

IDAHO'S BURIED TREASURE

A History of Hope of the Valley Lutheran Church,
Pocatello, Idaho

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June, 1985

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Idaho is called the Gem State because of its rich sources of silver, gold and other minerals. Such treasures are always buried beneath the surface, hidden from the eye, and must be dug up to be seen. Hope of the Valley Lutheran church of Pocatello, Idaho can also be called a buried treasure. For one thing, it is not visible, it no longer exists; there is not even a telephone number in the yellow pages to identify it. But Hope of the Valley is a treasure also because of its great value - for over seven years it was a body of Christians who gathered to hear the Word of God and receive the sacraments, and a body of believers who shared God's Word with others in southeastern Idaho. What follows is the history of Idaho's buried treasure.

To understand the history of Hope of the Valley one must first get to know the state of Idaho. To many this is the picture of Idaho: Sawtooth mountains, lonely ranchers, wealthy potato farmers, wilderness; if you're really up on geography you might also know Idaho is the home state of Hall of Famer Harmon Killebrew, Sun Valley and Hell's Canyon.

But one very important factor of Idaho which is little known is the state's lack of cohesiveness. Idaho is really three states. Southeastern Idaho is kin to Salt Lake City and Mormonism; the northern panhandle of Idaho aligns itself to Seattle and are

Seahawk fans; only central Idaho near Boise has any real self-identity and exists on its own merits.

This idea of being scattered and pulled in different directions is the most striking characteristic of the history of Hope of the Valley. Not three, but actually four different entities existed. There was central headquarters in Pocatello; to the south was the mineral enriched area of Soda Springs; to the north was the nuclear research location of Idaho Falls; and to the west lay the farming communities of Burley and Hazelton. The most important aspect of Hope of the Valley's history lay in the geography of the land - the many miles which separated the members and the many different communities the people lived in.

July and August of 1977 mark the official beginnings of the Pocatello church. On July 17, Pastor Gordon Peters, fresh out of the Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, was installed as first pastor. Three Sundays later, on August 7, the people organized as a congregation. When Rev. Peters moved west, there to welcome him was Idaho's second largest city. Situated along the Portneuf River, Pocatello had the nickname "Gateway to the Northwest". Just about every city west of the Mississippi has used that title at one time or other and like the other cities the name was a misnomer.

Pocatello is not a northwest city but a Rocky Mountain community all the way. The climate is dry; the countryside to the east is mountains and to the west is wasteland, and it contained in 1977 about 36,000 who

worshipped the great outdoors with its trout streams, ski slopes and plenty game for hunting.

The well-traveled roads from Pocky did not lead northwest, but south to Zion to the land of the chosen. In the 70's over 65% of the residents of Pocatello were Mormon.¹ Although Idaho Falls to the north boasted of a Mormon temple, Pocatello with its Satterfields, Smiths, Hansens and Hymases clearly was a beehive haven.

With 35 members present, Rev. Peters arrived in Pocatello with a solid nucleus of Wisconsin Synod members to work with. What had happened previous to Peters' coming? When the Ken Walters family moved from Milwaukee to Pocatello in February of 1975, they and a few other families began to worship through taped services. Then later that year the group was regularly served by either pastors Ron Mehlberg from Nampa, Idaho or William Gochring from Salt Lake City (both distances of over 200 miles).

At first services were held in the Walters' home on Monday evenings every three months. Rev. Mehlberg writes of these early days in a letter to the congregation dated December 1976. "Work began with quarterly trips to Burley, Pocatello and Soda Springs areas to administer communion to our people... Last November it became obvious to our Synod that there was a nucleus forming from which a congregation might begin."

¹Johnson, Douglas, Churches and Church Membership in the U.S.A. (Glenway Research Center, Wash. D.C.) p.51

When the Wisconsin Synod's General Board for Home Missions granted exploratory status in November of 1976, pastors Mehlberg and Goehring traded off trips to Pocatello. Beginning in December, 1976 services were held in the basement of Grace Lutheran School (Missouri Synod). This remained the basic worship facility for the duration of the church's history.

The next steps affecting the formation of a Pocatello WELS church came following a meeting of the local Lutherans with Pacific Northwest District Mission Board chairman, Rev. Ralph Baur. Mission status was soon granted and in May of 1977 a candidate from Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary was assigned.

Optimism was the theme of the day when Pastor Peters came to Pocky in July. He had a rather large group to serve, numbering 35. The future looked bright, not only for the church but also for the city of Pocatello. Oil booms were occurring in neighboring southwestern Wyoming cities like Rock Springs, Kemmerer and Evanston. There was talk that Pocatello would soon get caught up in the oil boom and grow.

More certain evidence for the expected growth of Pocky was from the fact that Bucyrus-Erie had decided to locate there. An impact study done for the city of Pocatello by Don Reading and Bob Johnston regarding the arrival of B-E to Pocatello offered impressive projections. This 1974 study projected B-E would hire

3200 employees which would eventually raise the city's population to 70,000 by 1977 and 75,000 by 1978. Dwelling units were expected to grow from 17,333 of 1974 to 26,512 by 1978.²

Certainly an influx of new labor in Pocatello spelled optimism for the new WELS mission. There were only three other Lutheran churches in Pocatello at the time - Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd (LCA), Faith (Mo.) and Grace (Mo.).

Good news could also be traced to the Wisconsin Synod's GBHM headquarters in Milwaukee. In the mid-70s, WELS was expanding rapidly with new missions; in 1977 22 new missions were opened. Surely the time seemed right for a mission in Pocatello.

August 7, 1977 was a historic date for Lutheranism in Idaho when the WELS members of southeastern Idaho organized as a church, calling itself Shepherd of the Valley and ratifying a constitution and by-laws. Elected as the church's first officers were Robert Holzworth, president; Ken Walters, secretary; Holzworth, financial secretary; Marc Falk, treasurer; Emanuel Maier, Ken Stohlman and Falk as trustees; and Dennis Maier, Walters and Holzworth as elders.

Information from church bulletins shows the average attendance in August to be 40. Statistics for all of 1977 indicate average worship attendance to be 32. Overall, the 1977 membership was 51 of which 26 were

²Reading, Don, Johnston, Bob, 1974 Impact Study (Idaho State University, Documents Dept.)

communicants. Two other noteworthy events of 1977 were the formation of a Sunday School in ~~September~~ - with a very high attendance of 13! - and the changing of the church's name. The new name given was Hope of the Valley, to avoid confusion with the LCA church.

In the coming years the church grew much like a version of a country square dance - two steps forward and one backward. Families would transfer in, families would transfer out. Both of the first two presidents, Holzworth and Marry Olsen, were gone shortly after being elected. Despite the fluctuation in membership personnel, the membership total remained fairly constant from 1979-1982. The numbers were 48 in 1979 and 57 in 1982.

Keep in mind the key to understanding the history of Hope of the Valley is the geography, the great distances which separated the people. Of the 19 families listed in the 1979 membership roster, only eight were from the immediate Pocatello area. One group of members lived 50-75 miles south of Poky in Soda Springs and Montpelier. Another group lived north of Poky, 55 miles away in Idaho Falls and even further in Rigby. A third group lived far west, in Burley and Hazelton, 75-80 miles away. As varied as the places of residence were, so were the occupations of the members: factory workers, mechanics, journalists, truck drivers, farmers, teachers, accountants, ~~and~~ a nurse.

Permission for land search was granted in March, 1978.

From a newspaper story in the local Idaho State Journal, Pastor Peters stated the church's goal was to have a permanent church site by 1980. Following a visit by GBHM executive secretary Norm Berg in November, 1978, land was then acquired about a year later, in October, 1979. The site was a 1.2 acre parcel of land on Butte St. in the northeastern sector of Pocatello, near Highland High School and the county rodeo grounds.

The congregation soon took on the character of a well-organized body. Two children were confirmed in 1979, three children in 1980, and two in 1982. Adult confirmations in the same period were three in 1981 and one in 1982. In addition to catechism classes, Hope of the Valley also offered Sunday School classes, Bible classes, a Hope Society for the women of the church, and an evangelism committee. Canvasses were conducted, pamphlets for Sunday School were distributed, annual church picnics were held, Christmas Eve services were offered - all reminiscent of a well-run established church.

Yet in many ways, Hope of the Valley was different. It took on the personality of Idaho itself, expansive, big, and independent. With members scattered in all directions, one can imagine the pastor called to serve would need to do much traveling. In this area, Hope of the Valley was extremely blessed by God. Not only did Pastor Peters enjoy traveling, not only was he, for example, not afraid to fly, not only was he himself able to fly, but in fact he owned his ~~own~~ airplane.

Peters' flying ministry was a necessity to serve the people of Hope of the Valley. In order to conduct confirmation classes there was a time when he would fly his Piper Chessna to Soda Springs, pick up a student there, then fly to Burley's airport to hold classes in that area.

For a stewardship every-home-visit campaign conducted in 1980 Rev. Peters flew the committeemen to the Burley area for the meetings. The airplane proved useful in the later years of the church when services were held once a month in such outlying areas as Hazelton, Soda Springs and Idaho Falls. Rev. Peters estimated he flew about 12,000 miles a year while serving Hope of the Valley.

Another air ministry which was developed by Rev. Peters was confined to one location, yet reached more people - radio ministry. "Second Thoughts" was the name of the brief radio message developed by Peters. Beginning in 1978, two of the one-minute radio spots could be heard weekly on station KSEI of Pocatello.

Despite its isolation from other WELS churches, Hope of the Valley had a unique opportunity each year to fellowship with fellow Lutherans. Every June a camp retreat was held in the Stanley Basin area of the Sawtooth Mountains with Lutherans from the Nampa church and the congregation of Salt Lake City invited. The retreat was held in June at the camp which was operated by the Missouri Synod. Fishing, hiking,

outdoor services, Bible topics, and general "rough-it" living ware offered those who participated. One year the campers were treated to a talk by missionary Thompson, who at the time was on furlough from Africa.

The concept of starting three preaching stations was put together in 1981 to offer more worship opportunities for members living in outlying areas, and also to give those members opportunities to invite their friends and prospects to a service. Economic limits had prohibited several families from attending services in Pocatello more than twice a month. This applied particularly to families in the three preaching station regions, Soda Springs, Burley and Idaho Falls.

Unfortunately, not all the goals of the preaching station concept were reached. Only rarely would a prospect attend a service in the outlying areas and in some cases the special services led to families driving to Pocatello even less than before.

Everything seemed to be going well for Hope of the Valley but by human standards things were not. Although on paper 1982 appeared to be a good year of growth with five adult confirmations and an average Sunday School attendance of 10, the average worship attendance was only 24. Growth was clearly slow. Growing faster were doubts whether the Poky mission could survive the Synod's budget cutting axe.

Concern over the future of the mission was expressed by District Mission Board chairman Arthur Volario in

a letter dated August 31, 1982: "We have had to deal with the possibility of withdrawal of mission status/ and/or subsidy for quite some time." The District remained supportive of the Pocatello mission, requesting in a September meeting with the GBHM that planning authority and funds be granted Hope of the Valley and the status and subsidy continue.

This quote from Proceedings, 33rd Biennial Convention, Pacific Northwest District, 1982, offers insight into the status of the Pocatello mission at that time:

"This station under Pastor Peters remains under the close scrutiny of the GBHM. The district board has been asked by the GBHM to take another hard look at this field and seriously consider the withdrawal of mission status and subsidy from this station and report back in fall."

In October, 1982, Hope of the Valley learned from the GBHM that the request for planning authority had been deferred until the GBHM's next meeting in February, 1983. That February 7 meeting of the GBHM dealt a serious blow to the operation of the Foky church. Mission status and manpower had been withdrawn.

Pastor Volario wrote the following to Pastor Peters: "Very little was granted by the GBHM this time. There were about 12 manpower requests, 2 were granted and both to the S.A. District."

With subsidy cut off it was a matter of time before

Pastor Peters would be issued a call to serve elsewhere. It was now up to the people of Hope of the Valley whether to continue as a preaching station or not. The decision of the May 15, 1983 meeting was to continue having services with a vacancy pastor (Pastor Peters was soon to be on his way to Bend, Ore., where he was installed June 19.) Services were to be held once a month at the Grace School basement.

By this time church attendance had dropped considerably. For example, on March 6, 1983 there were 18 in attendance in Pocatello and 6 at the service in Idaho Falls. Two families in Hazelton had recently returned to their former Missouri Synod church; a family in American Falls had dropped membership; a member from Burley had moved to Wisconsin.

Before Pastor Peters left for Bend, Ore., the church learned from the District Mission Board of the decision to continue sending once a month a pastor to serve in a communion service. The pastors mentioned were Volario, Goehring, and John Henning of Kent, Wa. The DMB at that time also mentioned setting up video tape services.

A factor which led to the eventual disbanding of Hope of the Valley came from the business world. In May, 1983, Bucyrus-Erie announced it was shutting down its plant in Pocatello. This stunning announcement led to layoffs as early as June of that year.

Between May and August of 1983 two more families had left the church in Poky; the Walters family moved back to Wisconsin shortly after B-E's closing; another

family joined a local Missouri Synod church.

Of the remaining members the majority were from the Idaho Falls area so services were begun there instead of Pocatello. Video services were conducted in Idaho Falls but when even more families moved out of the area these services ended and soon the church disbanded, this occurring in 1984.

Final statistical summaries for Hope of the Valley found there to be 15 baptisms in its history, 18 confirmations, 0 burials and one marriage.

Why did Hope of the Valley fail to continue as a mission church in southeastern Idaho? One can certainly respond that God in His wisdom did not want a church of the Wisconsin Synod in Pocatello at that particular time. But from a human standpoint, several factors should be considered.

One point is that Pocatello never grew as expected. Bucyrus-Erie failed to live up to its projected growth. While it expected to eventually hire 3400 employees, it never hired more than 1700, half of its projection. Not surprisingly Pocatello as a city never met its goals of growth. Not 70,000 or 75,000 but only 46,000 now live in the gateway to the northwest. When B-E pulled out there went with it a vital organ for the city and for the Pocatello church.

The high percentage of Mormons in Pocatello was a factor. Mormons, even Jack Mormons who are LDS only by membership, are so caught up in the social activ-

ities of their church that they are apathetic to doctrinal discussions. The LDS live in a world of their own and are difficult to reach with the Word.

The key factor, however, in the fate of the church was the great distances between the people. Members would be able to drive 80 miles to church, attend Bible class and meetings, but were usually unable to remain to do any canvassing in the community. The burden for outreach then fell on a few who lived in Pocatello.

The distances from one another had led to the preaching station concept to serve the outlying members but hindsight shows this idea may have backfired. Valuable time for Pastor Peters to work among the residents of Pocatello was lost in serving the members of distant communities.

The lack of cohesiveness simply prevented Hope of the Valley from directing its focus of time and energy solely on Pocatello as a mission field. And yet that was the key goal all along, to develop a mission field in Pocatello. From the GBIM's point of view Hope of the Valley was closed because Pocatello failed to produce enough new members. All the new members from Burley, Idaho Falls, or Soda Springs would never have been enough to keep a church going in Pocatello.

As the congregation's history drew to a close, it became more obvious that the greater number of prospects appeared to be in the Idaho Falls area.

That is where the final services were held after interest in Pocatello declined.

Today the remnants of Hope of the Valley are few. The physical remnants - hymnals, candles, duplicating machine - are located in a shed near a chicken coop in Kirie, Idaho. The people of the WELS in the area are a handful.

Hope of the Valley is buried but buried as a treasure with great value to those who gathered for worship, for the sacraments, for growth in the Christian faith. So long as Mormonism predominates, southeastern Idaho will remain an important mission field within our country. Possibly, Hope of the Valley will some day be resurrected.

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