

The Mission Work of Christopher Eberhardt

Church History  
Professor Fredrich

April 29, 1975  
Robert Koester

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

As the title of this paper indicates, the subject is the mission work of Christopher Eberhardt. But since it is impossible to divorce the man from the situation he is in, this paper must also be about the Michigan Synod.

Eberhardt joined the Michigan Synod in 1860. But the history of the Synod can be traced back about 27 years before this time. In 1833 a pastor Friederick Schmid came to Ann Arbor and began doing mission work among the Germans in southern Michigan. He was the first Lutheran pastor in Michigan and in a few years he had started several small congregations in an area stretching from Adrian, Michigan, north to Saginaw and west to Lake Michigan. In 1845 Schmid tried to organize a Synod. Several of Loehe's men who were in the area joined him. But a year later they withdrew. The reason was the lack of a confessional position in the new Synod. Schmid joined the Ohio Synod for a while and then withdrew and remained alone. In 1860 he again made an attempt to found a Synod. This time he would be successful. The members of this new Synod were some pastors whom Schmid had trained himself and two men who had just arrived from the Basel mission house. One of these men was Christopher Eberhardt. On December 10, 1860 they organized as the Ev. Luth. Synode von Michigan und andern Staaten. When the Synod began it consisted of a group of 7 pastors and several vacant congregations and stretched out over an area of 40,000 square miles in southern Michigan. The question which must have been in their minds was, what would be the fate of their new Synod?

The Michigan Synod could have developed in various ways. But

the fact is that over the years it developed into an energetic confessional Lutheran body. I believe that this was due to the grace of God alone. In these early years he sent men into its churches who were energetic both in missionary zeal and also in the zeal to teach God's Word in its truth. Christopher Eberhardt was a leader among these men. Through his efforts he helped the Michigan Synod grow in numbers and in the strength of its confessional stand.

Different papers could be written on the different areas of Eberhardt's life. He had a great desire to remain true to confessional Lutheranism in a day when there was little attempt to distinguish between Lutheran and Reformed theology. He was pastor for 31 years at St. Paul's church in Saginaw, Michigan. For eight years he was president of the Michigan Synod. During these years he guided the Synod through the time when it was in the process of leaving the General Council. While he was president he worked to build the pastoral seminary in Saginaw, and taught there until his death. One could write papers on all of these topics.

This paper deals with what I believe was Eberhardt's first love, mission work. From time to time Eberhardt took part in the administration, theological problems, and special projects of the Synod. However, I do not think that this is where in his greatness lie. He was not a Walther or a Loehe. I think that his greatness lie in his zeal for starting congregations and for doing everything he could to see to it that these congregations were cared for. This paper will outline his mission work and

show the results it had for the Michigan Synod.

#### TRAINING IN GERMANY

Christopher Eberhardt was born on January 3, 1831. He was born in the city of Lauffen on the Neckar river, about 20 miles north of Stuttgart, Germany. He was the eldest of four children. Not much is known of the first 25 years of his life. One comment he made was recorded in Synodal-Freund. He said, "Meanwhile, I had an especially great struggle whether I would choose the friendship of this world or the friendship of the children of God."<sup>1</sup> From quotations such as this which one finds in writings about him, one gets the impression that he was the type of person who wore his Christianity on his sleeve. He was not afraid to express what he felt. At the age of 25 he had an opportunity to enter the mission house at Basel. In 1856 he did just that and spent four years there training for the mission fields. One of the men in his class was Stephen Klingmann. He was also destined to become a leader in the Michigan Synod. After graduation Eberhardt and Klingmann were assigned to go to America. Schmid had recently written to the Basel mission house, where he himself had graduated, requesting additional help in Michigan. The two were assigned to "the broad expanse between the Michigan and Huron Lakes, to feed the white flock of the Lord, instead of the black one in Africa or India."<sup>2</sup>

On September 1, 1860 the two embarked on the ship, Bremen, and made the trip to America. They landed in New York on September 20

---

<sup>1</sup> Ev. Luth. Synodal-Freund, May, 1893, p. 63.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

and a week later they arrived at Schmid's house in Ann Arbor.

DER REISEPREDIGER

When Eberhardt and Klingman arrived in Ann Arbor, Schmid gave them a choice of where they wanted to go. There were two openings at the time, Adrian and Hopkins. Adrian was the more "tame" of the two, located south of Ann Arbor in the general vicinity of most of the congregations Schmid had started. The other was on the west side of the state. In those days it was an outpost congregation. But another job went along with the Hopkins congregation, the Reiseprediger or traveling missionary. When Schmid asked for their decision Eberhardt responded, "Do you know what we'll do? I am strong and healthy and I can take the hardship better than you. (Klingman) I'll take over the Reisepredigt and you go to Adrian."<sup>3</sup> In October of 1860 Eberhardt began his work in Hopkins.

As it turned out, Eberhardt's stay in Hopkins was short lived. He was only to remain there for a year and four months, from October, 1860 to December, 1861. Although this period in Eberhardt's life was short, I believe that it was one of the most important. It was the time when he became acquainted with the most pressing problem the Synod had, the lack of pastors.

The congregation at Hopkins was not large; actually, it was an amalgamation of three congregations, Hopkins, Dorr and Salem. The towns were about seven miles apart. The congregation met in the schoolhouse at Hopkins, probably not more than 12 - 15

---

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

families making up the group. Of the three, Hopkins and Dorr still have a Wisconsin Synod church, while Salem folded in the early 1900's. This joint congregation was Eberhardt's first group. His second was an established congregation at Allegan, begun by Schmid. Allegan is about ten miles south of Hopkins. There is still a Wisconsin Synod church there today also.

But Eberhardt was not only a pastor to these two congregations. He was primarily the traveling missionary. It was his job to find scattered groups of Lutherans and provide them with the Word and Sacraments. If possible, he would attempt to form these people into congregations. There is no doubt that he took his work seriously. By December 10, only three months after he had arrived at Hopkins, Eberhardt had established a circuit of preaching stations. He had 16 stations spread out in a circle of 360 miles. None of my sources told where any of these 16 were located. To understand the imensity of this undertaking one has to realize the conditions under which Eberhardt worked. In those days there were few roads in western Michigan, only a few trails winding their way through the forests and marshes. Eberhardt did not have a horse; all of his work was done on foot. Eberhardt made the entire circuit in three weeks. In 1861 Eberhardt reported to the Synod about these preaching stations and about other place where he was attempting to begin congregations. He writes,

At the last Synod convention in Detroit I reported that my circle of activity had extended to Lake Michigan and included Van Buren, Allegan, Ottawa and Muskegon counties. Now I must report that since the last Synod I have acquired an even larger area of activity. Owosso, 80 miles northwest of Detroit has become a preaching station I

often visit. Since then I have also preached in three other places, namely in Clinton county and in two other places in the town of Lowell. A settlement (at Lowell?) has recently organized itself into a congregation; they number about 30 families however they are very poor. Besides these I still have two small congregations, Hopkins and Salem. In the other preaching stations there are too few families and of these too many are indifferent to warrant their being built up into organized congregations."<sup>4</sup>

It might be noted here that the congregation in Owosso still belongs to the Wisconsin Synod. In all, Eberhardt served 150 families. In four places he held confirmation instruction.

But these were still not all of his activities. Eberhardt tried to expand his field by going into the upper peninsula. During the summer of his first year as Reiseprediger he made the trip. I will quote at length the portion of his report to the Synod which describes this trip. He says,

On June 18 (1861) I began my preaching journey to Lake Superior aboard the steamer "Planet" and after a pleasant three day trip I landed at Ontonagon. From there I took a 12 mile trip on foot to the Minnesota mine which had been pointed out to me. And in the evening of the 21st I arrived at the city by the same name. While I was there I held up my trip until July 8. This was at the request of many religious people there who zealously lent a hand to establish a congregation. I preached five times there, three times in Ontonagon and once in Maple Grove, celebrated Holy Communion and baptised children. In Minnesota Mine itself lived about 20 - 40 families and 60 unmarried protestants and in the vicinity there were 24 families, beside single people. To be sure, there is a large group of people who have departed from the faith of the Father, and have sunk into gross unbelief. On account of this they want nothing to do with any assistance from a servant of the Gospel. Also the salary of a preacher is uncertain since the people move on as soon as they have saved up some money. But is it right to leave so many of our brothers in the faith as orphans merely out of concern for the outward success of a preacher? Should we not send them even one preacher?

---

<sup>4</sup>Geschichte der Michigan-Synode, Saginaw: F & C Reitter Co., 1910, p. 9.

Would that be right since so many of them long with tears for the wonderful worship service of our evangelical Lutheran Church? Or, should we not go after the lost, who rush down to Hell being unwarned of their sins? Should we allow them to plung into the abyss? Certainly not, especially since I can report that up there on Lake Superior there can be found three more such settlements, Cliff Mine, Portage Lake, and Marquette. These towns are without a shepherd and in the meantime could be served by a pastor stationed in Minnesota Mine. This is their ardent wish. Indeed, I had to spend a week at one of these places. How many yearned once again after many years to partake of the Lord's Supper, to have their children baptised and again to hear God's Word. This preaching was seldom given up without much crying when the people remembered the lack of it which they had experienced and which they now would experience again.<sup>5</sup>

Eberhardt then made an appeal to the Synod to send men to the Upper Peninsula to serve the people in the towns where he had been.

When Eberhardt returned he made his report to Schmid at Ann Arbor. He then went to visit Klingmann in Adrian. While he was there he became sick and was laid up for a month. But since the time he had returned from the Upper Peninsula he had received a call to St. Paul's church in Saginaw. He accepted the call and on New Year's Day he preached his first sermon there.

#### SAGINAW

During the next 30 years Eberhardt did much mission work throughout the state from his base in Saginaw. I have attempted to accumulate all of the different places where he did work. I am almost sure that I have not found them all. The reason I feel this way is that no two sources list all of them and every

---

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 10 - 11.



source has some different ones. It is also very possible that some of the churches may have joined other churches or even other denominations. This is true especially of his earlier mission work. Many of his preaching stations may have gotten pastors from reformed churches due to the lack of pastors in the Michigan Synod. Consequently they would be lost from our records. In order to be sure one would have to study the history of all the reformed and Lutheran churches in lower Michigan. I am fairly certain that I have at least found all of the churches Eberhardt worked in which still belong to the Wisconsin Synod today.

- 1) Even though Eberhardt now had moved into a completely different area, he still worked as Reiseprediger. He continued to visit his preaching stations in southwestern Michigan. He made the trip every six to eight weeks; I am not sure how long he continued to do this.
- 2) St. Charles, 12 miles SW of Saginaw. We have a Wisconsin Synod church there today but it was not started by Eberhardt. He only had a preaching station there which evidently did not develop into anything.
- 3) Bay City, 12 miles N of Saginaw. Eberhardt began services there in 1862. At that time it was known as West Bay City. St. John's Lutheran Church.
- 4) Bay City, 12 miles N of Saginaw. Eberhardt served as vacancy pastor for Bethel Lutheran Church from 1862 - 1863.
- 5) Chesaning, 20 miles SW of Saginaw. Eberhardt began to hold services there in 1867. Zion Lutheran Church.

- 6) Mittelfranken and Frankentrost, 20 miles SE of Saginaw. Eberhardt began holding services there in the late 60's or early 70's. They organized as Bethel Lutheran Church. In 1879 they merged with a group of people from Frankenmuth and formed St. John's Lutheran Church, *of Frankenmuth*
- 7) Freeland, 10 miles NW of Saginaw. At that time the place was known as Tittabawassee. Eberhardt began holding services there in 1878. They were organized as St. Matthew's Lutheran Church in 1879.
- 8) Clare, 40 miles NW of Saginaw. Eberhardt served there as vacancy pastor from 1881 - 1882. Bethel Lutheran Church.
- 9) Custer, 100 miles W of Saginaw. Eberhardt served there as vacancy pastor in 1884. Emmanuel Lutheran Church.
- 10) Saginaw. Eberhardt and Pastor Huber, then director of the Seminary, started St. John's Lutheran Church in 1890.

#### CONCLUSIONS

I believe that the effect of Eberhardt's mission work on the Michigan Synod was twofold.

The first and most obvious result is the number of churches which Eberhardt began or in which he served. At a time when a church is growing it is invaluable to have a man with as much zeal and energy as Eberhardt who is willing to go out and find the people and not wait until the people find him. I think that the large area he served and the large number of preaching stations and congregations he worked with show that Eberhardt had this trait. At the end of this paper I have listed all of these

congregations on a map.

The second result is less obvious, but I feel it is the most important. It is the result of his mission work, especially the first year and a half in Allegan county where he experienced the frustration of not being able to fill his preaching stations with pastors. He had done the mission work, he had sown the seed, but getting someone to water the seed was a different question. We see this problem expressed in the 1910 history of the Michigan Synod,

It is right that we ask ourselves, what were the results and the fruit of the untiring work of this man for the Synod? And to this we must answer: Little, very little! Of all the places which he founded, only the churches in Allegan county (note: also the one in Owosso) remain with our Synod. His trip to the upper Peninsula had no results at all. We don't even know if the Synod concerned itself at all with this or even made an attempt to relieve the crying need up there. What was the source of the sad results of such self-sacrificing and diligent labor? That brings us to the greatest need and the worst error which the Synod committed. Indeed, it sought to gather the scattered believers, but it had no pastors which could then care for the scattered flocks with the means of grace. They lacked what was most necessary of all, to bring into existence an institution for instructing and equipping ministers. So it was forced to take on ministers who might offer their services or to request them from the unionistic Basel mission society. They had no guarantee of the qualification of these men, of their moral character or of their faithfulness in their office toward both the Synod and its confessional stand.

The last point of this quote can be illustrated by the church which Eberhardt began in Owosso. For nine years it was served by various pastors among whom was one who a short time later served a union church. In 1869 they finally decided to be recognized as a confessional Lutheran church.

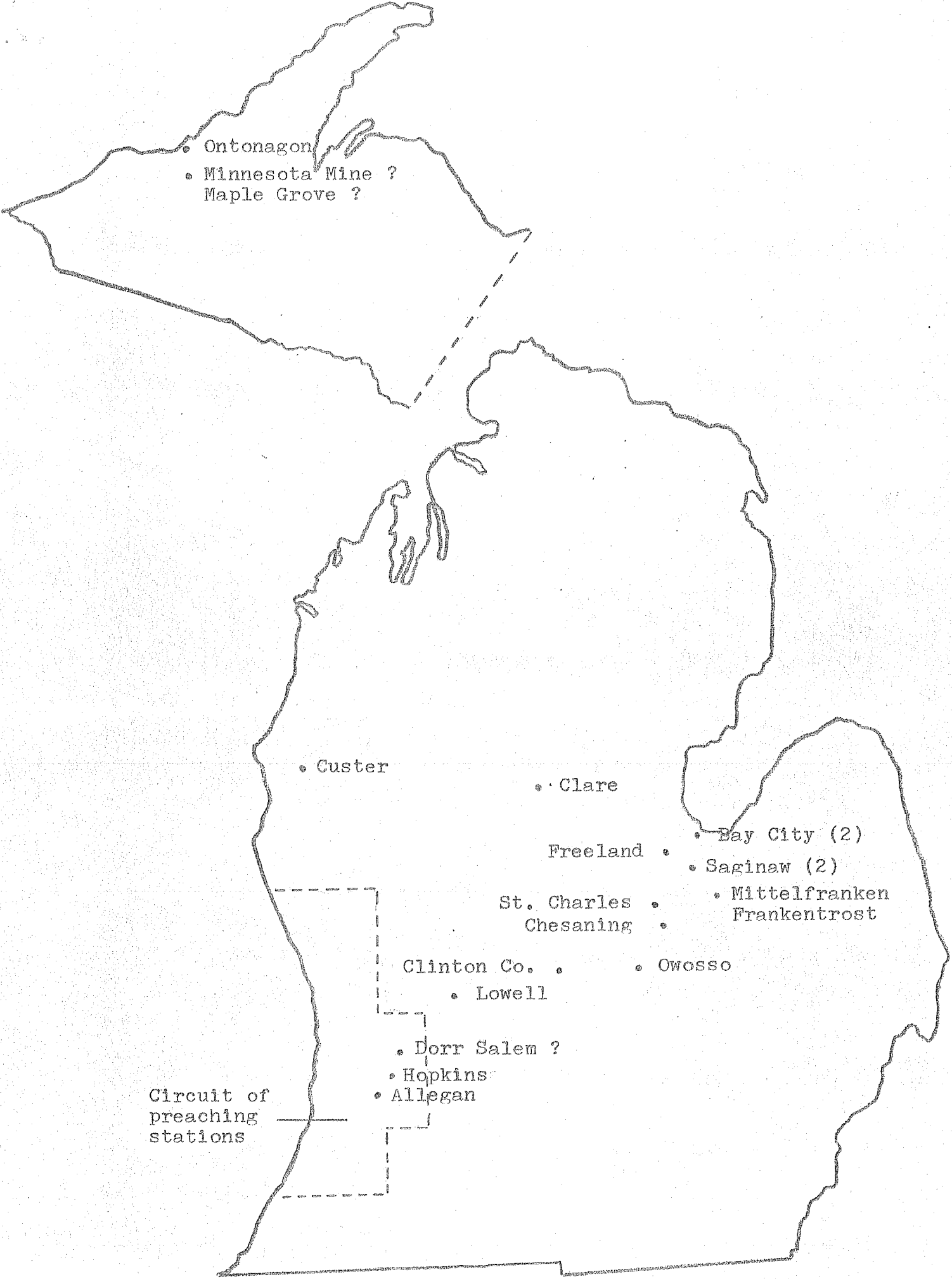
Those churches which received pastors were extremely fortunate.

---

Ibid., p. 11-12.

But even these fortunate ones had to wait sometimes 10 - 12 years for their pastor. No doubt these experiences made a deep impression on Eberhardt. He had begun so many preaching stations and there was no one to serve them. All around him he saw congregations crying for pastors. I think that the one thing Eberhardt desired most of all was to solve this problem. When he got the chance he did.

Eberhardt became president of the Synod in 1881. In his third synodical report in 1884 he began speaking about the need for a pastoral seminary. At that very synod there was a resolution made to start a seminary. For a few years the location of the seminary was in doubt and it changed from place to place. But finally Eberhardt himself donated the land for the Seminary in Saginaw. On September 21, 1887 classes were begun. Eberhardt himself taught the students until his death in 1893. The need which Eberhardt had experienced throughout the years in his mission work provided the impetus the Michigan Synod needed to finally build their much needed pastoral seminary.



• Ontonagon  
• Minnesota Mine ?  
• Maple Grove ?

• Custer

• Clare

Freeland •

• Bay City (2)

• Saginaw (2)

St. Charles •

• Mittelfranken

Chesaning •

Frankentrost

Clinton Co. •

• Owosso

• Lowell

• Dorr Salem ?

• Hopkins

• Allegan

Circuit of  
preaching  
stations

1., In Subscription zum Klub an der Herhaus  
an Circulation Trustee Mr. Weiss



Pastor Chr. L. Eberhardt.

undem Sonntag eine abendliche  
Versammlung abigen Subscription  
hatte.

Chr. Eberhardt  
Herausg.

Versammlung am 17. Aug. 1862

Consistent von Trustee Papp  
in Auftrag der an Volk bezahlten Pfalt wird  
der Gemeinderat vorgelagt als abschwicht.

2., In Subscription für den Klub an der Herhauses  
betragt jährlich 53.

3., beschlossene Trustee Weiss wüßte in dem Lauf  
der Woche allen Mitgliedern unsere Gemeinderat, um  
eine Beitrag für den Klub anzunehmen  
d. h. ~~den~~ bezahlten zu lassen.

4., beschlossene wüßte Sonntag wieder eine  
Gemeinderat-Versammlung einzubereiten.

Chr. Eberhardt  
Herausg.

Neunzehnte Konvention.

General-Konzil.

Chicago, 1886.

Druck von Thos. Wilson, Reading Pa.

*Chas. L. Johnson*

*Saginaw Mich.*

*1886*

## Bibliography

Der Ev. Luth. Synodal-Freund, May, 1893

Geschichte der Michigan Synode, Saginaw; F. & C. Reitter Co., 1910.

Michigan District History, Ann Arbor: LithoCrafters, Inc., 1972.

Minutes, St. Matthews Lutheran Church, Freeland, Michigan.

Minutes, St. Pauls Lutheran Church, Saginaw, Michigan.

Proceedings of the Michigan Synod Conventions, 1867 - 1893.

St. Pauls Lutheran Church, Saginaw, Michigan: 50th Anniversary Book, 1901.