

THE NORTHLAND LUTHERAN HIGH SCHOOL ASSOCIATION:  
MERRILL AND THE MOVE

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### Preface

By God's grace and under his guidance Northland Lutheran High School continues to operate. That is a significant statement because this paper does not intend to eulogize a Lutheran high school that once was. At the same time, however, if someone were to ask, "Isn't there a Lutheran high school in Merrill, Wisconsin?," the answer would be "No. Merrill used to have a Lutheran high school, but that school no longer exists in Merrill. It moved to Wausau." The Merrill years are history. The buildings are gone; the campus was sold; most of the faculty has moved south to the Wausau area. A clearly defined era of this high school's existence has passed.

The author has a special interest in this particular span of Northland's history. I was called by the association to serve as an emergency instructor for the 1986-87 school year--the final year of the school's operation in Merrill. I personally experienced the joys and disappointments, the challenge and struggle, the march of faith and the uncertainty that have marked Northland's story from the outset. Much of the history I already knew...from every angle that the stories can be told. But I wanted to review the objective account. For this reason most of the information for this report was taken from the letters, minutes of board and delegate meetings, annual reports and newspaper clippings which have been meticulously filed to tell the complete "Northland story." This paper does not propose to be a comprehensive documentary, but to highlight the significant events which have

surrounded the birth, growth, and "rebirth," if you will, of this young Lutheran high school.

Someone may still wonder how this can be an appropriate subject for an original bit of church history research. Can the story of Northland, a school begun in 1979, be considered "history"? How does a compilation of the key decisions of an area Lutheran high school association expand the sphere of church history knowledge? My answer would begin by advancing the belief that much of church history is the story of Christian education. In real terms, the operation of Northland Lutheran High School had a large impact on the life, thought and function of the churches of north-central Wisconsin. And it still does. Secondly, as we have outlined above, there is definite era of "Northland Past." Indeed, we may be too close to the events to make historical judgments about them, but it is not too soon to gather and review the information. Finally, Northland was born during a synodical "boom time." The Prairie du Chien campus of Martin Luther Preparatory School also opened its doors in 1979. And nine other area Lutheran high schools were begun in the last half of the 1970's; four of them in 1979.<sup>1</sup> Change and expansion were visibly apparent. Spirits were high. But difficult economic times loomed on the near horizon--for churches and synod alike. NLHS might well be viewed as a product and paradigm of this time. In this respect the survey of Northland's history may also be a profitable resource for other area Lutheran high school ventures. There is, I think, much to learn from the Northland story. Maybe this review will serve to illustrate how church history is not an unimportant catalog of facts, but a tool to educate for the future work of God's church.

A note about the scope of the paper: Many people and names are associated with the Northland project--board members, delegates, strong supporters, faculty. Northland is, after all, an association of Christian people. However, since the intent of this paper to bring together the important decisions which have molded Northland's history, the mention of specific names will be limited.

### Initial Interest

The Northland narrative really begins as a tale of two cities: Wausau and Rhinelander. Wausau is a north-central Wisconsin city which has a metro population of about 39,000<sup>2</sup> and four Wisconsin Synod churches in the immediate area. Rhinelander, about 55 miles north of Wausau, is a smaller city located in the heart of the logging and resort region of northern Wisconsin. There is one large WELS congregation within the city of Rhinelander. According to the 1976 Synod Statistical Report, Zion congregation had 1620 baptized members, 1205 communicants and a grade school of 165 children.<sup>3</sup> A number of smaller towns and WELS congregations dot the countryside around and between these two cities, but, quite naturally, the Wausau and Rhinelander churches became the rallying points for the area Lutheran high school movement in northern Wisconsin.

Although no plans were drawn up or association formed, it was actually Wausau which took the first formal step toward the goal of secondary education in northern Wisconsin. Discussions and a feasibility study were conducted in the Wausau area in 1973. At that time it was determined that there was not enough support among the members of the congregations to undertake an area high school project.

The idea was briefly laid to rest until the Rhinelander Pastor-Teacher Conference of January 10, 1975. At this Eagle River conference, Pastor David Kock of Zion, Rhinelander, informed those present that the old Rhinelander High School building was being sold. This opportunity for a facility revived area high school interest. It brought discussion of Lutheran secondary education out from the kitchen table into a public forum. As a result of Pastor Kock's announcement and the ensuing discussion, a committee was formed (chaired by Pastor Kock) to investigate and review the possibilities for the formation of an area Lutheran high school association.

Interest in what had been only a dream in the minds of some generated slowly but steadily. By May an "official" meeting of concerned members became a reality. They proposed a survey of the area. The committee decided to conduct a feasibility study in the Rhinelander Conference following a format similar to the Wausau questionnaire. This would facilitate a comparison of results from the two areas. The questionnaire was distributed in June of 1975 and tabulated early that fall. The study showed that there was a groundswell of support, but not enough to seriously consider opening a high school immediately.

The strong supporters of this venture did not want the interest to wane. During a November meeting, the decision was made to form an organization of concerned individuals who would continue to search out possibilities and keep public interest for Lutheran secondary education in the forefront of the minds of WELS members throughout northern Wisconsin. This loose association met again on February 8, 1976, in order to structure themselves. A news bulletin was released to area congregations following that meeting which read:

An association for secondary education has been formed in the Rhinelander area. Mr. Robert Otterstatter of Eagle River has been elected President, Mr. Ed Zastrow of Rhinelander as Vice-President, Mr. Anton Marheine of Tomahawk as Treasurer, and Mr. Willis Loeck of Rhinelander as Secretary.

We would appreciate your help in announcing that an association for the advancement of Christian education on the secondary level will meet at Zion Lutheran Church in Rhinelander on March 21, at 7:00 P.M. Waldemar Voigt who was active in the starting of the Kettle Moraine High School will speak. The possibility of starting a 9th grade in the 1977-1978 school year will be discussed.

That small bit of information contains a couple of telling observations. It is evident that there was a very enthusiastic core who felt that this association should not get bogged down in mere discussion but take some positive action. It is also apparent that the Rhinelander area took the lead in formalizing an association for Lutheran secondary education. This is not to suggest that no Wausau-area pastors or members were involved; there were a number of interested parties from that vicinity, but Rhinelander had become the center of focus and operations for the fledgling association.

Fifty-eight people turned out for the announced March meeting. With energy for the high school project gaining momentum, the next step of incorporation was discussed, as well as possible names for the association (a motion which was ultimately tabled, although North Central Association for Christian Education and Northwoods Lutheran High School--WELS were the frontrunners). A motion was also passed to "approach Zion Lutheran Church of Rhinelander for permission to use available facilities for a ninth grade this fall 1976 or, if impossible, by the fall of 1977."

By June of 1976 the Northland Lutheran High School Association (the name which finally won out) was legally incorporated. About 130 (or 150, depending on what source of information is consulted) individuals

from the Rhinelander and Wausau vicinities joined in this enterprise. It now became the task of this organization to adopt by-laws and increase membership. Northland's by-laws were modeled after those of Winnebago Lutheran Academy and passed at a fall meeting. The legal address for the NLHS Association was given as 19 W. Frederick Street, Rhinelander, WI. The enterprise was now a structured organization, governed by a constitution and an executive board. On the heels of that structure came the inevitable press for positive action toward the realization of the vision that had brought the association together in the bonds of Christian faith.

#### The Planning Phase

The surge of excitement at the incorporation of Northland seemed to mellow slightly at the close of 1976 and the beginning of 1977. The big plans remained; regular elections to various committees were held at the annual meeting in February, but prudence prevailed over any hasty decisions to start high school operations immediately. A couple of paragraphs from a letter dated April 20, 1977, inviting Dr. James Raabe, the principal of Luther High School in Onalaska, WI, to speak at an association meeting capture the sense of the Northland situation at this important juncture. A Northland representative wrote:

We are presently of an opinion that we must in the near future make a move to show that we are more than a talking group. This move would seem to be to call an administrator to develop the interest, give the program visibility through the talks to whomever will invite and listen, and, as soon as feasible, develop a curriculum and organize the program to actually start the high school.

At the present it is possible that many are lukewarm to the idea or to the possibility of establishing such a program in the area in view of the limited student potential and to the communicant base. Our goal is to enlist enough members in our association to support

this called man through a period of extensive calling, talking, surveying, and evaluating all material gleaned. At the conclusion of a year or so of this work we then feel we would be in a good position to realistically view the potential and say we move forward, or the Lord does not wish us to carry this idea further.

Throughout the summer months the board continued to consider the recommendation that a full or part-time man engineer promotion of the area Lutheran high school idea. For counsel in this endeavor the association sought the advice of Donald Zimmerman, the Executive Secretary for the Board for Parish Education of the WELS. Mr. Zimmerman introduced the board to the "Planning for Lutheran High Schools" analysis instrument at their July gathering. The board followed his suggestion to propose to the association members that it would be advisable to proceed first with planning by a structured survey rather than hire a full-time project director. Through Mr. Zimmerman's office Northland engaged the consultant services of Rev. Wayne Borgwardt, who was principal of Fox Valley Lutheran High School, Appleton, WI. Rev. Borgwardt would be an able consultant since he had firsthand knowledge of the operation of an area Lutheran high school. He met initially with the board members and then presented and explained the specifics of the planning tool to the organized delegates during a late August meeting in Wausau. After his report the voters rescinded the motion to call a project director and passed a new motion to enter into the "Planning for a Lutheran High School" program. Pastor Borgwardt agreed to be the advisor to the NLHSA for the duration of the program. Expenses for his services were estimated at \$2000, far less than the \$17,000 figured for a full-time association coordinator. Immediately, six Steering Committees -- Organizational Planning, Enrollment Planning, Financial Planning, Site Planning, Instructional Planning and Membership Drive --



were formed according to the prescribed structure. Each committee was assigned its own homework--survey, analyze the findings and make proposals. Rev. Borgwardt emphasized at the outset that this program was not designed to "make a decision to start or not to start" a high school, but only to "give sound advice so that a well-planned self-supporting high school" could be started. Nevertheless, with the adoption of this planning tool, the fact that this region would soon support a Lutheran high school began to seem inevitable.

Each committee proceeded headlong into the survey phase of its work. Detailed statistics were gathered, and permission was asked of the area congregations to allow a survey of its members concerning support of a high school venture. The association needed to know with what kind of base they were working. Compiled area statistics at the end of 1977 were published as follows:

Rhineland Conference:	8 Pastors
	14 Congregations
	3124 Communicants
	4075 Baptized
	3 Lutheran Day Schools (WELS)

Wausau Area (Extended):	16 Pastors
	23 Congregations
	6066 Communicants
	8138 Baptized
	3 Lutheran Day Schools (WELS)

It seems only obvious to admit that not all 37 congregations included were considered candidates for strong support. This initial target area was considerably widespread. But that was the nature of this region, and any association would have to be mindful of that particular challenge toward uniting in a common interest. 78% of the congregations contacted (86% of the communicant membership in the two areas) voted approval of the survey. Some denied the request because of

distance, others felt it necessary only to supply statistical information since they too were on the fringes of the target area.

Perhaps the most significant numbers graphed were the figures for WELS student population in kindergarten through eighth grade. These, after all, were the projections for the future. The first through eighth grade statistics (the kindergarten number was considerably lower) ranged from a high of 221 to a low of 180 with an average of 192.

Interestingly enough, although Rhinelander was the largest church and operated the largest grade school in either area, a separate graphing of the statistics divided roughly one-third, two-thirds for the Rhinelander and Wausau areas respectively.

With this first phase of the planning also came something of a media blitz. A couple of newspaper articles spread the word about Northland's activities. The proposals for a Lutheran high school became matters of public interest and awareness. Pastor Ralph Jones of Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church, town of Berlin (ten miles southwest of Merrill), explained, "People talk about offering the three R's in high school: reading, writing and arithmetic. Well, we are offering the fourth R that the public schools don't, religion." This was the same message that was broadcast to area congregations by way of the first issue of the NLHSA Update, March 1978. The newsletter was designed to keep congregational members mindful of Northland's cause and progress. One of the articles catches the spirit of the time into which Northland was born when it says: "Lutheran schools in our Synod are flourishing. It is particularly true of Lutheran high schools. Many areas are currently studying the possibility of having a Lutheran High School for their young people....It is our fervent prayer that the Lord would look

with favor on our endeavors, so that our young people might receive the benefits of a Christian education on the high school level."

We arrive, finally, at the extremely important subject of a school site. Where will Northland be located? The Site Planning Committee had quite a number of questions with which to wrestle. Do they locate centrally according to geographics or demographics? Would it be wiser to plant a school in either Rhinelander or Wausau, where there were Christian grade schools which could serve as primary feeder schools? Should the association pursue renting (leasing) an existing building or buying property? What type of facilities are available? What about transportation?

The Site Planning Committee presented its findings to the association after the survey phase. Their spring of 1978 report read:

After investigating numerous sites in Gleason, Merrill, Rhinelander, Tomahawk, and Wausau areas, the following are potential sites for the first year's operation of the high school. Although the possibility of using these sites is not definite as yet in every case, they do show promise:

- Menard Jr. College -- Merrill (available in 1980)
- St. Mark's School (Mo. Synod) -- Wausau (partial use of school building)
- Salem Church (WELS) -- Wausau

Sites that may become available within the next one to three years:

- Old Jr. High Building -- Rhinelander
- Curain School -- Rhinelander
- McCord School -- Rhinelander
- Pelican School -- Rhinelander
- Horace Mann School -- Wausau

Also included in their report was a breakdown of land costs in the areas cited as possible locations.

Rhinelander and Wausau locations both continued to present real options for the school. The underlying reason for this was a deep desire to capture the sense of enthusiasm for an area high school which existed in the grade schools by proceeding as soon as possible. There

was even a proposal made in April of 1978 to begin the school with a 9th grade class held independently both at Zion, Rhinelander, and Our Savior's, Wausau, and then bring them together at an area high school for 10th grade. But that proposal itself suggests that centrality was a foremost consideration from the beginning. An "Answer to Our Questions" memo that appeared even before formal planning was undertaken simply explained: "HAS THE LOCATION FOR THE SCHOOL BEEN CHOSEN? Not at all. It will be built where the most interest for a high school exists. Hopefully, the school will be centrally located so all our area churches can make use of it."

Enter Merrill. Even though there were no WELS churches within the city limits of Merrill, this city of about 10,000 became a leading candidate because it seemed to be the best compromise between centrality (although the location favored Wausau slightly) and transportation accessibility. The concensus opinion of the Site Planning Committee favored Merrill. And Merrill was the geographic center of what was considered a 50-mile target radius of WELS congregations. Admittedly, the site options in Merrill were limited, but a north/south compromise seemed necessary to retain the ardor of both poles.

#### An Administrator

The Survey Phase was completed by the summer of 1978. Confident that much of the groundwork pointed up a positive response to the high school idea, the June 11 meeting of the association approved a major move forward. At the same time they entered the Planning Phase, they made the decision to call a full-time administrator. The association obtained a call list from Pres. Carl Voss of the Northern Wisconsin

District, and called Prof. Curtless Franzmann from Michigan Lutheran High School in August. The call contained this job description:

First, promote the school in the minds of the pastors and congregations of the area. Secondly, secure enrollment for the first class to be instructed in the school. Thirdly, assist the various committees in the development of a sound spiritual, intellectual, and financial basis for the new school. Finally, organize the program, secure the materials, and make necessary arrangement for the opening of school in September of 1979.

In regard to the site, the call mentioned that the "Merrill area presently is the center of interest and is the current site of our planning."

Prof. Franzmann declined the call. On October 8, 1978, the association voted to issue a call to John R. Schultz, who was presently serving as the principal of a grade school in Lake Mills, WI. Teacher Schultz accepted the call--and the accompanying challenge. The association spelled out its vision for a school opening in less than a year after his arrival. Furthermore, the call suggests that much of the burden for coordinating the financial structure would fall on his organizational skills. In reality Northland did not have much more than a couple of thousand dollars in the association coffers at the time he accepted the call.

Mr. Schultz was installed as Northland's administrator at Trinity, town of Berlin, on December 3, 1978. He set up his "headquarters" in Merrill, and immediately began to visit association members and area congregations with the goal of concentrating Northland into an association of congregations. He told the "Northland story" -- that Christian secondary education helps to equip the church of tomorrow with dedicated workers for God's kingdom. In a personal interview, Mr. Schultz recalled being impressed by the prevailing "missionary spirit;"

he simply called those initial months of work "fun." He was working with individuals whose excitement was peaking at the prospect of realizing their dream of a high school. In fact, enthusiasm ran so high at times, especially among the young and idealistic pastors, that Mr. Schultz confessed that he found himself having to "reign them in once in a while" to keep them focused.

### Determined Decisions

After two months of fruitful labor, Administrator Schultz brought the encouraging news to the board that eleven congregations had voted to join the association. This amounted to approximately 3,500 communicants who pledged \$22,590 for the year. This council also moved to locate a rental facility in Merrill, or to purchase land for the long-range plan and equip it with temporary buildings as a short-range solution. To further their forward resolve the board moved to present the following items at the upcoming association meeting:

- I. A. Resolve that NLHSA open a Lutheran High School in the Merrill area, beginning in the 1979-80 school year with a freshman class.  
B. Resolve that a sophomore class be started also, providing that there is a minimum of 10 sophomore students.
- II. Resolve that the representatives of the congregations which voted to join the NLHSA convene on March 25th for the purpose of organizing.
- III. Resolve that the expired terms of the existing executive board be extended to March 25, 1979.
- IV. Resolve that the legal address of NLHSA be changed from 19 W. Frederich Street, Rhinelander, WI 54501, to 903 Adams Street, Merrill, WI 54452.

The resolutions all passed at the February 11, 1979 association meeting, with the small change that the dates in resolutions II and III both read April 1, 1979. Resolution I.A was adopted by a 49 - 0 vote! Northland was now officially linked to Merrill.

Northland now faced the enormous task of reworking its organization from an association of individuals to an association of congregations, along with making a multitude of decisions which accompanied the resolutions to open a school. The original eleven associated congregations were:

<u>Congregations</u>	<u>Comm.</u>	<u>Pastors</u>	<u>Male Teach.</u>	<u>Del.</u>
St. John, Enterprise	140	1	0	2
Zion, Rhinelander	1201	1	3	7
Grace, Mosinee	93	1/2	0	2
St. Paul, Stratford	84	1/2	0	2
Grace, Ringle	180	1	0	2
Redeemer, Schofield	219	1	0	2
Salem, Wausau	401	1	0	3
Our Savior, Wausau	583	1	2	3
St. Paul, Hamburg	231	1	0	2
Trinity, Berlin	342	1	0	2
St. Andrew, Goodrich	147	1	0	2
<u>Totals</u>	<u>3621</u>	<u>10</u>	<u>5</u>	<u>29</u>

Among the critical decisions that had to be made were the selection of a school site in Merrill and an accompanying financing package, as well as the calling of additional teachers. Since no rental facility was available, the decision was made to purchase land and relocatable classrooms.

Initially the association secured an option on 40 acres of land near the town of Scott on Business Highway 51, but the land did not pass the required percolation test. Even if it had, the association would have faced difficulty: the request for a rezoning of the land was denied. Since it was already June, Northland opted to temporarily rent some property on which to place the three relocatable classrooms purchased at a total cost of \$33,000. A lot on the corner of Tenth and North State Streets in Merrill was leased through a realty company. But this property also required rezoning approval, and not without opposition. In a most curious newspaper article the leading opponents,

abutting property owners, were quoted as stating that passage of the zoning variance in favor of Northland would "foster an image for Merrill as the 'Santa Claus City.'" The property owner must have meant that passage of the zoning would be an unmerited gift to Northland. Despite the opposition, the Zoning Board granted a conditional use permit. At least one hurdle had been cleared for the 1979-80 school year. However, the variance was conditioned in part on the assumption that a search for suitable land would continue. And the agreement with the realtor on the present land was good for only one year. We will comment again on the site issue shortly.

Quite frankly, the association now found itself in something of a financial bind sooner than it had perhaps anticipated. With the prospect of purchasing land, buying buildings, financing an operating budget and paying salaries looming large in the foreground, the Finance Committee found it necessary to secure a sizable loan for \$68,000 from a Merrill bank during the summer of 1979. Along with that financial interest would come the inevitable push, from banks and city planners and association members, for security and identity--to build a permanent structure. Much of the remaining Merrill history is controlled by this quest for permanency. We, of course, can view this from hindsight. From a 1979 perspective, with zeal for the project at its zenith, this intricate interconnection of site, finances and public perception probably did not draw as much attention as it might have. Administrator Schultz theorizes that the "commitment to own land and a building forced on our congregations (and this is entirely my interpretation) the need to consider building much sooner that they were ready for it." We will play out the Merrill years by way of highlight scenes.



## School Starts

An Opening Service was held on Sunday, September 2, 1979, at Salem Lutheran Church in Wausau. Two days later Northland Lutheran High School officially opened its doors to twelve freshmen and twelve sophomores. Administrator Schultz and Mr. Delbert Draeger, called during the summer months as a full-time math/science instructor, were joined by six part-time teachers as the first faculty. Four other freshmen transferred during the school year bringing the total enrollment to twenty-eight. After four years of earnest planning and discussion, Northland was not just an association but a school.

This new venture was an adventure. Traditions were set: school nickname--the Trojans, school colors--royal blue and silver gray (later white), the school newspaper was called the Nuntius, and the yearbook the Odyssey. Northland became a focal point. It had the positive effect of uniting fellow Christians from different congregations together in a common interest.

But the sense of accomplishment was tempered a bit by the matter of a school site. The fall months were spent in search of a suitable Merrill location. The investigation turned up the 17-acre Jopke property on South State Street, just a short drive immediately south of the temporary site. Everything about the site seemed ideal--the southwest corner location was easily accessible to major highways; it held tremendous potential for development, especially a fine athletic field; it was beautifully situated on the banks of the Wisconsin River. A zoning change was granted, and the Jopke land was purchased on January 24, 1980, for \$61,000. The 1980 Site-Planning Committee Report also contained an interesting recommendation. Their report concluded:

With the approval of the Board of Directors the Site-Planning committee has pursued the work of looking into an architect. The committee is convinced of the need for one at this time to help us develop our Master Site Plan.

Plans for permanency in Merrill had become a top priority.

### An Architect

Although it would be tempting to catalog a chronology of stories and details about school life at this point, it is not so much the operation of Northland the school as Northland the association that is our focus. We hope that we do not disappoint if we satisfy ourselves with just a few specifics or statistics to suggest the progress of the school as the years unfold.

In June of 1980, the relocatable classrooms were moved to the Jopke property, and another building was attached. A junior class was added, and enrollment for the second school year increased to a total of fifty-two. The full-time Northland faculty grew by two. And Zion, Rib Falls voted to become the twelfth association member. But the most critical move, as far as the association was concerned, was the hiring of an architect.

Unhappy with the architectural firm the Site-Planning committee originally had engaged on an hourly basis to assist in the formulation of a master site plan, the association employed the services of Milwaukee-based Mochon, Schutte, Hackworthy and Juerisson in November of 1980. The agreement worked through Mr. Ray Juerisson, who represented the firm, seemed too good to pass up. Juerisson's company would work with Northland through the completion of the project. Subcommittees would submit suggestions. The architects would supply line drawings and

cost estimates. This work would be at no expense to the association until the bidding phase. At that time a percentage based on the bids would be paid to the architect. It appeared to provide just what Northland needed. The association would receive plans (structured to Northland's specific needs) for the permanent building that had become a necessary part of the grand design and time enough to secure financing. A contract was inked.

### Increasing Influence

As Northland grew so did its influence in the church life of north-central Wisconsin. Three more congregations joined the association in 1981: Grace, Monico; Redeemer, Tomahawk; and Immanuel, Medford. Medford, about 25 miles west of Merrill, was viewed as an especially important addition since it had a communicant membership of over 1,000 and a grade school with an enrollment of over 100. With the 1981-82 school year came yet another increase in faculty and student body size--64 students. Northland was now an official four-year high school.

Easily overlooked in a discussion about the association is the positive influence Northland had in Merrill itself. The high school mission also brought a church mission to the city. In 1981<sup>4</sup>, Rev. Adam Horneber was called to serve the mission nucleus, primarily Northland faculty and their families, that had gathered in Merrill. Christ Evangelical Lutheran Church was formed. The congregation met initially in the Northland chapel facility, but by 1986 the members were worshipping in a new church in the northeast corner of Merrill. Despite

a faculty exodus to the Wausau area, Christ congregation continues to enjoy God's blessings of stability and growth today.

The building plans already begun in 1980 drew considerable attention among the associated congregations. Though no working drawings were completed in 1981, the architects and contractors worked to produce estimates for the various phases of the project. Initial estimates were quite high. The decision was made to temporarily delay working drawings. But throughout the year contractors called to inform the association that they would be bidding lower on projects in order to retain work during slower economic times. In this respect the association leadership undertook a very active role in promotion of the Northland vision. They sensed that NLHS was at an important crossroads. Note the urgency in the report of Donald R. Stoffer, NLHSA president, following the events of 1981:

We all would heartily agree that [Northland has received] undeserved blessings from our Lord. But, why does He give these blessings to us? Is it just to keep us from closing the doors of NLHS or is it done to strengthen our faith and increase our trust in His powerful promises? This is a question that must be answered, for if Northland is to continue to fulfill its full potential, without interruption, then the decision to provide its permanent home must be made this year.

There are several economic indicators telling us that perhaps the time to take action is NOW. Inquiries to contractors reveal that our accepted building design could be constructed for approximately 35% less than original estimates. Is this the Lord's way of telling us to build now?

Yes, we have had much to thank God for this past year and what better way could we show our thankfulness than to accelerate kingdom work through planning the construction of the high school's permanent home. Let it always be said that we fully trusted in God's promises rather than not trusting enough.

### The Bids and the Building

In April of 1982, the association authorized the architect to proceed with working drawings and submit them to interested bidders.

When the bids were opened in August the bombshell hit. The bids came in much higher than expected. The dilemma: not only was the building too expensive to construct at the present time, but Northland also owed a large sum to the architect under the terms of the contract. A couple of other factors entered in to complicate this discussion and make it something of a vicious circle. Enrollment continued to increase--82 students in 1982-83 with future projections in the 100's--and the existing facilities were crowded. Some sort of building seemed necessary not only to accomodate present classes but to hold the interest of prospective students. At the same time, the school was accumulating a large operating deficit.

Northland agreed to pay a sum of \$110,000 to Hackworthy, Juerisson Associates as a settlement on the contract through the bidding phase. The association owned ready-made building plans but saw no possible way to finance the endeavor.

With the stability of the association in question throughout the course of this "quest for permanency," Northland was dealt three more decisive blows in 1982. Three congregations, undoubtedly frightened by the mounting costs of maintaining the high school and fearful of being left "holding the bag" if the school should be forced to close, withdrew from the association. Grace, Ringle; Our Savior's, Wausau; and Immanuel, Medford; were each assessed (on a per communicant basis) a fair-share portion of the indebtedness and given a release from membership. The withdrawal of these congregations reduced the communicant base to a level approximately equal to that of the association in 1979. The lone bright spot was the joining of Divine Word, Plover (a suburban area near Stevens Point, south of Wausau).

A year-end report offered the following summary of the 1982 events:

The adversity of the past year included controversy over when, if, what, and how to provide an adequate permanent structure to house our school. It included differences of opinion concerning the architect. It included concern over Northland's operating and capital indebtedness. It, perhaps, was prompted by fear of our nation's economy. It, perhaps, was prompted by mis-communication or misunderstanding of how a new area Lutheran high school is born and struggles to grow. It, perhaps (as indicated by last fall's Feasibility Study for the approaching fund drive), was prompted by a low commitment to Christian secondary education in some quarters. Through all of this I am constantly reminded of the inspired words of Paul: "We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him," Romans 8:28.

It becomes increasingly evident through the difficult times ahead that the leadership of the school sought to refocus attention, as above, back on the comfort and promises of God's Word. They continued to emphasize that Northland was not just a human institution, but an association directed by our loving Lord God.

#### Rebound and the Rhinelander Resolution

After the setbacks of 1982, the association looked to count its blessings in 1983. Despite continuing budget and building difficulties, there were several positives. Enrollment figures soared to a high of 92. The "Time To Be Counted" fund drive received pledges for almost \$320,000 to cover indebtedness and operational expenses. And a fifth temporary building was remodeled and added to the modular school setup. Northland appeared to be catching its breath and rebounding slightly for the challenge that lie ahead.

The work of the Building and Grounds Committee (formerly the Site Committee) maintained a position of high importance on Northland's priority list. The Merrill Planning Commission began to press for permanency. The city informed the association that it was looking for a

site plan and timetable for construction by February of 1985. After a review of various options, the NLHSA asked new architect Jan Vanderwerf to work up plans and cost estimates for constructing a school building in phases. Vanderwerf divided the building plan into six phases. The first phase would be the gymnasium, auditorium. Cost was estimated at \$250,000.

This arrangement seemed workable, but the financial woes mounted. The problem came to a head at the July 17, 1984, delegate meeting. The representatives from Zion, Rhinelander, brought this resolution:

Zion shall advise Northland to: put a "hold" on the building program; to consolidate debts only for now; to work vigorously toward getting new congregations in the association; to increase tuition to pay "their share" of costs for students of non-associated congregations; Zion will fulfill their 1985 TTBC commitment and drop back to the operating budget amount of \$20,000 in 1986 with recommended school phase out if association membership and economic conditions do not improve.

The Rhinelander resolution prompted emergency action on the part of the association. While the resolution aimed at fiscal responsibility, the Northland leadership feared that it might have the opposite effect. In order to obtain a loan from bank, the association had to prove that it was proceeding with building plans. This "hold" on building plans could destroy any chance to borrow the funds necessary to continue operation of the school. Many felt that this resolution could well lead to the closing of the school. A meeting of Northland representatives and the Rhinelander voters failed to bring about a change in Zion's position. The board, nevertheless, determined that it would proceed as though the school would open for the 1984-85 year.

To resolve its serious financial crisis, the association called a special meeting for July 26, 1984. In simple terms, this gathering

adopted the ultimatum that \$140,000 be received in money and pledges by August 10, 1984, or commence closing the school.

The watershed date approached and the goal had not been reached. At the August 12 meeting, President Stoffer stated that the board had no recommendation on whether or not to keep the school open. The motion was then made from the floor to rescind the part of the July 26 resolution which stated that closing procedures be enacted if the goal was not met. The motion carried unanimously. A follow-up plan was presented which would use the monies gathered primarily to cover operating deficits, while individual and congregational notes would be pursued to pay off the debt service.

Northland survived the summer scare and functioned as normal on its Merrill campus during 1984-85. While the uncertainty did not as of yet affect the immediate student support (the school equalled its enrollment high with a student body of 92), recruitment became something of an unsettling proposition.

#### Merrill or Move?

The series of setbacks that kept Northland from establishing permanency in Merrill reopened questions about the wisdom of continuing at the Merrill site. Was the Merrill site the problem, or was it a lack of commitment for the project on a local level? Was it a matter of low morale because of the financial straits, or relative indifference to the idea of Christian secondary education? Would a move bring a better response?

Already in 1984 a site evaluation was commissioned by the board. The External Relations Committee began a study under the heading: "Is



the original conclusion to have NLHS in Merrill still correct? Or should the school move to Wausau?" While they intended that the report be objective, they did admit that they were operating under the premise that it would "take a strong weight of evidence to dislodge" Merrill as the school site. What is most telling is that the only alternative given was a move to Wausau. A move north was not even considered. Why? The reasons were becoming clear. It was apparent that the Rhinelander delegation was fast becoming disenchanted with the operation and policies of the association. Support for the high school from Zion, the largest associated congregation, was less than anticipated. At the same time, other congregations to the south: Plover, Marshfield and Wisconsin Rapids (a congregation not included in the original target area), were sending students and cultivating interest.

The ERC returned with its recommendations in March 1985. Their involved resolution simply concluded that "moving from our present location would be financially unwise." The motion carried unanimously. Subsequent motions at that March 15 meeting recommended that planning and permanency in Merrill be pursued. These motions also passed.

But crisis and questioning were far from over. Another emergency fund drive labeled "Abundantly Sow -- Abundantly Reap" was undertaken to "balance the budget, reduce debt and pay interest." The minimum goal was \$425,000. \$75,000 per year was earmarked to cover congregational shortfalls toward a balanced operating budget. The financial woes, especially since the large fee paid to the architect, loomed as seemingly insurmountable obstacles. 1985 also saw the formation of a special "Blue Ribbon Committee." The objective and tasks were outlined as follows:

Objective: Improving and strengthening Christian secondary education at Northland Lutheran High School.

- Tasks:
1. What is the cause of recent high attrition and how can it be reduced?
  2. Evaluate Northland's present recruitment procedure and determine ways to improve it.
  3. Determine why Association growth is relatively slow and suggest procedures to increase congregational membership in the Association.
  4. Examine other matters of concern and recommend solutions.

Under that rather nebulous charge, the Blue Ribbon Committee began to simultaneously investigate and promote the work of the association. It was hoped that the committee would be able to pinpoint specific problems on the "grassroots" level.

One major challenge still lingered. Zion, Rhinelander, continued to be extremely wary of what they felt was an unmanageable financial situation. Rhinelander greatly feared being saddled with the "lion's share" of the financial burden for a school that was deeply in debt and constantly on the brink of closing. The congregation simply felt that it would not be wise to indefinitely continue supporting a venture that was on shaky ground. In their minds an immediate withdrawal, although it would carry an expense of almost \$180,000, would be more fiscally responsible than to maintain a subscription to an organization which was falling deeper into debt. By a 10 to 2 margin the Zion church council ratified an April 7, 1986, resolution which read:

Zion church council recommends that Zion congregation withdraw from the NLHS Association effective immediately, and shall consider reinstatement on equitable grounds when:

1. The NLHS Association has a balanced operating budget.
2. The NLHS constitution has been amended to provide that no future deficit spending for the operating budget be allowed.

The association leadership expressed deep regret over the Rhinelander action and deemed it to be unloving and coercive. Despite

attempts to discuss the matter with Zion officials, a June 25, 1986, letter acknowledged to the associated sister congregations that Rhinelander had officially withdrawn. The communicant membership base was drastically reduced. NLHSA now existed as an association of ten congregations, none of which operated a Lutheran Day School. Northland's uncertain future had reached yet another plateau, but the association stood firm on its position to remain in Merrill and operate during the 1986-87 school year. The school opened its doors that year to 75 students.

#### Construct, Close or Cabrini?

We must recall again that part of the intricate interplay that forced permanency on Northland were commitments to the banks and to the Merrill Planning Commission. The latter is our interest here. Through the turmoil of 1985 the association managed to secure an extension --until March, 1986--for a proposed master site plan and building timetable. By the fall of 1986, construction of a building on the Merrill campus drew considerable attention. All of the special reports continued to conclude that Merrill was the most feasible location for the high school. The Building and Grounds Committee recommended construction of a Phase I building (gymnasium, several classrooms and offices) as adapted from former drawings at a cost of \$400,000. In order to finance this effort, Northland proposed another special fund drive called "Building Excitement." Goals for the project were set at \$350,000 with construction to begin in October of 1987.

Tensions mounted; the warriors began to weary. Two fund drives were slightly too much to handle. Even the establishment of the "Dime

and Dollar Thrift Store" (an independent organization which offered a generous portion of its proceeds to the Northland budget) in Wausau could not significantly dent the Northland debt. Furthermore, the slow movement of monies into the "Building Excitement" fund was sending a clear message that there was not strong local support to plant the school in Merrill. Debts increased. Enrollment declined. Recruitment suffered. Morale, even among board members and the faculty that had been a remarkably faithful and strong constant through the times of testing, was low. At long last, the subject of school closing seemed more than just rhetoric. An April 21, 1987 resolution moved that if the "Building Excitement" did not achieve a goal of \$350,000 in commitments from congregations and individuals, school closing procedures be initiated.

The summer of 1987 also brought with it a renewed interest in Wausau. Actually, the idea had been spooking around among concerned parties since the site reevaluations and the Blue Ribbon Committee. Now relocation in Wausau was a real possibility, seemingly the only possibility, for saving Northland. Administrator Schultz commented that "once [Rhinelander pulled out] there was really nothing holding it [a move to Wausau] back."

Chaired by Bob Schuch, the Ad Hoc Relocation Study Committee (also known later as the Wausau Relocation Committee) presented a detailed nine-page study to the association board on June 29, 1989. The report observed that Merrill does not, in fact, represent a good location both in respect to demographics and to historical precedent for area high schools. It also alledged that grassroots support for the school was "probably no deeper that 20% of the members of any congregation." The

committee came with of host of recommendations. After lengthy discussion, the board voted to rescind the April closing resolution and passed twelve new resolutions. Chief among them were:

1. Move the location of the school from Merrill to Wausau immediately--in time for the 1987-88 school year.
2. Negotiate the better of leasing or purchasing the Zimpro building to effect the most economically efficient operating budget for 1987-88 and yet to create the aura of permanency.
3. Sell the portable classrooms immediately before the school marked disappears in mid-July and pay off M&I Bank.
4. Sell the Merrill property for the maximum amount possible, under the circumstances and pay off the M&I Bank and Fox Valley Lutheran.
5. Apply any money left over from the above property sales to either purchasing the Zimpro building or meeting operating expenses.

The move was on. Shortly after the recommendations were passed, continuing investigation turned up the possibility of leasing the Cabrini building, a vacant school building owned by St. Mary's Catholic Parish located on Grand Avenue in the heart of Wausau. The faculty agreed that the Cabrini building was a suitable facility. The plans were in order. What remained was a scramble to raise \$90,000 to make the move possible. More than enough money was committed.

Late in the summer of 1987 the association vacated the Merrill campus and set up quarters in the leased Cabrini building. 75 students took seats in a "new" Northland that fall.

#### Concluding Comments

Wausau was a rebirth for Northland, a new lease on life. But what started out as an idealistic dream now exists in realism. The present school situation, especially in regard to the building, is perhaps what Northland needed in 1979. The project has been a growing and learning

experience--in Christian faith and understanding. We do not mean to say that Northland does not continue to face tremendous challenges as an association. It takes time for trust to be renewed in the decisions made by the association. But while financial worries remain, the snowball effect of uncertain permanency, identity, recruitment and building plans has been somewhat slowed by the move.

The 1988 External Relations Committee report announced: "Our task of telling the 'Northland Story' was made easier in some ways this year by reason of the school moving to Wausau. We received much publicity from the many articles that featured Northland in the local newspaper. At the same time we continued to 'cultivate' nonassociated congregations through visits and information....We remain optimistic in God's sovereignty." It seems that once again Northland could focus more on its Christian mission than on the details of its operation. By God's grace and under his guidance Northland Lutheran High School continues to exist "to train disciples of Christ."

## ENDNOTES

An explanation: Since the overwhelming majority of the information came from primary sources which were not bound together in any volume, and since information relative to the source of the primary source information is contained within the text, it was considered that endnotes would give essentially redundant information and are not included for sources from Northland's files.

<sup>1</sup>Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, Reports and Memorials to the 46th Biennial Convention, 1981, p. 53.

<sup>2</sup>Rand McNally and Company, Rand McNally Road Atlas, 1988, p. 127. The reference is given because the suburbs of Schofield and Rothschild were included in the "metro-area" figure.

<sup>3</sup>David Worgull, Synod Statistician, Statistical Report of the Wisconsin Ev. Lutheran Synod for 1976, p. 40.

<sup>4</sup>David Worgull, Synod Statistician, Statistical Report of the Wisconsin Ev. Lutheran Synod for 1989, p. 94.

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