

Forward In Christ: Lengthening The Cords And Strengthening The Stakes

- I. Expansion at Home
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- III. The Founding of the CELC

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In the 1860s the Wisconsin Synod by the grace of God discovered and strengthened its scriptural and confessional moorings. A century later the synod was forced to review its commitment to the Lutheran heritage as former friends ignored the directives of Scripture. There was pain as old relationships were ended. But there were unforeseen blessings as the Lord of the Church led the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS) to pursue the encouragement of the prophet Isaiah, "Enlarge the place of your tent, stretch your tent curtains wide, do not hold back; lengthen your cords, strengthen your stakes" (54:2).

Entrance into the 1960s brought a host of changes to the Wisconsin Synod. The fellowship which the WELS had enjoyed with the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod since 1869 came to an end in 1961. Our association with the Synodical Conference, such a blessing to the Wisconsin Synod since its formation in 1872, was officially terminated in 1963. Since WELS lived and worked in the shadow of its much larger sister synod for so many decades, there were many who honestly believed that the "little WELS" could not survive on its own.

I. Expansion at Home

It would be unfair to say that the Wisconsin Synod did not reach out with the gospel prior to the break with Missouri. Home mission work began to increase a quarter century prior to the demise of the Synodical Conference. During the interwar period, as the number of German-speaking immigrants declined, the General Mission Board began to reach out in areas where WELS had never done German work. In the 1941 synod convention the chairman of the General Mission Board, Pastor W. Roepke, noted, "Let us free ourselves from the thought that our Home Mission work is done with the same kind of people that were available a generation ago. Then this type of mission work was done almost exclusively around those of the household of faith. Today is different."¹

The mission board recognized that America was changing and so were Wisconsin Synod Lutherans. No longer were they limited to the "heartland" of the country. Job opportunities, along with expanding and easier transportation and a desire for a change in climate, were all joining to make Americans a mobile society. While we were trying to figure out how to serve these transplanted Midwesterners best, it slowly became apparent that we had opportunities to share the gospel with an increasingly churchless society.

Two years before Pastor Roepke's notation, the 1939 synodical convention had resolved to call "general missionaries" for Arizona and Colorado. This was not a new idea but rather a reworking of the *Reiseprediger* position which had been used in the early years of the Midwestern synods. Without the responsibility of an established congregation these missionaries could explore a wide area. They gathered believers wherever they found them and shared the gospel with others as they had opportunity to do so. In response to this synodical resolution, Pastor F. Stern was called to Arizona, Pastor I. P. Frey was called to Colorado, and Pastor R. Scheele became a general missionary in Michigan.

In spite of the residual effects of the Great Depression and then the country's involvement in World War II, new mission fields were developed. From 1941 to 1945 the synod established almost 90 mission

¹ *Wisconsin Synod Proceedings*, 1941, p 24.

congregations. As is the case today, not all these exploratory ventures proved to be successful, but a mission emphasis was growing in the synod.

Following the reintroduction of general missionaries, the General Mission Board took two steps which, humanly speaking, allowed for greater efficiency in our home mission efforts. The first step was the introduction of "mission districts." These were promising areas of activity that were removed from the established districts of the Wisconsin Synod. Colorado, which had been under the Nebraska District Mission Board, was organized as a mission district to allow it to operate under its own mission board. Similarly, Arizona was set up as a mission district rather than operating under the Southeastern Wisconsin District Mission Board. With mission boards who were more familiar with and more closely connected to these new areas, mission work expanded.

It was the Arizona Mission Board that first ventured into neighboring California. In response to the pleas of transplanted Midwestern members of the Synod, the board sent two missionaries to California in 1950. Pastor Armin Keibel began the work in western Los Angeles, where he held the first WELS public service on December 24, 1950. Pastor Frederick Knoll soon joined him and began services in Tarzana in the San Fernando Valley on February 4, 1951. Although a third missionary did not enter California until 1957, the work continued to expand in the Los Angeles area and work was also begun in the San Francisco area.

Economic opportunities and the warmer climate have made California an attractive site for relocation. The state's dramatic population growth has likewise made it an attractive area for mission exploration. After almost half a century of work 48 WELS congregations were active in the state at the end of 1999.

Meanwhile Arizona has also experienced dramatic growth, especially in the areas of Phoenix and Tucson. As we enter the 21st century Arizona is the home of 39 Wisconsin Synod congregations. The Arizona-California District is also working in New Mexico (five congregations), the El Paso area of western Texas (4), Nevada (7), and Hawaii (1).

A conservative outlook is a blessing when it comes to how one views Scripture and how one uses Word and sacraments. It can, however, have the effect of dampening expansion efforts. The 1953 Synod Convention attempted to restrain what it considered overly enthusiastic growth. Undoubtedly believing that it had the kingdom's best interests in mind, that convention resolved that "the General Board for Home Missions shall be required to obtain specific authority from the Joint Synod whenever it desires to establish missions in areas . . . which lie outside the general area served by the Joint Synod."²

No sooner had this principle been made official than ways were found to circumvent the resolution. The Wisconsin Synod's entrance into Florida is a prime example. Mr. Louis Ott, who served on the Michigan District Mission Board, wintered in Florida. In his desire to get a mission started in the state, he joined Pastors Alvin Baer, Karl Vertz, and Harold Zink in an exploration of the state from February 8-17, 1954. In eight days the team covered 1400 miles as it checked out the mission potential in city after city. Mr. Ott's dream was realized later in 1954 when Pastor William Steih, formerly of Kawkawlin, Michigan, was called to serve "Florida in general and St. Petersburg in particular." He arrived in September. A parsonage was constructed before the end of the year, and Faith Congregation held its first public service on January 9, 1955. Before the end of the summer the congregation had its own chapel.

In a sense Faith Lutheran Church of St. Petersburg, Florida was a "daughter congregation" of Michigan congregations. No synodical funds had been approved for this effort. Therefore individual congregations collected \$15,000 to support this project until the congregation joined the synod in August 1955 and received funding for its parsonage and chapel. Within three years the congregation was self-supporting.

By 1959 three additional congregations had joined Faith Lutheran Church as WELS outposts in Florida. Forty years later 37 congregations have a Florida address. With Florida as a base the work spread into neighboring states. In 1973 there were a sufficient number of congregations in the area to necessitate the establishment of the South Atlantic District of the Wisconsin Synod. At the end of 1999 this district consisted of 63 congregations³ stretching from the state of Louisiana to the island of Antigua in the Caribbean.

² *Wisconsin Synod Proceedings*, 1953, pp 50,51.

³ Of this number 54 are member congregations of the WELS and 9 are exploratories.

From 1950 to 1954, when the WELS was entering California and Florida, it also entered three other states. Idaho organized its first Wisconsin Synod congregation in 1950. A Cheyenne, Wyoming congregation was founded in 1952⁴ and we entered Missouri in 1954 to serve a group who had left the Missouri Synod. After the flurry of activity in the first half of the 1950s mission expansion quieted down during the last half of the decade. A number of factors led to the relative calm. During the late 1950s much time and energy were spent on the question of our deteriorating fellowship with the Missouri Synod. This problem was compounded by a severe shortage of pastors. Coupled with the manpower problem was a shortage of money in the Church Extension Fund which made it difficult to construct additional churches.

During this period there was also a shift in administrative philosophy. By 1955 it became apparent that the expanding home mission fields needed additional attention. It was then that the General Mission Board was divided into separate home and world mission boards. In 1963 the Synod determined that a full-time administrator was necessary to oversee the growing home mission efforts. Pastor Raymond Wiechmann was the first to serve as the "executive secretary" of the General Board for Home Missions. In 1968 he was succeeded by Pastor Norman Berg, who served in that capacity for two decades. The number of new mission openings eventually required the calling of an associate administrator for home missions. Pastor Larry Zwieg was the first to hold this position. His successor, Pastor Harold Hagedorn, replaced Pastor Berg upon his retirement in 1988 as the administrator. At that time Pastor Peter Kruschel was called to be the associate administrator for home missions.

Following the break with the Missouri Synod, the expansion of home missions began in earnest. Increasing numbers of pastoral graduates and permission for the Church Extension Fund to borrow money made it possible for the Wisconsin Synod to enter additional states. In the 1961-1965 period Kansas, Virginia, New Jersey, Texas, and Pennsylvania became the homes of new congregations. It was during this period that we also ventured into the Canadian province of Alberta.

From 1966 to 1970 eleven more states⁵ were entered. Likewise, an additional eleven states⁶ opened mission congregations from 1971 to 1975. During these years the WELS also received a member congregation in another Canadian province, Quebec, and we inherited the congregation on Antigua in the West Indies. This had been a mission of the Federation for Authentic Lutheranism until the group disbanded in 1975, with congregations joining either the Wisconsin Synod or our sister synod, the Evangelical Lutheran Synod.

By 1975 the WELS was represented in 46 of the 50 states. The early 1980s found us in the final four states: West Virginia (1980), Vermont (1981), Maine, and Mississippi (1983). Two decades after the trauma of the failed fellowship with Missouri, the Lord had stretched the Wisconsin Synod from a Midwestern association of congregations to a national organization. Having strengthened our scriptural stakes, he positioned the synod for continued growth.

II. Expansion in the World

At the same time that the Wisconsin Synod was reaching out on the home front, its world mission program was also experiencing growth. At first the expansion was limited. Like a toddler learning how to walk, progress was initially slow and there were some bumps and bruises along the way. Yet the Lord of the Church once again blessed our meager efforts and the pace of the world mission expansion has picked up as we moved from one decade to the next.

World mission work had been a long-established concern of the synod. Toward the close of the nineteenth century mission work in Japan had been considered. This, however, was replaced by the work among the Apaches. After World War I the Wisconsin Synod worked in Poland among German-speaking Lutherans who now found themselves in a predominately Roman Catholic country. In addition, we had shared in the Synodical Conference mission efforts in Nigeria. Although these efforts were instructive, they either involved

⁴ The missions in Idaho and Wyoming were later closed. These states were reentered in 1973.

⁵ Alabama, Maryland, Alaska, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Connecticut, Indiana, Louisiana, Hawaii, Massachusetts, and South Carolina

⁶ Arkansas, Georgia, Nevada, Tennessee, New York, Utah, Delaware, Kentucky, North Carolina, Rhode Island, and New Hampshire

serving displaced persons who were already Lutherans or working as the junior partner in an overseas mission venture. There was a continuing desire to reach out with the gospel in areas where there was no one to proclaim it.

At the 1945 convention of the Wisconsin Synod it was resolved "that the President appoint a committee to gather information regarding foreign fields that might offer opportunities for mission work by our Synod. When ready, this committee shall report the results of its study, first to the General Mission Board and then to the Synod."⁷ After some wrangling about the orderliness of the resolution (it had been introduced as a part of the Indian Mission Report), the concept was passed and a Commission on Foreign Missions was appointed. Included on this committee were Pastors Arthur Wacker, E. Benjamin Schlueter, Henry Nitz, and Leonard Koeninger, as well as Professor Bliefert of New Ulm.

Initially it appeared that two competing ideas of what "gather information" meant might derail the commission. Pastor Wacker believed that "gather information" indicated the committee was to be proactive and must look for mission opportunities. Other voices contended the phrase meant only that the group was to receive and gather information as calls for help came to it. Ultimately a special arbitration committee had to settle the dispute. It determined that the broad meaning was appropriate, but it added that no personal investigation overseas had been authorized.

The 1947 synodical convention debated what action, if any; should be taken on the matter of foreign missions. It became clear that the convention favored working in a foreign mission field. When a resolution to that effect was adopted, the only question was where the work should begin. Originally the General Mission Board intended to investigate two areas, China and Africa. The communist takeover of China after World War II, however, cut the list to Africa. The convention determined that two men should be sent to explore the mission possibilities in Africa.

In the spring of 1949 two Michigan pastors, Arthur Wacker and Edgar Hoenecke, departed for Africa. Years later, Pastor Hoenecke published his account of this fact-finding expedition in the book, *The WELS Forty-niners*. At the 1949 convention they reported to the synod that a promising mission field existed west of Lusaka, in the country then known as Northern Rhodesia, now called Zambia. The convention took no action on the proposal. Another committee was appointed to study the question further.

Fifty years ago the Wisconsin Synod finally began a solo effort to work among unbelievers overseas. Just as had happened on the home mission field, the 1950s saw action taken after years of interest. The General Mission Board proposed to the 1951 synodical convention that two men be sent to Africa and that an additional two men be sent to Japan. A new day in the history of WELS mission work had dawned.

Japan

Although a two-man team had been proposed for Japan, the 1951 convention changed that to a single pastor who would serve the spiritual needs of our servicemen stationed there, while also researching the mission opportunities there. Pastor Frederick Tiefel left for Japan in February 1952. Mission progress proved to be very slow and what was accomplished had to be redone when Missionary Tiefel broke ties with the Wisconsin Synod over fellowship practices. Recall that during this time stateside pastors were expressing their dissatisfaction with what they considered to be WELS inaction in dealing with the Missouri Synod. When the 1956 special synodical convention did not break with Missouri, Tiefel viewed it as evidence of a disregard for biblical fellowship principles. In 1957 he resigned from the Wisconsin Synod and, due to the requirement of Japanese law which made it necessary for him to hold title to property in the country, he was able to retain possession of the two houses the synod had purchased in Japan.

Work in Japan continued under Pastor Richard Seeger who had been assigned to the country in 1956 as a seminary graduate, just as the break with our former missionary was coming to a head. Soon Pastor Richard Poetter joined him, as the Wisconsin Synod voted to expand the work in Japan. In the 1960s three additional

⁷ *Wisconsin Synod Proceedings*, 1945, p 34.

missionaries were sent to the island nation: Luther Weindorf, Norbert Meier, and Harold Johne. By the time the Lutheran Evangelical Christian Church celebrated its first quarter century the missionary team numbered seven, including Pastors Kermit Habben, Roger Falk, David Haberkorn, John Boehringer, and Elwood Fromm, as well as Poettel and Johne. In that time five national pastors had also been trained and installed in the work.

At the end of the century the work continued, although the number of expatriate workers involved had declined. At present four national pastors and five missionaries are serving in Japan. Lay workers, who serve for limited periods of time, are augmenting the efforts of the missionaries. Offering English as a Second Language (ESL) classes, our lay workers are discovering new opportunities to witness to Japanese young people and adults.

Africa

The same convention that authorized the work in Japan also initiated the work in Africa. Unfortunately the start of this work was delayed until the summer of 1953 when Pastor and Mrs. Albrecht Habben and lay workers, Mr. and Mrs. Paul Ziegler, arrived in Lusaka. Soon thereafter seminary graduate Otto Drevlow was added to the team.

In their report to the 1955 synodical convention the missionaries reported an average attendance of twenty-five people at the white mission in Lusaka. In the suburb of Matero almost 100 Africans were gathering for worship on a regular basis. In Sala Land four mission stations had been established with regular attendance ranging from 150 to 400. The mission work was already showing the promise of still greater things to come.

Although there were repeated manpower turnovers in the early years, the work progressed. The arrivals of Dr. William Schweppe, Pastor Ernst H. Wendland, Pastor Theodore Sauer, and Pastor Raymond Cox provided the mission with long-term service and stability.

After the first decade of work in Zambia the work of the missionaries branched out to include training national workers for an indigenous church. The Lutheran Bible Institute was opened in the Lusaka area in 1964. It provided a two-year course of study which permitted graduates to serve as evangelists and gain additional experience before attending the seminary.

In 1965 the African congregations organized the Lutheran Church of Central Africa (LCCA). By 1978 when the mission's silver anniversary was celebrated, the LCCA included 7,000 souls in 106 congregations that were served by five national pastors, twelve missionaries, two vicars, and thirty-two evangelists. By that time the LCCA had grown into neighboring Malawi. By 1999 the Lutheran Church of Central Africa had produced 29 national pastors. It serves more than 200 congregations, numbering almost 36,000 baptized souls.

In various ways contact was also made with groups in other part of Africa. More than 25 years ago our synod became involved with the Lutheran Church of Cameroon (LCC). Since 1995 we have been able to send missionaries into the country to assist in the training of native church workers. In March 1999 this worker-training effort provided 15 pastoral candidates to join the two national pastors in serving the LCC's 24 congregations and two preaching stations with a total of 1200 baptized souls.

Similarly the Wisconsin Synod also enjoys fellowship with a group in Nigeria that had formerly been a part of the Synodical Conference mission. Christ the King Lutheran Church of Nigeria is composed of 23 congregations. Its nine national pastors serve some 2,500 baptized souls. Although no WELS missionaries are currently resident in the country, Pastor Charles Papenfuss organizes regular visits by teachers who conduct a pre-seminary program that one day, with the Lord's continued blessing, will again become a seminary program.

Organization

As previously noted, the Wisconsin Synod's General Mission Board was split into home and world mission boards in 1955. At that time Pastor Edgar Hoenecke, who had gone on the 1949 African exploration, became the chairman of the "General Board for Foreign and Heathen Missions." In 1959 Hoenecke was elected to be the fulltime chairman of the "Board for World Missions." His title was changed to "Executive Secretary"

in 1965, but there was no change in the work. Hoenecke held the position until his retirement in 1977, when he was succeeded by Pastor Theodore Sauer who had served as a missionary in Africa, including a three-year stint as field superintendent there. Sauer served as the administrator of WELS world missions until his retirement in 1984. At that time Pastor Duane Tomhave began his tenure as administrator. Tomhave's service was cut short by a devastating illness which forced his retirement in 1997.

The world mission program had also been served for a number of years by Pastor John Kurth who served as the Coordinator for Mission Training. This service also ended in 1997. With Administrator Tomhave's retirement Pastor Daniel Koelpin was called to the administrator's position and Pastor Walter Westphal, himself a veteran of the African field, was called as the associate in 1998.

Latin America

Once foreign mission work had been established in Japan and Africa, it did not take long to quicken the pace of expansion into other fields. Our efforts in Latin America had begun in the late 1940s when Pastor Venus Winter began Spanish services in Tucson, Arizona. When similar efforts were initiated in El Paso, Texas, some thought this would provide a natural foundation for work in Mexico and countries in Central and South America. Because of Mexican regulations limiting expatriate missionaries, the work in Mexico did not begin until a Mexican Lutheran pastor, David Orea Luna, brought a group into fellowship with the WELS. To assist the Mexican church a seminary was set up in El Paso, and supervision and support were provided by Wisconsin Synod missionaries who remained in El Paso.

In 1999 the WELS mission team moved to Mexico City, the largest city in the world. This move reflected the desire of the national church to expand evangelism among the city's 24 million residents. Pastors Larry W. Schlomer and Timothy Flunker also are continuing seminary training of two students, while they work to establish a nucleus of believers there.

Even before the work in Mexico was possible, the synod authorized Spanish mission work in Puerto Rico. That effort became a reality in 1964 with the arrival of Pastors Roger Sprain and Rupert Eggert on the island. Presently more than 300 souls are served in four established congregations. Four Puerto Rican evangelists, two of whom are in seminary training, work with our missionaries.

The experience gained in Puerto Rico led to work in Colombia. Ten years after work began in Puerto Rico, three missionaries began work in Medellin. The authorization of a fourth Colombian missionary in 1975 and the ordination of a national pastor in 1985 permitted the work to expand into Bogota. Unfortunately the civil strife that has overrun Colombia in recent years necessitated the pull-out of our expatriate missionaries in 1999. The work continues there through national workers with supervision from the United States.

South American mission work expanded to Brazil when the Orthodox Lutheran Church near Porto Alegre contacted the Wisconsin Synod and sought our assistance. Although a visitation team was authorized to survey the Brazilian opportunity in 1977, the visitation did not take place until 1983. When the visitors reported to the 1985 convention, the convention authorized a five-man team to work in Brazil. Pastors Charles Flunker, Bruce Marggraf, and Richard Starr entered Brazil in the fall of 1987. The initial three men were soon joined by Pastors Charles Gumm and Kenneth Cherney. From the Porto Alegre region the work has expanded 800 miles to the northwest, to Dourados, and to the cities of Gravatai and Sao Paulo.

Efforts in the Dominican Republic have been carried out since 1993 when Missionary Ronald Baerbock began to work in Santiago. In 1995 he was joined by seminary graduate Larry M. Schlomer. The response to the gospel has been very encouraging. As a result, when the Colombian missionaries were withdrawn, Philip Strackbein and Stephen Mueller were called to work in the city of Santo Domingo.

The Dominican Republic shares the island of Hispaniola with the country of Haiti. Missionary Baerbock has begun to make exploratory trips across the border into Haiti. The region is primitive and the Creole language presents additional challenges, but there too the field is ripe for the harvest.

Cuba remains a stronghold of Cold War communism, but we are confident the Lord is opening the door and will allow our missionaries to share the gospel there more openly in the not too distant future.

Antigua has been an English-speaking mission outpost of the Board for Home Missions since the 1970s. Two years ago Missionary Timothy Satorius of Puerto Rico was sent on a temporary basis to work among the Spanish-speakers on the island, many of whom immigrated from the Dominican Republic. After only a year over 60 people were regularly attending Spanish services. Missionary Satorius has now accepted a permanent call to work in this collaborative effort between the home and world mission boards.

Asia

Southeast Asia has been another area of expanding mission activity. After Japan, Hong Kong was the next location to receive missionary attention. In 1960 Rev. Peter Chang asked for Wisconsin Synod help in caring for the congregations he had established in Hong Kong. Beginning in 1964 WELS began to send "friendly counselors" to assist Chang. When Peter Chang left the mission field, the missionaries carried on the work in the congregations. Under the efforts of Pastors Gary Schroeder, Gary Kirschke, and Roger Plath, as well as Teacher Mark Sprengeler, the mission prepared for the return of the British colony to China. This happened in 1997. To this point the Chinese regime on the mainland has not interrupted the work of SALEM, the South Asian Lutheran Evangelical Mission.

By the beginning of 2000 our sister church body in Hong Kong consisted of eight congregations. SALEM is providing more of its own leadership and financial support. Pastor Tse Tat Chiu now serves as president of the body. In 1999 SALEM reached a milestone when it became financially independent. Although the WELS still provides the support for two missionaries, with a third missionary being called, this body is otherwise operating without subsidy.

From Hong Kong work began on Taiwan in response to radio programs broadcast from Hong Kong. After the initial work was carried on by a pastor and vicar from Hong Kong, a missionary team was sent to the island in 1979. Pastors Marcus Manthey and Robert Meister were the first to serve there. In recent years ESL classes have offered new opportunities for sharing the gospel.

In the same year that missionaries arrived on Taiwan, missionaries were also sent to Indonesia. Once again it was an invitation from a national pastor that brought the WELS into Indonesia. Pastors Bruce Ahlers and Howard Festerling were soon followed by Robert Sawall, who was already a veteran of overseas mission work in Africa. Indonesia has been a difficult country in which to work. Government regulations have now limited our mission to one expatriate, Pastor Pieter Reid. Civil strife between Muslims and Christians also creates a perilous situation. On one occasion we temporarily brought our mission family and our teachers home when their safety could not be reasonably guaranteed. A growing national church has continued the work. In addition we have benefited from the influences of WELS Lutheran elementary school teachers who have been serving in the country in an international school.

At the end of 1999 the Lutheran Church of Indonesia (Gereja Lutheran Indonesia) consisted of six congregation, served by six national pastors and two evangelists. At present there are eight men studying at the seminary level and an additional seven men who are taking pre-seminary courses. Total membership in the congregations is more than 300 souls.

India, the second most populous nation on earth, has been providing us with tremendous mission potential in recent years. As early as 1970 the Wisconsin Synod had established a relationship with T. Paul Mitra who led a Lutheran mission in the Madras area. Since government regulations limit expatriate work in India, this contact provided us with a very limited access to the country. In the early 1990's Professor David Valleskey, now president of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, and World Mission Counselor pastor John Kurth began to investigate additional promising mission opportunities in India.

Rao Dasari, Mark Krueger, and Lynn Wiedmann, have been guiding efforts on our behalf in India. The recent death of Pastor Dasari, a native of India, is a set-back, but work will continue. in an area which measures 900 miles from north to south and 320 miles from east to west, more than 200 congregations are served by 180 national workers. More than 11,000 souls are gathered in these congregations. A seminary is preparing 12 men for graduation in 2002 and a pre-seminary is readying 35 men to enter the seminary.

Rounding out the mission work in Southeast Asia is Thailand. In 1993 Missionaries Robert Meister and John Hartwig began work in this country. Today Missionary Meister, assisted by two WELS Kingdom Workers lay volunteers, continues gospel outreach in four areas of Thailand.

From Thailand new possibilities for bringing the gospel to Hmong-speaking people in this part of the world are opening up.

Europe

Until the fall of the Iron Curtain, our efforts to reach people in communist-controlled countries had been limited to radio broadcasts. With the fall of one communist regime after another, suddenly we were able to enter vast new areas.

For generations in Russia being "sent to Siberia" was anything but pleasant. The first WELS missionary arrived in Siberia in February 1993. Since that time a congregation has been organized in Akademgorodok, with preaching stations in Iskitim, Novosibirsk, and Omsk. In 1999 there were 105 baptisms and 72 confirmations, bringing membership to 306 baptized and 185 confirmed. This mission effort is served by seven missionary families and one layworker.

Akademgorodok is home to our Russian seminary under the direction of Pastor John Sullivan. He is assisted by other missionaries and from time to time by visiting professors from the United States. Four students are presently enrolled in the seminary and one student is in the Bible institute program.

Christian Information Centers have proven to be effective means for reaching out to the Russian people. There are two such centers in Novosibirsk. A third center is located in Iskitim, 50 miles to the south of Novosibirsk. In December 1999 Missionary Luke Wolfgramm moved to Omsk and efforts are underway to establish a fourth Christian Information Center in that city.

With the prospect of Russian seminary students graduating in the near future, exploratory work is being carried out as we look for new cities in which to work. During 1999, in addition to Omsk exploratory efforts were conducted in Tomsk, Togychin, Berdsk, Taimyanka, and Linyova. After more than 70 years under an atheist regime, the Russian people are hungry for the gospel. The dramatic growth in 1999 gives evidence of the power of the Spirit working through Word and sacraments.

Bulgaria is another former communist state in which the gospel continues to make progress. As is the case in Russia, Christian Information Centers provide a very important means for sharing the good news of Jesus. In addition to the mission's headquarters in Sofia, centers are also found in Trun, Varna, Mladost, Lullin and Chichil. Our Bulgarian missionaries are also working in at least twelve other locations.

Last year the Bible institute graduated its first class of three men and one woman. The three men entered our seminary program and the woman accepted a call to serve as a deaconess. In June 2000 the first Bulgarian national pastor graduated from our seminary and was ordained and installed. Pastor Arno Wolfgramm directs the seminary and the Bible institute. He is assisted by the other missionaries and by visiting professors. At the present time the Bulgarian expatriate team includes five missionaries, one retired pastor, and one teacher for the missionary children in the country.

The national church has also been active in translating confessional Lutheran literature. In a related matter, more than 250 hymns will be made available when a Bulgarian Lutheran hymnal is published at the end of the year 2000.

In neighboring Albania work began in December 1996. Missionaries Kirby Spevacek and Richard Russow were the initial team. Our WELS missionary presence has been limited due to political unrest. When our missionaries were forced to flee the country, it was decided that for the present no full-time missionary presence is possible.

Missionary Russow served the Albanian Lutherans on a part-time basis until July 1999, at which time Pastor Gregory Bey from Bulgaria began making visits into the country once every three weeks. In the absence of a full-time expatriate missionary, the work continues thanks to the efforts of Mr. and Mrs. Agron Mece, a national lay couple. They teach and visit the sick in the Durres area. Mr. Mece is studying worker-training

materials with Missionary Bey. In the absence of a pastor, he reads sermons for the congregation in Durres, which had an average attendance of 62 in 1999. Mrs. Mece, a teacher of English, serves as an interpreter and translator for the mission. A considerable amount of scripturally-sound material has been translated from English to Albanian. These materials are distributed at the rented building that serves as a church and Christian information center.

In March 1999 Pastor John Vogt arrived in Sweden as the "friendly counselor" to our sister churches in Scandinavia. While serving a congregation in Goteborg, he has been providing workshops for lay people and pastors in Sweden and other nearby countries. More than a dozen students have also enrolled in a pre-seminary program.

Native Americans

One final world mission effort needs to be mentioned—the expanding work among Native Americans. Although the work among the Apaches has been going on for more than one hundred years, outreach activities among the Lakota and the Navajo are relatively new.

In 1995 Pastor James Fleeting began to work among the Lakota Sioux, dividing his time between the Rosebud Reservation and the congregation in Mission, South Dakota. When Pastor Fleeting moved to New Mexico, it was decided to make the mission effort among the Lakota a full-time position. In 1998 Missionary David Neumann established a Christian Information Center in Mission, South Dakota. Although the work is challenging and time is required to gain the trust of the Lakota people, there is evidence that good opportunities exist for sharing the gospel among these frequently forgotten people.

A similar effort began in 1999 on the Navajo Reservation in New Mexico. Missionary Daniel Jensen has begun teaching children's Bible lessons at three sites on the reservation every Sunday. Once again a cooperative effort between home and world mission boards is evident among the Navajo. WELS home missionary to the Navajo Pastor James Fleming of Farmington, New Mexico, coordinates his efforts with Missionary Jensen.

It should also be noted that our long-established Apache mission is entering a new era as the mission moves closer to self-support and self-control. The newly formed Apache Lutheran Council continues to take on more of the leadership of the Apache church. East Fork Lutheran High School began functioning in February 2000 with an all-Apache Board of Control.

The training of lay leaders has become a priority with the establishment of ACTS—the Apache Christian Training School. Eight men and three women are currently enrolled in ACTS classes. The first Apache evangelist, Mr. Fidel Dazen, began his work in February 2000 as an assistant to the San Carlos missionary team. He continues to work at pre-seminary courses as he serves his Lord.

Humanitarian Aid

Providing humanitarian aid for the strengthening of bodies has given us the opportunity to share the gospel for the strengthening of souls. Since 1961 the Central Africa Medical Mission has provided medical care in Zambia and Malawi. The costs involved have been provided by special gifts outside the synodical budget. Similar efforts are now being carried out in other areas.

The use of humanitarian aid is becoming critical to legitimizing our presence to the governments in some areas of the world. In Africa, Bulgaria, India, Russia, and other countries charitable efforts provide the constituency of the WELS with the opportunity to express their Christian faith and to put Christian love into action. The Board for World Missions recently established a standing Humanitarian Aid Committee to raise awareness about this program and to oversee the efforts so as not to drain the energy of mission teams.

In November 1999, Pastor Daniel Koelpin, Administrator of the WELS Board for World Missions, summarized the blessings world missions has enjoyed:

By God's grace the WELS has also had the privilege of participating in the Lord's worldwide plan to reach the lost. As we begin to observe our Forward in Christ anniversary celebration, it is abundantly clear that among the blessings we have to celebrate are also those that the Lord has showered on our synod's World Mission efforts. As of this writing a rich harvest of 57,274 souls is evidenced in the 20 World Mission fields in which we have been working for a little over 100 years. Most of this growth has taken place in the past 50 years. Sixty-six national pastors and 232 evangelists from those respective fields have been educated in worker training programs so that, as gifts from the ascended Christ, they might provide scriptural leadership for their emerging national churches. The worldwide enrollment of 101 Bible institute students and 106 seminary students also points to a future bright with promise. To our God alone be the glory!⁸

In our world mission fields, as in our home mission endeavors, there are numerous challenges to be met and difficulties to be overcome. How do we stretch budgets and manpower to cover the opportunities before us? Which new areas should we investigate and where can we best use our missionaries? Presently exploratory work is gathering information for possible expansion in far-flung areas, some of which have been largely closed to Christian mission work. Home and world mission efforts are working with each other to investigate new opportunities and new methods for sharing Jesus Christ as Savior of all. With every day that passes we see more evidence of how the Lord blesses all our efforts in his name.

III. The Founding of the CELC

WELS mission work has resulted in a number of national church bodies around the world. At the same time the Wisconsin Synod has established fellowship with confessional Lutheran groups in other countries. How can we keep in contact with these sister synods, helping them to remain in the Word and encouraging them to reach out to the lost? That has been a challenge as we work to lengthen the cords and strengthen the stakes.

In 1962 as the old Synodical Conference was coming to an end, there were individuals who called for a new International Lutheran Synodical Conference. A memorial for the formation of such a group under the leadership of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod was proposed. The lack of fellowship with Missouri made the proposal impossible for the Wisconsin Synod to pursue. President O. J. Naumann in his report to the 1971 convention mentioned the centennial of the Synodical Conference's founding. He suggested, "1972 might be the year during which our Synod together with the Evangelical Lutheran Synod, the two synods who still uphold the confessional platform of the former Synodical Conference, should initiate consultations with orthodox Lutheran synods around the world aimed at the formation of a world-wide synodical conference."⁹ The convention passed a resolution encouraging the Commission on Doctrinal Matters to arrange such a meeting as favorable conditions permitted.

President Naumann's suggestion lay dormant until the WELS Commission on Inter-Church Relations revived the idea in 1986. It concluded that the time had come for those

who continue to uphold the confessional positions in doctrine and practice of the former Synodical Conference of North America to again establish such a federation

The purpose of such a conference would be predominantly confessional. It would aim to bring together churches or synods so that they might strengthen one another in their confession to Scripture and to the Lutheran Confessions and present to the world (religious or otherwise) a united confession of faith on a sound scriptural basis.¹⁰

⁸ Daniel H. Koelpin, "Status of WELS World Missions on the Threshold of the 21 Century," p 3.

⁹ Proceedings of the 1971 Convention of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, p 21.

¹⁰ Resolution of the Commission on Inter-Church Relations, adopted April 19, 1986. Quoted in Duane K. Tomhave's "Synods of Mission-Minded Confessional Lutherans," p 17.

When both the ELS and the WELS Districts reacted favorably to the proposal, a planning committee of three men from each synod was appointed. They were to present recommendations to the 1989 conventions of the two synods. WELS Board for World Missions Administrator Duane Tomhave wrote in support of such an organization:

In the mid-nineteenth century, our forerunners were faced with a wave of immigrants in a sparsely populated frontier. They molded a ministry and mission to meet the challenges of their time. Near the close of the twentieth century we face an international movement of tribes and nations of over five billion people on six continents of earth's green globe. To spread its light is still our chief endeavor. The Spirit's abundant wisdom will also help us to chart a course for our generation of Lutheran confessional churches. Such an international federation that makes its end and aim the saving of souls will always exhibit both a deep concern for doctrine and a world embracing love.¹¹

The constituting convention of the Confessional Evangelical Lutheran Conference (CELC) met at Oberwesel, Germany, from April 27 through 29, 1993. Nineteen voting delegates, representing eleven churches¹² from around the world, together with eleven advisory delegates and thirteen official guests, gathered to give witness to their common faith and mission. Two additional churches were included in the CELC's membership, although they were not able to attend—Christ the King Lutheran Church of Nigeria and the Lutheran Church of Cameroon. In reviewing this initial meeting Prof. Lyle Lange noted, "Repeatedly throughout the convention it was stressed that this unity of doctrine and purpose was the work of God's Spirit alone. Human effort could never have achieved the unity of faith and purpose which was demonstrated at Oberwesel."¹³ The conference essays centered on the Bible as God's Word.

Prof. Wilbert Gawrisch of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Mequon, Wisconsin, who had chaired the original planning committee, was elected as the first president of the CELC. Elected to be vice president was Prof. Lyle Lange of Dr. Martin Luther College, New Ulm, Minnesota. Conference secretary was President Armin Panning of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. President Gerhard Wilde of the Evangelical Lutheran Free Church of Germany and Administrator Duane Tomhave were elected to the planning committee.

The second triennial convention of the CELC was held at Quebradillas, Puerto Rico, on April 23-25, 1996. Twenty-three voting delegates, twelve advisory delegates, and fifteen official guests were in attendance. Since the 1993 convention the membership had increased by two with the addition of the Confessional Evangelical Lutheran Church (Russia) and the Evangelical Lutheran Synod in Peru. Five other churches sent visitors' to the meeting. Conference essays dealt with justification by grace through faith—the central doctrine of scripture.

Professors Wilbert Gawrisch and Lyle Lange were reelected as president and vice president of the CELC. Professor John Moldstad, Jr. of Bethany Lutheran Seminary, Mankato, Minnesota was elected secretary. President George Orvick, Evangelical Lutheran Synod, and Administrator Duane Tomhave were elected to the planning committee.

The most recent gathering of the CELC was its third triennial convention in Winter Haven, Florida, on April 20-22, 1999. The convention welcomed delegates from eleven of the fifteen member churches. At this meeting the sixteenth member, our sister church in Bulgaria, was accepted into membership.

¹¹ Duane K. Tomhave, "Synods of Mission-Minded Confessional Lutherans," p 22.

¹² The original members of the CELC were: Confessional Evangelical Lutheran Church (Mexico); Evangelical Lutheran Confessional Church (Finland); Evangelical Lutheran Confessional Church (Puerto Rico); Evangelical Lutheran Free Church (Germany); Evangelical Lutheran Synod (USA); Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Australia; Lutheran Church of Central Africa (Malawi Conference); Lutheran Church of Central Africa (Zambia Conference); Lutheran Confessional Church (Sweden and Norway); Lutheran Evangelical Christian Church (Japan); and Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (USA).

¹³ Lyle W. Lange, "The Constituting Convention of the CELC—A Mountaintop Experience," *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 90 (Summer 1993): p 218.

Under the theme "Come, Holy Spirit, God and Lord," the convention essays dealt with the work of the Holy Spirit. With essays presented by men from around the world, Pastor James Pope noted that "the convention offered a preview of what the apostle John saw in his vision: 'After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb'" (Revelation 7:9).¹⁴

The delegates elected new officers to serve during the present triennium. These officers are: President, Professor Armin Panning; Vice President, Professor Adolph Harstad of Bethany Lutheran Seminary; Secretary, Professor John Moldstad, Jr. Pastor Daniel Koelpin and Pastor Walter Westphal were elected to the planning committee.

Our forefathers made their doctrinal positions clear by organizing the truths of Scripture into confessions of faith. Recognizing the need for a clear proclamation of the biblical teachings, the CELC has committed itself to developing "The Eternal Word: A Lutheran Confession for the Twenty-first Century." In 1998 Article 1 of this confession, dealing with Holy Scripture, was produced. It was drawn up on the basis of the essays presented at the 1993 convention of the CELC. God willing, this effort will continue as we travel into the 21st century.

One hundred and fifty years is a long time, if we are comparing it to today's average life span. It is not a long time, however, in the history of the Christian church. As we continue our celebration of God's many blessings upon our Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, may the Lord help us to look back with gratitude on all that he has accomplished. Our God has kept his promise. He has strengthened us through Word and sacraments and has given us the privilege to reach out with his message of forgiveness. Lengthening the cords and strengthening the stakes reminds us that the Lord Jesus is with us, just as he promised at his Ascension. Mindful of his blessings and clinging to his promises, may we go forward in Christ.

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