

The Wisconsin Synod's Mission in Poland * 1924 - 1949 *

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Before the year 1923 the Wisconsin Synod carried on no mission work outside the borders of the United States. Thus our mission in Poland, which started in 1924, was our Synod's first real "foreign" mission. The specific purpose of this mission in Poland was to minister to the spiritual needs of those people living in Poland who were of German descent. Following the end of the First World War, two German provinces, namely, Posen and East Prussia, were annexed to Poland. As a result of this annexation, many German Lutherans found themselves under the control of the Polish government. Then too, the government of Poland encouraged the immigration of German citizens into their country in order to raise the existing level of agriculture. Many Germans took advantage of the considerations and concessions that were granted by the Polish government and took up residence in that country.

At first conditions were favorable for these new "Polish" citizens. The government had promised the people that they could establish their own Lutheran communities and that there would be no interference in matters of language or religion. However, there still were definite problems, especially in the area of religion. Foremost of these problems was a lack of properly trained, well-qualified pastors. As a result of this lack, little by little false doctrine, legalism and false enthusiasm began to appear. This problem was further aggravated by the fact that when these people did manage to secure a pastor usually he had been trained in the State university with its rationalistic and liberal theology.

Another problem arose for the Lutheran Church in Poland when a new government came into power. Before World War I, the

country had been divided under Russian, Austrian, and German control. But as a result of the war, the country of Poland was reestablished as a sovereign state. This new government, the Republic of Poland, sought to establish its sovereignty over the Augsburg Church, which was the name of the Lutheran Church in Poland. Thus the promises that had been made to the German Lutheran immigrants were at this time no longer honored.¹

It was in 1923 that the Wisconsin Synod, through the Mission Board, was made aware of the problems and of the spiritual needs of the German Lutherans in Poland. Two large congregations had contacted the Mission Board requesting our Synod to supply them with pastors. The Synod eagerly resolved that the Mission Board should begin the work in Poland and accordingly appropriated \$10,000 for the new Polish Mission.²

Pastor Otto Engel had been sent over to Poland to analyze the situation and upon his report the Synod went ahead with the Polish Mission. Before he arrived, a beginning had been made to establish a confessional Lutheran church there. This work was started by Gustav Maliszewski. He realized that the Augsburg Church was by this time State controlled and State supported, and was no longer a true, confessional Lutheran church. Maliszewski, who had been a former parochial school teacher, enrolled in the seminary of the Saxon Free church at Berlin-Zehlendorf and upon his return to Lodz, gathered a considerable following.

At this point Pastor Engel arrived and he organized a congregation at Lodz and another one was established in Andrespol.

The Mission Board formally called Pastor Maliszewski. He was ordained by Pastor Engel with Professor J.P. Koehler, who was in Europe at this time, and Pastor Kurt Koehler assisting. "This occasion, in 1924, is therefore generally considered the date of the founding of the Evangelical Lutheran Free Church of Poland."³

The first "permanent" director of our Synod's mission in Poland was Pastor A. Dasler. During the time he served in Poland, there were three pastors at work. In the two mission fields, Lodz and Andrespol, there were six preaching stations with 74 voting members and 269 communicant members.⁴ Pastor Dasler originally was to serve for only one year, but he actually remained in Poland for almost two years. He returned to the United States in 1927.

It should also be noted that the problem of supplying pastors for the newly founded congregations was a difficult one. Realizing the need for theologically sound pastors, the Free Church of Poland concerned itself with the training of young men from the first congregations. These young men were trained at the seminary of the Saxon Free Church where two Wisconsin men, Dr. Paul Peters and Dr. Henry Koch, were among the professors. Among the students at the seminary were L. Zielke, A. Schlender, H. Mueller, E. Patzer, A. Reit and A. Napp. As we shall see, all of these men eventually served Free Church congregations in Poland.⁵

It took over a year to find a replacement for Pastor Dasler. Finally, in June of 1929, Pastor William Bodamer of Sico, Michigan began his work in Poland. The prospects were

bright at this time, even though there was opposition by the government. There were five pastors engaged in the work of preaching the Gospel. However, in August of 1930, Pastor Bodamer was ordered out of Poland. He was given until the end of the month to leave peaceably or be forced out. But by the grace of God and through the mediation of the American ambassador, Pastor Bodamer's visa was extended long enough to permit the Synod to file a formal petition requesting the Pastor Bodamer be allowed to remain. The State Department took up the matter and no further difficulties were encountered at this time.⁶

By 1932 there were seven established congregations of the Free Church in Poland. In Lodz, St. Paul's Church was served by Pastor Maliszewski, and St. Peter's Church by Pastor A. Lerle, who had joined the Polish Free Church for confessional reasons. Pastor H. Mueller was the pastor of Trinity Church in Andrespol. St. John's in Stawiszyn was served by Pastor L. Zielke. Rev. A. Schlender was the pastor of Trinity Church in Skrzypkowo. Our Savior's Church in Piotrlow had Rev. E. Patzer as its minister, and Immanuel Church in Brundnowo was served by Pastor Maliszewski. At this time mission work was stopped at Zyrardow and the chapel at Danowice was closed because of vigorous opposition by the pastor of the State church there. Two students, Alfons Wagner and Helmuth Schlender, were enrolled at the seminary at this time.⁷

At the convention in 1933, the Synod showed its support for the Polish Mission. The Synod resolved; a) to ask the government of Poland to let Pastor Bodamer to stay and continue the work; b) to ask the United States government to extend or

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issue a new passport to Pastor Bodamer; and c) to renew Pastor Bodamer's appointment as the superintendent of the Polish Mission.⁸

During the pre-war years, 1934-1938, the Polish Mission held its own. Because of the continued opposition from the State church the numerical growth of the Polish Mission was not a spectacular one. Yet, those people who were members of the Free Church were made the stronger in their convictions and in their stand.

In 1938, there were nine pastors and twelve congregations of the Free Church in Poland. Pastor Bodamer in his report to the Synod's convention in 1939 wrote: "The personnel of our workers and their sphere of activity is the same as last year. We entered the year 1938 with nine pastors and twelve congregations and closed the year with the same number. Fact is, there has been no marked expansion the past three years. Some undoubtedly wonder why this should be so. Does the fault lie with us, with our workers? Indeed no. Our Poland Mission has received full and loyal support, our missionsries have labored faithfully and fearlessly. The reasons for the non-expansion the past three years are due entirely to the economic conditions peculiar to the Poland of today. It would carry us too far to try to portray these conditions in this report. Suffice it therefore to say that God's Word has been faithfully proclaimed, the Sacraments administered, and that God has blessed our work."⁹

The beginning of World War II brought a change to the Polish Mission of the Wisconsin Synod. In 1939 Hitler, in just a few short weeks, conquered Poland and added it to the Reich as a

conquered province. This action was both a hinderance and a help for our mission. The new military government permitted our missionaries to continue their work and even granted them some priviledges that had formerly been denied them. Some examples of these freedoms were; a) cooperation in the completion of building programs; b) the supplying of places for services and a parsonage in cases where a congregation was transplanted; c) the removal of former hinderances such as, the withholding of burial rights or the forbidding of wearing the clerical gown.¹⁰

However, all was not a bed of roses. Pastor Bodamer, who had returned to the United States for the Synod convention, was not allowed to return. For a while, he was able to remain in contact with our mission through the mails, but when the United States entered the war that opportunity was cut off. Pastor Maliszewski was appointed as our offical representative. It was reported that all the congregations, with the exception of St. John's at Nury, were in tact and still carrying on important work.

The defeat of the German army by the Russians, and the end of World War II also brought an end to the Polish Mission. Our people in Poland were forced to flee. "The flight from Poland was not a matter of personal choice, but by the command of a retreating German army which, apparently, was determined to leave as little as possible for the use of the advancing Russian troops."¹¹

As a result of the flight from Poland in January of 1945, the Evangelical Lutheran Free Church in Poland came to an end.

But that did not mean that our men stopped their work. At the 1947 convention of the Wisconsin Synod it was reported that work was being done in the American, British, and Russian zones. In the American zone there was one congregation and five preaching stations served by Pastor Maliszewski. Three pastors, L. Zielke, A. Wagner, and Armin Schlender, were working in the British zone where there was a large concentration of our members. These men served twenty preaching stations. Pastors A. Lerle, who lost 90% of his vision, and H. Schlender served twelve preaching stations in the Russian zone. At this time there was no information as to what was being done in the French zone. Thus the Evangelical Lutheran Free Church in Poland became the Evangelical Lutheran Refugee Mission in Germany. A vivid picture of what the conditions were like in Germany at this time was presented to the 1947 Convention by Secretary Maas. "Great, indeed, are the difficulties under which our missionaries carry on their work. A lay member of our mission writes: 'If only you could see us today, who in January of 1945 were still prosperous! In our present condition you would see us ragged, emaciated, unwelcome beggars! Our pastors are carrying on their work, though in great need themselves, without funds, without adequate, suitable clothing. They can not continue in this way.' In their work, to reach the members of our mission, our pastors must cover great distances. Transportation facilities, hard hit in the war, though improving, have not been restored as yet. Long, trying waits on trains and in stations are inevitable. Hunger and cold must be endured. Very few places for worship are available. They

conduct services in homes, in barns, in the open. In many localities available facilities for divine services are denied them. In such localities the State Church is trying to make our work impossible. Her desire is to 'swallow up' the members of our mission, Christians who endured much and long to get away from the conditions prevailing in the State Churches. In spite of all the difficulties, time and again as a result of them. our congregations are increasing in members and daily such who are to be saved are being added."¹²

Indeed, the Lord did bless our mission in Germany. By 1949 there were nine pastors serving 10, 408 souls in the four zones. The mission was growing, but not only with refugees, but also with German nationals who joined our church. "So it happens, in the wonderous and mysterious providence of God, that our Mission Church, uprooted from the soil of Poland, where it grew, is transplanted to the Land of the Reformation at a time when the cause of a clear and uncompromising Lutheranism is at a particularly low ebb. There it takes its stand on the Free Church position. There it shows promise of sound and substantial growth."¹³

The Wisconsin Synod's Polish Mission was faced with many problems and difficulties during the years of its existence. In almost every one of the reports submitted by Pastor Bodamer to the Synod through the Mission Board, reference was made to the persecution and enmity that the pastors and the congregations had to undergo. Opposition from the government and especially the State Church hindered the preaching of the pure Gospel of Jesus Christ. The government permitted only Polish citizens to

be pastors. The government often refused to grant congregations of the Free Church the right to build their own churches, or if a chapel had been built. the State easily closed it down. Yet, in spite of the various hardships and difficulties that were placed before the people, the Lord did not forsake the Polish Mission, but gave it the strength and the courage to continue the work.

When the end of the Second World War forced our people out of Poland, the Lord through this turned our Synod's attention from Poland to Germany. If there is anything we can do in Germany today, to help maintain the preaching of the pure Gospel of Jesus Christ and confessional Lutheranism in an age of unionism and doctrinal indifference, it is a direct result of the Wisconsin Synod's Mission in Poland.

Endnotes:

- ¹Lehninger, M. Continuing In His Word, pgs. 251-252.
- ²Ibid., pg. 252.
- ³Ibid., pg. 253.
- ⁴Proceedings of the 19th Convention of the Wisc. Synod, pg. 48.
- ⁵Lehninger, M. opt. cit., pg. 255.
- ⁶Ibid., pg. 256.
- ⁷Proceedings of the 21st Convention of the Wisc. Synod, pgs. 59-60.
- ⁸Proceedings of the 22nd Convention of the Wisc. Synod, pg. 75.
- ⁹Proceedings of the 25th Convention of the Wisc. Synod, pg. 30.
- ¹⁰Proceedings of the 26th Convention of the Wisc. Synod, pg. 37.
- ¹¹Lehninger, M. opt. cit., pg. 257.
- ¹²Ibid., pgs. 258-259.
- ¹³Ibid., pgs. 259-260.

Bibliography

Lehninger, M. Continuing In His Word., Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1951.

Proceedings of the 19th - 30th Convention of the Evangelical Lutheran Joint Synod of Wisconsin and Other States, 1927-1949.