

# Missionary to Menomonee Falls

Church History 331  
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## Introduction

When a person thinks of a mission congregation, he probably does not initially think of Wisconsin and specifically the Milwaukee area. Due to the numerous Wisconsin Synod churches that presently surround the city of Milwaukee<sup>1</sup>, a person might forget that these churches were also mission congregations at one time. As the population and popularity of the suburbs rapidly increased during the 1950's and 60's, God's people in the Wisconsin Synod saw the need to establish new congregations in these areas. Some of the missions were founded as daughter congregations and funded by established churches in the area. Other situations called for the members of the Wisconsin Synod as a whole to support a new congregation with their joint mission offerings. Area pastors and Seminary students originally served some of these mission congregations, while others sought a full-time pastor who could devote all his time to mission work in a certain area. The circumstances for founding each of these Milwaukee suburb churches varied, yet their purposes were identical: to faithfully carry out the Great Commission of the Lord by taking the gospel to all the world.

The following interview is with the author's grandfather, Pastor Herbert Kruschel, who served the Lord and his people as exploratory missionary and minister for over 25 years (1958-1984) at Pilgrim Lutheran Church in Menomonee Falls, WI. This interview is intended to record some of the unique, and maybe not so unique, experiences he had while founding and serving a congregation located in the suburbs of Milwaukee.

Allow a brief history of Herbert Kruschel in order that the viewer/reader may gain a better appreciation of him and his ministry.

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<sup>1</sup> As of March 15, 2001 there were 48 WELS congregations in the Milwaukee area according the "Church and School Locator" found on the WELS website.  
<http://wels.knowwhere.com/wels/cgi/selection?option=Church&mapid=USBaseMap&addr=&city=Milwaukee&region=WI&zip=>

## Biography

Herbert Kruschel was born to Alma and August Kruschel on December 20, 1924 in Cudahy, WI.<sup>2</sup> Awaiting the arrival of a new baby brother was Herb's only sibling, Henry. The Kruschel family of four made their church home at St. Paul's Cudahy where Herb attended grade school and was encouraged by Pastor Heinrich Vogel to consider the pastoral ministry. When it was time for high school, Alma and August decided to send Herb to Northwestern Preparatory School in Watertown, WI, so that he could be the first member of the Kruschel family to study for the ministry. This was a big commitment and adjustment for the Kruschels since Herb would travel to Watertown via train and only be able to return home to his family on holidays.

With the encouragement of pastors, family and friends, and by the Lord's guidance Herb continued his pastoral studies at Northwestern College and then at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. In 1949 Herb was ready to enter the full-time ministry and serve God and his people wherever the Lord might call him. With fiancé Helen May Seefeldt eagerly awaiting to see where they would soon begin their married life together, Herb was assigned to Firth, Nebraska. On June 25, 1949 Helen May Seefeldt and Herbert Kruschel were married at Trinity Lutheran Church in Marinette, WI, and later that summer began the long journey across the Midwest to Firth, NE.



Herbert Kruschel in his 1949 Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary graduation picture.

When the newlyweds arrived in the farming and ranching community of Firth they found a parsonage that had the newly installed conveniences of indoor plumbing and running water. However, Herb and Helen May had to wait a few weeks to make use of the facilities since electricity had not yet reached their home. The Kruschel family grew by two in 1950 and 1951 when Peter and Elizabeth were born in Lincoln. Herb served the farm folk of Firth until 1954

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<sup>2</sup> Many of the dates and names were provided by Pastor Peter Kruschel, the son of Herbert Kruschel, during a discussion held on 4/20/03.

when he accepted a call to serve dual parishes in Aurora and Sutton, NE. The Kruschels welcomed the move to the established city of Aurora<sup>3</sup> where the family would also welcome two more additions to their family, Jonathan in 1955 and Christopher in 1958. After nearly 10 years in the Cornhusker state, Herb received and accepted the call to start a mission congregation in Menomonee Falls, WI.

The Kruschel family of six left their friends and endless miles of Nebraskan cornfields in March 1959 and headed back to Wisconsin where they would spend the next 25 years. Herb was installed as missionary to Menomonee Falls by mission board chairman Ray Wiechmann<sup>4</sup> at Salem Lutheran Church on March 8, 1959.<sup>5</sup> The Kruschels settled into their new home where only months later the first church service of Pilgrim Lutheran Church would be held in the parsonage garage.<sup>6</sup> Menomonee Falls was one of the fastest growing suburbs of the Milwaukee area, and proved to be a blessed mission field. A little over a year from their first service, Pilgrim dedicated a school and chapel on July 19, 1960. The building project made headlines within the WELS as it was the first congregation to directly benefit from Church Extension Fund money. ?

God continued to bless Herb's missionary efforts and Pilgrim's rapid growth in membership, and shortly after dedicating their new worship facility the need arose for more seating. Instead of building a new worship facility, it was decided in 1961 that Pilgrim would found a daughter congregation, Bethlehem Lutheran Church, on the north side of Menomonee Falls. Throughout Herb's years as Pilgrim's shepherd, he was able to serve on various Synodical boards and committees, and even taught sophomore religion for a time at Wisconsin

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<sup>3</sup> Aurora is located just north of Grand Island, NE.

<sup>4</sup> Sixteen years later, Peter Kruschel, son of Herb, would serve as vicar for Ray Wiechmann at Bay Pines Lutheran Church in Seminole, FL.

<sup>5</sup> Unknown, "Installation Service – The Rev. Mr. Herbert Kruschel," bulletin from Salem Lutheran Church, Milwaukee, WI (March 1959).

<sup>6</sup> The history of Pastor Kruschel's ministry at Pilgrim described in the following paragraphs was partially gleaned from "Our Pilgrimage of Service, Forward in Christ." This three-page history of Pilgrim Lutheran Church was compiled for the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the church in 1999 by an unknown author.

Lutheran High School. Helen May was able to enjoy the many relationships she forged with her fellow-Christians within the congregation and the numerous pastors' wives scattered throughout the area. The Kruschel children also benefited greatly by the move to Menomonee Falls as they were able to attend Lutheran grade schools and high schools, something not available while living in Nebraska. The Kruschel's also enjoyed one last addition to their family in 1965 when little sister Sarah was born.

Herb would direct Pilgrim through one last building project as a new worship facility was dedicated on April 30, 1978.<sup>7</sup> Six years later, after much prayerful consideration, the Lord guided Herb to accept a call to a small, struggling mission congregation in Daytona Beach, FL. Sarah was the only family member to make the move to Florida with Herb and Helen May, although the rest of their kids and grandkids would make frequent visits to the sunny location. The Lord blessed Herb's work in Daytona, and in 1992 the congregation dedicated its first permanent worship facility. By 1994, Herb and Helen May had made the decision to retire and move back to the Midwest where the majority of their family was located. Once again, the Lord guided their decisions when St. John's Lutheran Church in Manitowoc, WI, extended a part-time call to Herb. It was an excellent opportunity for Herb to continue serving God's people and retire in the general area where their family lived.

The Kruschel family gathered to celebrate Herb's 50<sup>th</sup> year in the ministry during a special service of praise to the Lord in 1999 at St. John's Manitowoc.<sup>8</sup> It was an eventful service in which all three of his sons, who presently serve as pastors, presented sermonettes, and his grandson, who was studying for the pastoral ministry at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, was able to lead in prayer. Later the next year, Herb and Helen May decided it was time to enjoy full retirement.

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<sup>7</sup> Unknown, "Pilgrim of Menomonee Falls Dedicates New Church," *The Northwestern Lutheran* ISSN 0029-3512 (August 1978): 252.

<sup>8</sup> Unknown, "A Worship Service in Celebration of the Fiftieth Anniversary in the Pastoral Ministry of Rev. Herbert Kruschel," bulletin from St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church, Manitowoc, WI (1999).

They continue to live in Manitowoc while making frequent trips to visit their children, grandchildren and great grandchildren, and are actively involved in the OWLS and various other activities. As one looks at the life, ministry and family of Herbert Kruschel, the vast love and rich blessing of the Lord certainly shines forth in numerous ways.

### Interview

Below are the questions that the author provided Pastor Herbert Kruschel with prior to the interview. The interview was recorded on April 23, 2003 at Pastor Kruschel's home in Manitowoc, WI.

1. Was mission work something that you had envisioned for yourself before accepting the call to Menomonee Falls?
2. What was your initial reaction when you received the call to start a congregation in Menomonee Falls? Was it a difficult decision whether or not to leave Nebraska?
3. Looking back, how do you feel your previous experiences helped to prepare you for the mission work you would be doing?
4. What did you know about the situation in Menomonee Falls before arriving there? (nucleus, housing, timetable, responsibilities, area)
5. What did you do before the first official church service held in the basement of the parsonage? (outreach methods, advertisement, canvassing, finding prospects)
6. What were your expectations for that first service and were they met or exceeded?
7. Was it part of Pilgrim's mission/outreach strategy to start a Lutheran Elementary school, or was that something that was just expected by the members of a Lutheran congregation?
8. How did living in the Milwaukee area nearby numerous WELS churches and pastors benefit you personally in your ministry and Pilgrim as a congregation? Did their proximity ever pose challenges? How?
9. Could you explain how the first building project came about? (when started to think about building, CEF money, always both a school and chapel, how long process took)
10. Sometimes after a building project, a congregation seems to lose focus of its mission and outreach emphasis. However, Pilgrim continued to grow at steady rate. How did you keep that focus on outreach before the people?

11. How was the decision reached to start a daughter congregation in Bethlehem Lutheran Church on the north side of Menomonee Falls? How did its founding affect Pilgrim and your ministry?
12. The people of Pilgrim obviously saw Christian Education as one of their top priorities. Did the decline in enrollment during the early 1980's reflect a loss of that priority, or do you feel there were some other causes?
13. How did the gradual decline in enrollment affect you and Pilgrim?
14. Eight years after Pilgrim's conception as a congregation, it consisted of 391 souls. What was the make-up of people (WELS transfers, new Christians, new move-ins), and did it affect the way you did ministry? If yes, how?
15. Pilgrim dedicated a new worship facility in 1976 due to its increase in membership. What were your feelings at that point about what had been accomplished and your vision for the future of Pilgrim?
16. In 1984, you accepted the call to be a missionary once again, this time in Daytona Beach, FL. It must have been difficult to leave a congregation you had started, and served for over 25 years. How did you know it was time to move on?
17. Looking back to your time at Pilgrim, how did your ministry or the way you did ministry change over the 26 years you served there?
18. What advice do you give to a Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary senior who will be assigned to serve as pastor of God's people in about a month?

### Reaction

I had heard many times from my father and uncles how Grandpa (Pastor Herbert Kruschel) had been an avid missionary in Menomonee Falls and had helped to develop some of the evangelism methods/techniques used by WELS missionaries today throughout the Wisconsin Synod. It was exciting to actually hear Grandpa describe his missionary efforts and the methods he was able to implement in order that he might most effectively bring the gospel to the people in his area. While interviewing him, the joy and excitement of the gospel ministry derived from serving the Lord and his people certainly shown through.

Although Grandpa readily admitted his inexperience in mission work, the Lord trained and readied him for full-time mission work while in Nebraska. I found it surprising to hear that even in a sprawling rural area like Nebraska, Grandpa saw the value in doing farm door-to-farm

door evangelism work. By these means, the Lord provided Grandpa with the valuable mission work experience that he would later use in Menomonee Falls.

Serving a Milwaukee-area mission was unique in a number of respects. Pilgrim gained a number of WELS transfers as people began to move into the suburbs. Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary students were able to assist in evangelism efforts and in serving the Pilgrim's daughter congregation, Bethlehem. Grandpa had opportunities to speak directly to Board for Home Missions representatives in order to share concerns and offer input, and to serve in various synodical positions.

In other areas, Grandpa's ministry was similar to that of many home missionaries throughout the country. He mapped out his mission field and methodically and repeatedly canvassed the area. The rapid development of subdivisions within Menomonee Falls called for such a strategy. And the frequent turnover in membership shows the Spirit at work through gospel ministry as one family moved from the area, another one was brought into Pilgrim's church family. Pilgrim's school served as an outreach tool, and even when enrollment dwindled, the congregation's zeal for Christian education and its mission focus did not waver.

Grandpa also saw his share of challenges while serving Menomonee Falls. Pilgrim's first building project was repeatedly reduced in size so that when it was finally completed it did not adequately serve its initial purpose. The founding of a daughter congregation in Bethlehem was not well received by all the members. A once flourishing school declined to such a degree that its continued existence was questioned. The steady increase of membership slowly began to plateau and then diminish, as city restrictions were placed on the development of new subdivisions. Even with these and many other challenges, the Lord continued to richly bless Grandpa and the people of Pilgrim as they grew together in the Word and then shared that Word with their community.

This interview allowed me to see the love that my Grandfather had for Kingdom work while serving as missionary/pastor in the Menomonee Falls area. The Lord certainly blessed



him as he faithfully carried out the responsibilities of gospel ministry. Grandpa recognized the awesome privilege God gives to Christians of proclaiming the gospel, and he continually sought new ways to bring people in contact with that life-giving Word. I thank God for the opportunity to sit down with this missionary, pastor, and Grandfather and personally hear about his ministry experiences.

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