to begin work in this field Dr. Thompson cited Trinity's strong commitment to outreach.⁷ He also expressed other factors that led the committee to Trinity.

The Evangelists—A Congregation with a heart for the Poor

In 1993 the WELS Multicultural Mission Committee (MC2) met with pastors of the Bay City area to discuss an outreach program to the economically disadvantaged in the Bay City area (Pop over 50,000). Trinity Lutheran of Bay City expressed interest in the idea. This congregation had already demonstrated a strong commitment to working among the poorer people of their city. Years earlier they had decided to build their new church in the city rather than moving out of their declining South Side neighborhood. When calling a second pastor, they made the decision to call him specifically as an outreach pastor. The congregation also was active in prison ministry in the county jail as well as showing its concern in other ways. Thus, this new effort was just a logical extension of a mission vision and commitment that was already in place.⁸

Thompson was familiar with Mark Schulz, the pastor called by Trinity to be its Outreach Pastor. He and the Mission Committee recognized Schulz as "a super evangelist" and also saw that this was one of only a few congregations in the Synod to call specifically for this purpose.⁹

Preparing the workers for this Field

The Multi-Cultural Mission Committee and Dr. Thompson had found a field eager for this work. This was something that the Pastoral leaders of Trinity felt could be an attractive possibility to expand the congregations outreach ministry. "First impression to Thompson's proposal was positive. The idea of doing pure outreach without any of the usual concerns about

⁷ Thompson, Telephone interview 4-12-99.

⁸ Thompson, *Evangelizing the Poor...*

⁹ Thompson, Telephone interview 4-12-99.

self-support and making a mission self-sustaining was something we found attractive. We expected others in the area to share the enthusiasm.”¹⁰

As with any aspect of ministry, every first year seminary student has it drilled into his head that nothing is to be done in a hasty, unprepared, or unorganized manner. When introducing the prospect of this ministry at Trinity Lutheran Church the pastors did so simply by first working with its leaders and then making its members aware. This happened throughout 1993 and early in 1994. Pastor Ron Muetzel writes in his annual report of January 16, 1994:

Finally, I would mention a program for Outreach to the Economically Disadvantaged that our Board of Elders has developed and discussed during 1993. A representative of the Synod’s Home Mission Board approached us to determine our congregation’s interest in such a program. The Mission Board has now approved a Pilot Program for our congregation. As it is planned, a full-time worker will be called to serve the work of Outreach to the Economically Disadvantaged. Salary and other costs will be born by the Synod during the first year of the program. Our congregation will gradually pick up the costs in successive years.¹¹

While the prospect of such a mission along with the financial responsibilities it entails might be a cause for concern and apprehension for many, this was, for the most part, not an obstacle for the Trinity.

We simply presented the concept, first to the Board of Elders, then to the Church Council and congregation. Reaction was very positive. Some concerns were expressed about the financing, but there were never any major hurdles to overcome.

You understand, of course, that a lot of unintentional preparation went into this. The ongoing education on the importance of sharing the gospel has prepared the congregation to support all of our outreach efforts. None of this preparation was

¹⁰ Ron Muetzel- Administrative Pastor, Trinity Lutheran Church. Written interview 4-7-99.

¹¹ Ron Muetzel, Annual Report—Administrative Pastor, Trinity Lutheran Church: 1-16-94.

done with Project Share as the intentional outcome, but the ongoing education undergirds all of our outreach efforts.¹²

It was not long before the idea for ministry to the poor in Bay City became one that others in the congregation and area also backed. The congregational secretary's minutes of October 16, 1994 read, "Pastor Muetzel expressed the growing support for the Outreach to the Economically Disadvantaged program. Pastor Schweppe from St. John's and other individuals have expressed their support in the future. MLS has also offered a portion of their chapel offerings to be directed to this fund."¹³

One of the reasons for the support is that Trinity had developed an original plan for this ministry. Their mission statement shows how the Gospel would hold its place at the center while not forgetting other help. "To reach out to the economically disadvantaged in Bay City, Michigan, with the Gospel message of Jesus Christ and to give them direction on how to adequately meet their physical needs."¹⁴ Trinity also started out by recognizing some of the goals that they had for the ministry to the poor. The first would be basically reaching the people of the immediate area with the Gospel message.

1) To canvass depressed areas of Bay City and do follow-up outreach work in those areas

Bay City is a blue-collar, lower middle-class community with a number of older, deterioration neighborhoods. Unemployment runs high. There is racial diversity throughout the community. While there are no "ghetto" areas, there are a number of neighborhoods largely populated by people who are struggling economically and with the other problems of our society. Trinity Lutheran Church is situated in and near several of these neighborhoods.

¹² Muetzel, Written interview 4-7-99.

¹³ Trinity Lutheran Church congregational secretary's minutes: 10-16-94.

¹⁴ Trinity Lutheran Church: *Outreach to Economically Disadvantaged* –detailed information, unpublished 1-23-94.

Trinity Lutheran Church is a congregation with more than a hundred years of history and is located in one of these neighborhoods. The congregation has been very accepting of “different” people and supportive of efforts to reach all people with the Gospel regardless of social status.¹⁵

Another goal was to work at expanding the outreach they were already doing to those who were incarcerated in local jails.

3) To pursue opportunities for ministry at the local correctional facility Bay County Jail has an inmate population of 180. One of Trinity’s pastors has agreed to serve as a chaplain at the institution. Another pastor from St. John, Bay City, assists him. The pastors conduct a service every Sunday afternoon. Attendance runs around 40 (two services of 20 each) A number of guards and jail personnel are members of Trinity and provide additional contacts with inmates.

Another goal of Trinity’s ministry was not just to give people assistance with physical, material help but to teach people how to better manage what they have.

4) To teach financially strapped people how to handle their finances. The congregation’s pastors have developed some basic budgeting materials to provide people with some structure to their financial lives. While this would not be an essential part of the outreach work, providing financial structure has relieved some stress and made it possible for people to listen to the Gospel message. It also demonstrates concern for every aspect of people’s lives.

The work in the Field

Once the Mission Board had gathered start-up money, they encouraged Trinity to proceed with a Call and attempt to bring other congregations on board once the program was underway. Duane Anderson, a licensed architect, accepted Project Share’s Call and began service as a Staff Minister for Evangelism in April of 1995. From the beginning Project Share experienced the blessings that go along with and come from the power of the Word of God. The first few weeks of Anderson’s ministry were packed with activity.

Overall, the past six weeks have been very challenging, and at the same time probably some of the most engaging six weeks of my life! It seems that the Lord

¹⁵ Ibid.

is leading us...(plural, since both Pastors Muetzel and Schulz, as well as other lay leaders in the congregation are providing wonderful encouragement and support!) to meet many unchurched and spiritually searching people.¹⁶

The range of opportunities for Anderson and the rest of those involved with Project Share to present the Gospel to people continued to grow. He began to have twice weekly meetings at the local homeless shelter, named the Cornerstone Mission in which he would conduct a Bible study. Sunday afternoon worship services were held at the Bay County jail. As a number of inmates that were involved with the ministry were about to be released, Project Share sought to establish a half-way house program, where clothing, shelter and job counseling could be provided. An area businessman/woman's group was organized. This group was used to aid those in Project Share to find employment for a number of people with whom they had come into contact with. A slow pitch softball team organized for high school aged youth from Trinity as well as others to give the program another avenue of contact with the community. Anderson also began to work on a prospect list of 163 individuals and families that had visited a worship service at Trinity.

Anderson over time was able to establish and build relationships not only with people in the community but also with those other agencies and groups that worked in and among the same people that Project Share was reaching out to. "Another aspect of this work, is the relationship that we have forged with the homeless shelter in Bay City, know as the Cornerstone Mission. Twice a week I stop off a the shelter in order to informally meet with the residents---usually the director has left me messages as to which residents would like a person to talk with."¹⁷

¹⁶ Duane Anderson, Initial Project Share Report, 6-2-95.

¹⁷ Duane Anderson, Project Share Report, 7-10-95.

One aspect of the work of Project Share that began to show much growth was the ministry to the offenders and ex-offenders that had been contacted through the services at the local correctional facility. Anderson writes of this ministry, "It should be noted that this work has been taking up a significant portion of my time, recently; yet, it appears that there is significant, initial success."¹⁸ By January of 1996 this ministry was in full gear, "I have assumed the responsibility for the counseling work at our County Jail. Presently, our case load exceeds twenty-five. We have decided to see each inmate on an every other week basis."¹⁹

The prison ministry has continued to provide Project Share with opportunities to present God's Word to people in desperate need of this Good News.

Each Sunday afternoon, three worship services are held in the gymnasium at our local Bay County Jail, a facility with 230 beds. Due to security regulations, we are limited to 20 inmates per service. Typically, about 50 to 55 inmates attend each week. During the week, when I make follow-up visits, about 70% of this group are visited. Since the Sunday after Easter, our services are the only ones offered at the jail. Pastor Paul Schweppe (St. Johns, Bay City) and Pastor Mark Schulz (Trinity, Bay City) lead these services.²⁰

Another part of the work of Project Share was to gain the support and activity of other congregations in the Tri-City area. "Our pastors and I meet every month with the two St. John's pastors. Areas of joint work are continuing to grow. Recently, a young mother inquired through Project Share about our school. Since she lives only four blocks from St. Johns, we arranged for Pastor Schweppe to meet with her."²¹

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Duane Anderson, Project Share Report, 1-8-96.

²⁰ Duane Anderson, Project Share Report, 5-31-98.

²¹ Duane Anderson, Project Share Report, 8-12-96.

Throughout his ministry with Project Share, Duane Anderson has learned about working with the disadvantaged and about the joy of sharing the Gospel with them. "Whether there is success or (apparent) failure observed, as one works with troubled people, the real joy is that the 'seed' of God's Word is being shared. It is really not our responsibility to worry about the success or failure issue. Our human nature certainly wants to! But only God gives the increase, and only God knows what is really going on!"²²

The work among the homeless is another area that has given Project Share an opportunity to witness to many.

Reconciliation Homeless Shelter. Each Thursday evening, I travel to Saginaw's northeast side to meet with a unique Bible study group. RCO is a privately operated shelter housing from 25 to 36 men. Usually it is filled to capacity. This work is challenging, while at the same time very fascinating. The shelter's director is supportive of Bible study and encourages participation by the residents. While there is a fairly high level of turnover, there is a core group of five or six who have attended faithfully for a period of almost two years!²³

Although Duane Anderson is the only full time paid staff person of Project Share there are many other involved in this ministry.

There are many people who volunteer time and assistance to Project Share on an intermittent basis. This may be a matter of helping someone move, donating furnishings, providing transportation, and the like.

There are about fifteen people who regularly participate in the work of Project Share. Some correct Bible Studies (240 test and diplomas processed in 1997). Some provide mentoring in the workplace, the support group, and in learning life skills. An attorney provides some donated legal counsel. Some teach Bible studies. Some do visitation. Some provide a music ministry for the worship services.

²² Duane Anderson, Project Share Report, 6-5-97.

²³ Duane Anderson, Project Share Report, 5-31-98.

While most of the volunteers are from Trinity Lutheran Church, five other area WELS congregations are represented in this volunteer corp.²⁴

Project Share has continued to expand its ministry throughout the Tri-City area. The program has gained admission into a number of facilities that serve the economically disadvantaged. These include but are not limited to:

- A weekly Bible Study at a Lutheran Boy's Home (adolescent).
- A weekly devotional service at the Saginaw Correctional Halfway House
- A weekly Bible Study at a Saginaw homeless shelter
- Two weekly worship services at the Bay County Correctional Center
- Every other month seminars at Friendship House (substance abuse resident program)
- A working relationship with Created for Caring (a community assistance program)
- A weekly visitation program at the Bay, Saginaw, Midland County jails²⁵

At the end of 1998 Project Share counted the number of Law-Gospel presentations it had made at more than 260. Other statistics for the year 1998 are:

50 Bible study sessions at the RCO homeless shelter
 48 Bible study sessions at the Bay Co. youth home
 108 services at Bay County Jail averaging 18/service (note only 20 max/service)
 2,380 one-on-one visitations at the Bay Co. Jail
 14 at Midland Co. Jail
 12 at Saginaw Co. Jail
 31 counseling sessions, non-inmate related
 85 people assisted with employment
 17 families assisted to find housing²⁶

Project Share began with special funding from the WELS Home Mission Board (\$90,00 over a three year period: \$45,00 first year, \$30,000 second year, \$15,000 third year). Now that it

²⁴ Ron Muetzel and Duane Anderson, *Synopsis of Project Share*: Unpublished paper, 12-13-98.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Duane Anderson, Project Share Report, 1-1-99

is going into its fifth year that funding is no longer available. Annual expenditures have been in the range of \$50,00 to \$55,000. \$43,000 of the \$56,000 is for salary and benefits for the one paid Staff Minister. Trinity Lutheran Church has contributed about \$14,000 annually to Project Share. Small gifts from area congregations, some generous individual donations, a few start-up grants and matching money (50 cents on the dollar) from WELS Kingdom Workers—National have enabled Project Share to continue. The leaders of Project Share continue to plan and place all things in the hand of the Lord. This allows anyone to have confidence as they look to the future.

We believe the time can come when Project Share will be funded locally. We trust that God can open the eyes and hearts of people in our area to see the wonderful outreach opportunities for Project Share. We think a couple more years of grant funding can allow adequate time for this to happen.

Why hasn't it happened already? We have been slow to act. At Project Share's inception we expected people would just get excited and join in the support. We have only been working to broaden the base of support for about a year and a half. The members of the Board of Central Michigan Kingdom Workers are taking responsibility for the funding. They are working hard to get the word out and to encourage area churches to include Project Share in their budgets. We think it will happen.²⁷

Evaluation of the work and its future

As the leaders of Project Share evaluate how the ministry is progressing and its effectiveness they turn to their original goals and principles.

Normally we see our mission efforts as bearing fruit if we bring into our congregation a substantial number of children and/or adults, and if these new members show their faith by an ongoing involvement in and supporting of the congregation. While these are worthy goals, for a variety of reasons mission work among the poor often does not end in these same results. While thanking God when the above do happen, outreach among the poor is better measured by different criteria: 1) that God's message of salvation is effectively shared with a large number of people; 2) that God's love is also shared physically in ways that support the spiritual message and aid people in becoming productive members of

²⁷ Ron Muetzel and Duane Anderson, *Synopsis of Project Share*: Unpublished paper, 12-13-98.

the church and society; 3) that the Gospel message in word and deed is provided to the poor in the setting most conducive to their situation (usually on their “turf”) while attempting to gradually make them feel comfortable in our more formal congregational settings. If these latter criteria are used, we can certainly call Project Share a success.

It is imperative that the matter of ministry goals is openly and thoroughly discussed at the outset of any outreach to the poor. As will every other type of ministry, it is God-pleasing that efforts to evangelize the poor are properly evaluated to ensure that the church’s resources are being used wisely. If, however, most people in the involved congregations judge outreach primarily by the number of new people in church or an increase in offerings, evangelism among the poor will have little chance of being seen as successful and worth continuing. If, however, the equally scriptural goal of sharing the Gospel in a meaningful way is emphasized, the program will be able to be evaluated much more accurately.²⁸

Project Share will serve as a model for how this kind of ministry can be carried out. As Dr. Thompson put it, “we needed a pilot project to show that it can work, that this is a legitimate ministry that can be done.”²⁹ He calls Project Share, “one proven solution” to the gap in outreach to the poor.

While there are many different ways to evangelize the poor of our land... (there is one) evangelism project that has a proven track record in our circles—Project Share in Bay City MI. This project has touched the lives of many of the area’s poor during the past four years, has allowed local WELS members to share God’s Law and Gospel with several thousand people, and has brought joy and blessings to the local congregations involved. While Project Share has been shaped by local circumstances and conditions, its basic Principles and methods could be adapted and replicated in other areas of the country.³⁰

Project Share has indeed given many Christians the opportunity to witness with the Gospel of Jesus Christ to hundreds of people who, humanly speaking, otherwise may have never come into contact with God’s Word. It has also given those same Christians the opportunity to

²⁸ Thompson, *Evangelizing the Poor...*

²⁹ Thompson, Telephone interview, 4-12-99.

show their love for their Savior by caring for the earthy physical needs of others, letting the love of Christ be shown by the lives they live. Project Share has given an excellent example of how a ministry to the poor can be conducted. Dr. Thompson gives a final encouragement for those who seek to follow in the way of Project Share.

While ministry to the poor seems to some people to be a “black hole” absorbing endless time, efforts and funds, it is a Scriptural ministry. The poor are a part of mankind, and Christ wants all mankind to hear his message and come to faith. If stewardship becomes an issue, remember Jesus’ call to stewardship in his discussion with the Pharisees: “But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.” (Luke 14:13-14). And remember the words Jesus promised to speak on judgment day: “Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.” (Matt. 25:40) Your evangelistic outreach to the poor will carry the seal of approval of the Savior himself.³¹

May this seal of approval continue to be found on Project Share, as it continues its Christ-centered ministry to the Tri-Cities.

³⁰ Thompson, *Evangelizing the Poor...*

³¹ Thompson, *Evangelizing the Poor...*

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