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Reverend Henry Paustian: Life, Ministry and Music

Music invigorated, sustained and comforted Pastor Henry Paustian throughout his life. Music also nearly kept him from entering the ministry. On December 4th, 2010, I conducted an interview with my grandmother, Elaine Paustian, on the subject of my grandfather. The focus was on his ministry and the effect of music on it.

This topic is one I was particularly interested in because my grandfather retired from the public ministry the year I was born and I never heard him preach. Both his father and his grandfather were ministers (his grandfather graduated from NWC in 1855 in a class of two. That would make me a fifth generation pastor of this synod, Lord willing). What I knew of my grandfather was just that. He was my grandfather. I didn't know how well respected and loved he was until I arrived at Martin Luther College. I learned much from my grandmother in this interview and am thankful for this opportunity not only for myself, but also for my cousins and siblings. They, like me, never heard my grandfather preach.

For the sake of order, I'll begin with the beginning of my grandfather's study for the public ministry. He did not intend to be a pastor. He intended to go to the University of Wisconsin, in Madison. He wanted to pursue a degree in music, primarily in the area of trumpeting.

He had planned on going there until his uncle, Richard Siegler, offered to pay for his tuition if he would enroll at Northwestern College. He accepted and entered Northwestern college in the business program. It was over the course of that year that three of his friends

convinced him to enter the pastor track.¹ Because he entered that program after his first year, he was in college for five years. One might think, “Well, that should be no problem since his uncle was paying for it.” He didn’t. He died during his first year and never actually paid for his tuition. Years later, money from Richard Siegler’s estate went toward forming the Siegler Grant, still available for Paustian descendants in the pastor track at Martin Luther College. In order to pay for college, my grandfather rented himself out, tutoring his fellow students in Latin.

While in college, he continued to pursue music. In his earlier years, he had learned from his brother how to play trumpet, winning his first place in his district and taking first place honors at the state competition level. From what I understand, my grandfather was an excellent trumpeter, although his wife, children and grandchildren never heard him play. He knocked out his two front teeth playing basketball while at the seminary and never played again. The bridge holding his teeth in place would have been damaged had he continued to play.

From his somewhat humorous autobiography, I learned how he came to play piano, “I took piano lessons from a member and then a one-armed musician and played accordingly.” This must have been said in jest. He was a fine pianist and also organist.² He was also incredibly humble.

While he was at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, he was privileged to serve as the student director of the male chorus. It’s likely that this had an impact on his years in the parish. He, Harold Wicke, Don Sellnow and Gene Kirst began what has become a yearly tradition in Watertown, Wisconsin.

¹ All three of those friends eventually joined the Missouri Synod during the controversy.

² My mother and grandfather used to challenge each other. My mother would play the organ and my grandfather would play the piano at home. They played hymns from memory. One would change to a different key and wait for the other to figure it out and change keys to match.

In 1966, Maennerchor was a quartet. Then, it grew and grew. The quartet was joined by Northwestern professors, tutors, city pastors, retired pastors, teachers, members of St. Mark's Lutheran Church in Watertown. Eventually, the group had over thirty male voices. My grandmother remembered fondly the performance which always came after the nursing homes and shut-ins. My grandmother would remain at the parsonage all day, cooking Norwegian dishes for the hungry men when they finished. In thanks for her cooking, she got her own private concert each year. Just the thought of the rumbling base line on Stille Nacht still brings tears to her eyes. I remember singing that same Stille Nacht for my grandfather, along with my fellow juniors in high brau. Tears filled his eyes too.

Music has and will continue to have an effect on the Paustian family, where the love of music is instilled from infancy. Music lifts the spirit in times of joy and comforts it in times of sadness. I'll never forget sitting in my grandfather's hospice room. I took a dvd of a WLS chorus concert to his room for him. I turned it on, but before the music started, it seemed like he had fallen asleep. I told my grandmother that I would just leave it for him to listen to later. Then I looked over and I saw him, eyes closed, directing the choir with one hand.

I'll finish this paper by quoting one of the stanzas sung at his funeral.³

No guilt in life, no fear in death,
This is the power of Christ in me;
From life's first cry to final breath,
Jesus commands my destiny.
No power of hell, no scheme of man
Can ever pluck me from his hand;
Till he returns or calls me home,
Here in the power of Christ I'll stand.

³ Members of Pastor Paustian would remember how often he quoted hymn stanzas in his sermons. It seems fitting to do so here. Quotation taken from Christian Worship Supplement.