

Pastor Rolfe F. Westendorf:
Leading A Congregation of Change

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Synopsis: This will be an oral history of Pastor Westendorf which will focus on his ministry at Siloah during the change from a mostly German-American congregation to a mostly African-American congregation.

Pastor Rolfe F. Westendorf

- I. Introduction
- II. Background
 - A. Family background
 - B. Growing up in Bay City, MI
 - C. Education background
- III. Assignment to Maumee, Ohio
 - A. Ministry
 1. First impressions of ministry
 2. Important lessons
 - B. Family
 1. Marriage
 2. Children
- IV. Call to Siloah in Milwaukee's inner-city
 - A. Adjustment
 - B. What Siloah was like in 1968
 1. Make-up of the congregation
 2. Ministry aspects
 - C. History of the 30+ years of ministry at Siloah
 1. Milestones
 2. Setbacks
 - D. How Siloah functions as a multi-cultural congregation today
 1. Culture
 - a. incorporating German & African-American culture
 1. worship (Gospel Choirs, Senior Choir, etc.)
 2. fellowship (Black History Sunday, Friendship Sunday)
 - b. caveats
 1. education (barriers)
 2. cultural differences (roadblocks)
 3. possible Arminian "baggage" of Baptist culture
 2. Philosophy of ministry
 3. Important aspects of multi-cultural & inner-city ministry
 4. The future of Siloah
- V. Conclusion

QUESTIONS—Oral History (See Accompanying Videotape)

Church History Project – Rolfe F. Westendorf

I. Introduction

II. Background

1. What was it like to grow up with your father as a pastor?
 - What did you learn about being a pastor from your father?
 - What were some more vivid memories about growing up?
2. What was your education like?
 - Compare your education with the current pastoral training.
 - What was your Call Day like?
- III. Assignment to Maumee, Ohio
3. What was your first impression of the ministry
 - What did you learn the first year?
 - What joys of ministry did you experience? --What disappointments?
 - How did Maumee shape or change your philosophy of ministry?
4. What Westendorf family events took place in Ohio
5. How did you balance family and ministry? What advice would you give?
- IV. Call to Siloah in Milwaukee's inner-city
6. Describe the adjustments you made as a family from Maumee to Milwaukee.
7. What was Siloah like in 1968?
 - What was the make-up of the congregation?
 - What was the ministry like(average day at Siloah for the pastor(s))
8. Describe the history of your 30+ years of ministry at Siloah.
 - milestones
 - setbacks
9. How does Siloah function as a multi-cultural congregation today?
 - How does Siloah incorporate German & African-American culture in worship?
 - How does Siloah incorporate German & African-American culture in fellowship?
10. What are the caveats of serving a multi-cultural congregation?
 - What are the barriers in education?
 - What are the roadblocks in the realm of cultural differences?
 - How do you deal with possible Arminian "baggage" of the Baptist culture?
10. If you had to describe your philosophy of ministry, what would it be?
11. What are some of the most important aspects of multi-cultural and inner-city ministry?
12. How do you envision the future of Siloah?

This paper is a summary of the oral history of Rolfe Westendorf, interviewed in April 1998. Please see accompanying videotape.

Rolfe Frederick Westendorf was born on May 19th, 1933 to Pastor & Mrs. Adelbert Frederick Westendorf in Bay City, MI. He was baptized shortly thereafter at St. John's congregation where his father was pastor. Rolfe was confirmed at St. John's on Palm Sunday, 1947.

Some of his childhood memories include spending time at the beach, his mother letting the delivery man know how much ice she needed for the icebox, and his father drilling a hole in the floor to let the water drain out of the icebox. Rolfe remembers growing up poor, rarely getting new toys. In fact, his older siblings used to say that their younger brother Rolfe was spoiled because he got to put *both* butter *and* jam on his bread. The Westendorfs would often make their own butter and bread.

WWII was a great time to be a kid because the war was glorified. As a boy, Rolfe would play with a wooden machine gun in vacant lots and even had a cardboard army and navy, which he would shoot with his b.b. gun. The touches with the realities of war included one member of St. John's killed in a training exercise, Oscar Guntermann, as well as the members of St. John's sending care packages to those in war-torn Europe.

The path to the ministry was well laid out for Rolfe Westendorf. His grandfather, J.H. Westendorf, was a pastor and four out of five of his sons served in the ministry, all in the Michigan District. Rolfe's Father was serving as pastor in Bay City and Rolfe's

older brother Rollin had also gone ahead to school to be a pastor. Although he didn't learn much theology from his father(who summed up the turbulent relationship with LC-MS in the 40s & 50s by saying "Well, you can't always keep your skirts clean"), what Rolfe learned from his father about ministry was dignity—a high respect for the pastoral office.

Rolfe attended grade school in Bay City then went on to Michigan Lutheran Seminary in Saginaw. Especially appreciated was the sense of family atmosphere at MLS. Rolfe went on from Saginaw to Watertown, WI; to Northwestern College where he enjoyed football(where he played four years and never lost a game) and basketball but lamented the loss of the family spirit. At NWC there seemed to be a barrier of formality. From Watertown, Rolfe went on to Thiensville; to Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, where there were fewer barriers between faculty and students. Rolf went to Germany for a year after his junior year at Sem and tutored for a year at Mobridge, S.D. for a year after his middler year. Call Day and Graduation finally came in May, 1960, when the graduate was assigned as tutor to the Watertown campus. The following May, Rolfe was assigned to Maumee, Ohio. On June 18, 1961, Rolfe Westendorf married Katherine Zabell of Pigeon, MI.

The young Pastor Rolfe Westendorf was installed at St. Timothy in Maumee, OH on July 9, 1961. This congregation was the beginning of the Lutheran Association for Church Extension(LACE), when one of the members went to Genera, OH and got farmers to invest in a loan to provide a church in Maumee. While the Westendorfs were at St. Timothy, the congregation grew from 80-120 communicants. Maumee provided

some interesting ministry decisions with re-baptism, baptism for a non-member, and the only time someone has come to him for absolution.

In 1962, Mark Frederick was born, followed by Miriam Anna in 1964 and Krista Naomi in 1966. These first six years were valuable for building relationships with wife and children. The congregation was small enough that it afforded the young pastor a good amount of family time.

In 1967, Siloah congregation in Milwaukee called Rolfe to serve as an assistant to Pastor Hoffmann in the changing neighborhood of the inner city. On November 1, the Westendorf family moved into the brick colonial home on N. 23rd St. where they are still living today. Where only two families out of thirty were black in 1967, there is only one family out of thirty that is white, namely, the Westendorfs.

The neighborhood had been changing since the 50s and Siloah Lutheran Church built a school in 1961, which was really an act of integration. The school reached out to the black community while making a permanent commitment to the neighborhood. With that firm stand, Siloah made a commitment to stay in that neighborhood and spread the Word there until Jesus comes again.

The community continued to change and the methods to bring the gospel to the changing neighborhood also changed. In the mid to late 1980s, Siloah was about 50% Black and 50% White. Today, Siloah is a mostly Black congregation.

Siloah attempts to blend the African-American and German-American cultures in worship by using the Gospel Choir and Youth Gospel Choir, as well as the gifts of Mr. Don Roeber, organist. Roeber is an artist at blending the two different styles of music into one service and trying to find a balance in worship. The balance is not always 50/50;

the service may be more traditional German style(Good Friday Tenebrae service) or more African-American style(Wedding service).

Pastor Westendorf makes no boasts about having the secret to cross-cultural ministry. He encourages the love of other people enough to learn and appreciate their culture. Love the people enough to avoid areas of cultural sensitivity and possible areas of misunderstanding. Westendorf envisions the future of Siloah as simply speaking the truth in love until Jesus comes again. God bless your ministry at Siloah, Pastor Westendorf, and wherever the Lord leads you!