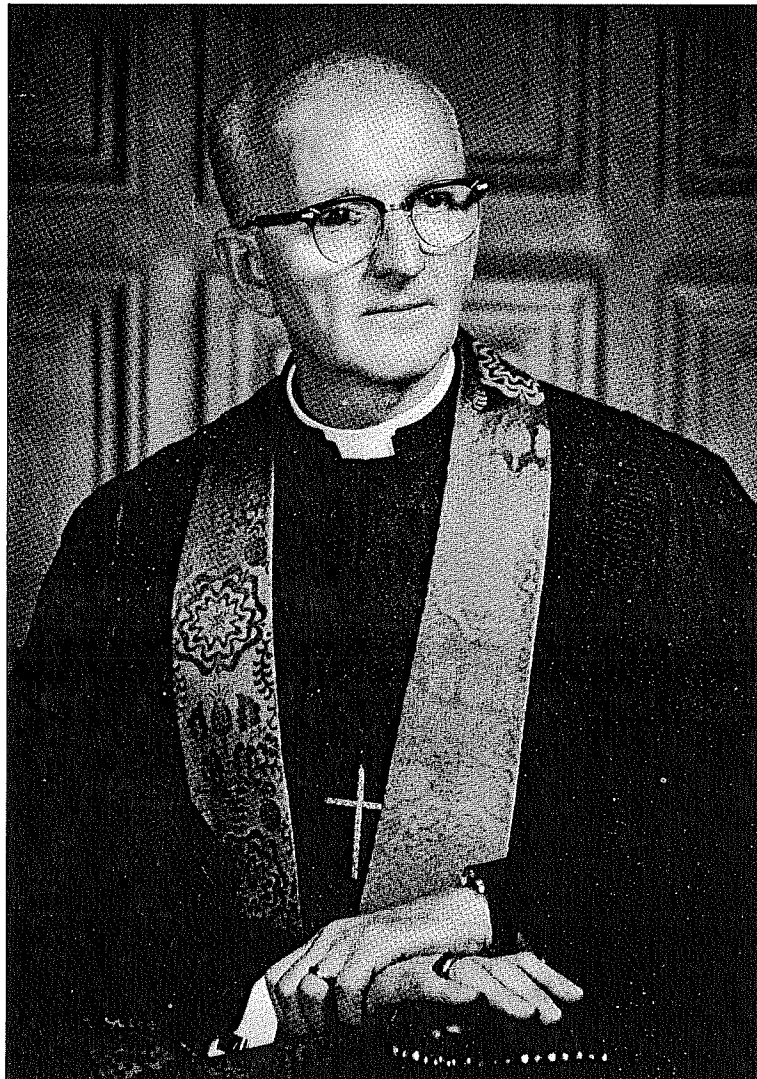


# Rev. Kenneth W. Vertz

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A Michigan Missionary



*Kenneth W. Vertz.*

Kirk E. Lahmann  
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Prof. John Brenner  
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*This biography of Rev. Kenneth W. Vertz (1908-1978), published one day after his one-hundredth birthday, is dedicated to his faithful wife, Mrs. Helen Vertz, in honor of her one-hundredth birthday, to which the Lord has graciously brought her.*



*Happy birthday, Mrs. Vertz!*

### *The Early Years: 1908 - 1936*

Kenneth Walter Christian Vertz was born on December 7, 1908 in Mishicot, Wisc. His father, John Ernest Vertz, owned and operated a hardware store in Mishicot. John was a "faithful and active member" of his home congregation and was "very good to the pastor's kids," according to Rev. William Zell, one of those kids.<sup>1</sup> His mother, Theresa (Broecker), took care of the home and raised her two children, Kenneth and his younger sister Geraldine. Zell remembers "Tressie" as a "jewel of a lady...truly salt of the earth."<sup>2</sup> Brought up in a Christian home, Kenneth and his family attended St. Peter's Ev. Lutheran Church in Mishicot, where Kenneth was baptized on December 9, 1908. As a child he was taught at the public elementary school in Mishicot.

On a farm outside of town lived a young lady named Helen Alma Emma Schwake, born on November 22, 1908. Her family attended St. John's Ev. Lutheran Church in nearby Two Rivers. The Schwake family farmstead was about six miles from St. John's, a one-way trip of nearly half an hour by sleigh. When Helen was old enough for Catechism classes, her parents intended to enroll her in classes with her home congregation's pastor. But because of the distance, she would have had to stay in Two Rivers for a whole week at a time. She didn't want to be away from home for that long, however, so her parents allowed her to attend summer classes at St. Peter's in Mishicot, taught by Rev. Edward Zell, Sr. Her family actually lived closer to St. Peter's than to St. John's, so she didn't have to stay away from home. It was at these

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<sup>1</sup> William Zell, "Vertz," e-mail to author, December 5, 2008.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

summer Catechism classes at St. Peter's that Kenneth and Helen met and became close friends. They were confirmed together at St. Peter's in the fall of 1922.

After eighth grade, Kenneth left home and attended school at Northwestern College in Watertown, Wisconsin for his preparatory and college education. After graduation in 1931, Kenneth began his seminary education at Lutheran Theological Seminary in Thiensville, Wisc.<sup>3</sup> During his time away from Mishicot, Kenneth and Helen kept in touch with each other through letters.

Though English was the language they were raised to speak and taught in school, both Kenneth and Helen were well acquainted with German. Helen's father was born in Germany, and her great-grandfather lived with them at their Mishicot farmstead. She recalls her great-grandfather's aversion to English and comments on her fluency in German in her autobiography *Wonderful Memories*:

I can still visualize him when he would come out of his room on Sunday mornings to go to his church in Mishicot. He wore a black suit, a white shirt, a black shoe-string tie, and a large black fedora hat. If we spoke English to him he would be offended. So we had to converse with him in German. Even now, at my age of 96, I still can understand and converse in German, though not as fluently as I once did.<sup>4</sup>

Worship services in Mishicot and Two Rivers were occasionally held in German. Most of Kenneth's classes at Northwestern and at the Seminary were taught in English, but he did receive some training in German. Kenneth prepared a German sermon on the Good Shepherd during his senior year at the Seminary.<sup>5</sup> However he never enjoyed preaching in German because he felt he wasn't fluent enough in the language to communicate well. Years later, when

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<sup>3</sup> The school has since been renamed Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary.

<sup>4</sup> Helen Vertz, *Wonderful Memories*, 2005.

<sup>5</sup> Kenneth Vertz, "Jesus Christus, der Gute Hirte" (John 10:12-16), May 18, 1934.

he became the pastor at Salem Lutheran Church in Owosso, Mich., the congregation still had an annual German service on New Years Day. Within two years he was able to discontinue that service.

As a pastor, Rev. Vertz offered his parishioners occasional glimpses into his early life and education. In a 1967 confirmation sermon, delivered over forty years after his Northwestern days, Vertz told his confirmands:

Just a few months after I was confirmed I went away to college to Northwestern College at Watertown, Wisconsin. I had 11 long years ahead of me. It seemed long at that time. In reality it was too short. During my first year several other boys and myself disobeyed a certain order of our school: we stayed out later than we were supposed to. That following evening at chapel the President Professor Kowalke asked that those boys who had stayed out overtime meet with him after the chapel service. From that brief talk I learned one lesson in obedience which I never again forgot. He pointed out that all our education would be a waste of our parent's money, our time, and the faculty's time unless we learned to want to obey God's voice.<sup>6</sup>

Vertz also included in his 1939 and 1940 Sunday bulletins a short series of articles on Wisconsin Synod's educational and charitable institutions. About the Thiensville Seminary, completed only two years before he enrolled, Vertz reminisced:

The quaint architecture is patterned after an old feudal castle of the Middle Ages. Located on a high hill, and built in the form of a horseshoe with a huge tower surmounting the wide entrance, it is most impressive and can be seen from a great distance. In recent years the spacious grounds have been landscaped so that it is a thing of scenic beauty, an institution we all can be proud to call our own.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Kenneth Vertz, "Living Hand In Hand with the Lord" (Dt 30:19-20), sermon preached at Salem Luth. Ch. in Owosso, MI, March 19, 1967.

<sup>7</sup> Kenneth Vertz, Sunday bulletin for Mt. Olive Luth. Ch. in Detroit, MI, December 10, 1939.

It should be noted that Vertz' seminary education did not include a vicar year, which is why he graduated from the <sup>3</sup>Seminary after only three years.<sup>8</sup>

Upon his graduation from the <sup>5</sup>Seminary in 1934, Kenneth Vertz was well prepared and eager to serve the Lord as a Lutheran pastor in the Wisconsin Synod. But in those days of the Great Depression, the synod didn't have enough money to provide mission pastors with an income; there was also a shortage of calls for the graduates. Of the twenty-five graduates of the Seminary's class of 1934, only six were initially assigned calls to congregations.<sup>9</sup> So Vertz moved back home to Mishicot, where he waited over a year for a call. While home, he offered preaching <sup>assistance</sup> assistants to the pastors of local congregations. His wife, Mrs. Helen Vertz, remembers that his honorarium for a Sunday sermon was \$5, half of which he would regularly give to the organist.<sup>10</sup>

While Kenneth was away at school, Helen Schwake was receiving her own education. She writes, "I went to a one-room country school, which had all eight grades. Maybe our grade level was a bit above the average because we could listen to what the upper grades were learning too. I still remember that I had many dedicated teachers."<sup>11</sup> After elementary school, she went to the local high school, then to the County Normal School, where she was trained to be a teacher. Her one-year course of study was sufficient credential for the nearby Shoto school district; she recalls:

After one year, I graduated from County Normal and got a job teaching all eight grades in a public school in Shoto, Wisconsin. In the winter it was my job to

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<sup>8</sup> Though some students voluntarily opted to spend one year away from the Seminary as a vicar, the vicar program as it exists today was not a mandatory part of the Seminary's curriculum until 1965.

<sup>9</sup> J. J., "Graduation Exercises At Thiensville," *Northwestern Lutheran*, 21 (June 24, 1934), 203.

<sup>10</sup> Helen Vertz, interview.

<sup>11</sup> Helen Vertz, *Wonderful Memories*.

build a fire in the furnace, which was in the basement because the school had to be warm by 8:00 A.M. There were about 25 children enrolled in the school. Because I had to teach all eight grades, each class was allowed 10-15 minutes a subject. I truly enjoyed my ten years of teaching at Shoto and at another school called Jefferson school in the town of Mishicot.<sup>12</sup>

Although they knew they wanted to be married, Kenneth and Helen postponed their marriage until Kenneth was called to be a pastor. The interval between Kenneth's 1934 seminary graduation and his first call must have been a bittersweet period of time. After years of schooling in southern Wisconsin, Kenneth finally lived near Helen again. But while she was earning a meager income as a schoolteacher in Shoto, a village less than five miles from Mishicot, Kenneth was not able to work fulltime in the occupation he had trained for, nor did he know when he would receive a call.

The winter of 1935-36, however, became a very eventful time for Kenneth and Helen. On December 17, 1935, a meeting was held at St. Paul English Ev. Lutheran Church in Hale, Michigan; the minutes of this meeting read, "We voted for a minister call. Called a minister for Hale Mission Congregation. We called Kenneth Vertz from Mishicot, Wis....Services to be held Sunday mornings and church holidays by incoming minister in English language. Education to be left to pastor and parents."<sup>13</sup> Rev. William Zell remembers "how excited he was when he came up to the parsonage to tell my dad he had received the call to Hale."<sup>14</sup>

Christmas of 1935 must certainly have been merry. The long-awaited call meant that Kenneth and Helen could finally be married – right away! They were married on January 18,

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<sup>12</sup> Helen Vertz, *Wonderful Memories*.

<sup>13</sup> Record book for St. Paul's Luth. Ch. in Hale, MI, December 17, 1935.

<sup>14</sup> William Zell, e-mail.

1936, at St. Peter's in Mishicot by Rev. Edward Zell, Sr. Mrs. Vertz remembers vividly how the winter weather affected their wedding day plans:

The day before our wedding...was one of the coldest days of January. Even though it was a bright, sunny day, the temperature was 24 degrees below zero. My father called the Road Commission office and asked if the road would be plowed so that we could get to St. Peter's Lutheran Church in Mishicot where we were to be married. The Road Commissioner said, "We open the roads for weddings and funerals." So we were in luck.

Our wedding was scheduled for 2:00 P.M. but, because we had to wait until the roads were opened, we did not arrive at the church until 4:00 P.M. My future husband wondered if he would be left standing at the altar all by himself. So did the pastor.<sup>15</sup>

Rev. Kenneth Vertz was ordained into the public ministry in February of 1936 by Rev. Edward Zell, Sr., at his home congregation of St. Peter's. Some of the most meaningful events of his life took place at St. Peter's in Mishicot: his baptism, confirmation, wedding, and ordination. Certainly this congregation held a special place in his heart. He returned often to visit with family living in Mishicot and preached for St. Peter's 85<sup>th</sup> anniversary service on November 10, 1946.<sup>16</sup>

Rev. Edward Zell, Sr. was also held in high respect by Vertz. Mrs. Vertz believes that Zell had a great influence on her husband and even encouraged him to become a pastor. Zell served St. Peter's from 1911 (young Kenneth was two years old when Zell arrived) until his death in 1958. Mrs. Vertz remembers Zell to be so excellent a preacher that a local Catholic priest, who befriended him, would eavesdrop on his funeral sermons whenever he had the chance, standing just outside the door of the church, not daring to enter.<sup>17</sup> Vertz' respect and appreciation for Zell is evident not only in the fact that Vertz preached the sermon for Zell's

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<sup>15</sup> Helen Vertz, *Wonderful Memories*.

<sup>16</sup> "Mishicot Lutheran Church To Mark 85<sup>th</sup> Anniversary," *Manitowoc Herald-Times*, November 8, 1946.

<sup>17</sup> Helen Vertz, interview.



funeral but also in the personal words of esteem with which Vertz concluded his obituary for Zell, published in *The Northwestern Lutheran*: "All who knew him thank God for his ministry, which has also inspired many to enter the work of the Church, either as pastors or teachers."<sup>18</sup> With these words, it seems that Vertz himself was pointing to Zell as perhaps the strongest influence in his becoming a pastor.

Rev. Vertz was affectionately nicknamed Spike by his schoolmates, colleagues, and friends. This nickname seems to have come from his father's hardware store, when nails and spikes would have been sold. Classmates probably began calling him Spike at Northwestern, and fellow pastors kept up the nickname throughout his life. He never seemed to mind being called Spike nor received the nickname as derogatory.<sup>19</sup> Likewise, he didn't allow the coarse use of his title to bother him. His parish secretary at Owosso, Mich., Mrs. Ann Bernson, remembers how some members would presume to call him 'Rev'. However, she also recalls most of his members in Owosso respectfully addressing him not as Pastor Vertz but as Reverend Vertz.<sup>20</sup>

### *The Hale Years: 1936 - 1939*

Newly married and ordained, Rev. Vertz hastened to Michigan. He was installed as pastor of St. Paul's English Ev. Lutheran Church in Hale, Mich., on February 9, 1936 at 3 P. M. by Rev. Walter Voss and Rev. A. Ross, both of Tawas City, Mich.<sup>21</sup> The 1936 biennial report of the Michigan District Mission Board describes the mission in this way: "A vast field for blessed

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<sup>18</sup> Kenneth Vertz, "Pastor Edward Zell, Sr." *Northwestern Lutheran*, 45 (April 13, 1958), 125.

<sup>19</sup> Karl Vertz, "Pastor Kenneth Vertz," e-mail to author, October 14, 2008.

<sup>20</sup> Ann Bernson, interview by author, Owosso, MI, November 15, 2008.

<sup>21</sup> Record book for St. Paul's Luth. Ch. in Hale, MI, February 9, 1936.

activity opens up to us here. Our worker in his efforts is not to confine himself to Hale, but is called to explore the regions round about; he intends to start at Rose City." These statistics follow: "Souls 75; communicants 37; voting 19."<sup>22</sup> Vertz was received into membership of the Michigan District at the 1936 district convention.<sup>23</sup>

Lutherans of the Hale area began gathering for worship as early as 1915 and were served occasionally by pastors from Tawas City. Rev. Walter Voss of Emanuel Luth. Church, Tawas City, began holding regular Sunday evening services in October of 1934 and helped the members officially organize their congregation on February 15, 1935.<sup>24</sup> Voss brought the choir from Emanuel to beautify the installation service.<sup>25</sup> Thus St. Paul's of Hale received her first fulltime called worker in the person of Rev. Kenneth Vertz.

Mrs. Vertz explains why her husband left his wife of one month behind in Mishicot when he left for Hale: "I had to remain in Wisconsin to finish my teaching contract which I had made the first of the year. Finally in June my husband came back to Wisconsin to get me. Our 200 mile trip entailed crossing Lake Michigan on a car ferry and then driving to Hale."<sup>26</sup> Rev. Vertz must have been overjoyed at their reunion, not only because he hadn't seen his wife in four months but also because his reception in Hale was less than welcome. A certain burley German man approached the young pastor one day and said with a thick accent, "Vot the hell you vant here. Ve don't need you."<sup>27</sup> Finding temporary housing proved to be difficult, as well:

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<sup>22</sup> *Proceedings of the Sixty-eighth Convention of the Michigan District of the Ev. Lutheran Joint Synod of Wisconsin and Other States, Benton Harbor, Mich., June 18-23, 1936*, 34. This report offers February 16, 1969, as the date for Vertz' installation, conflicting with the congregational records.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>24</sup> *St. Paul's Lutheran Church: A 50 Year History*, 1985.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> Helen Vertz, *Wonderful Memories*.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

“Since a Lutheran Missionary was more <sup>or</sup> of less of an odd personage, it was rather hard for him to find a place to live. Finally one Baptist lady consented to let him room and board in her home.”<sup>28</sup> And finally, the District Mission Bboard didn’t have the funds to pay him until three months into his work; his only income was \$12.50 per month, pledged by the congregation, until the district could supply his monthly \$80 salary.

By the time Mrs. Vertz arrived, her husband had begun renting an old 18’ x 24’ wood shed converted into an apartment. They had electricity but no indoor plumbing or running water. There was a “two holer” outhouse and a hand-pump for fresh water in the backyard.<sup>29</sup> Saturday night was bath night, when they would heat their bathwater in a large metal washtub raised up on four kitchen chairs. During their first winter there, a small wood burner fueled by pine knots kept their home not only warm but also dirty with soot. They decided to purchase an oil burner heater for a cleaner winter the next year. But despite these uncomfortable living arrangements, the people at Hale very generously donated large bushel baskets of canned meat, vegetables, eggs, and other foods for their new minister. The Vertzes never worried about going hungry. Plus, their landlord only charged them a reasonable \$5 per month for rent. After a few years in the converted woodshed they moved into a nicer bungalow apartment.<sup>30</sup>

The congregation was gathering for worship in Hale’s Town Hall when the Vertzes arrived. Dances were held there on Saturday nights, so whoever made it to church first on Sunday morning had to clean up before the service started. The people sat on long planks of wood set on sawhorses. The altar was an old, worn library table dressed with clean white linen.

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<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> Helen Vertz, interview.

The Lord's Supper was celebrated six times a year. Mrs. Vertz became the accompanist for worship. The old upright piano was so badly out of tune that, as she recalls, "Nobody knew if I was playing right or wrong, because that piano was so out of tune! They couldn't tell; I couldn't tell, either!"<sup>31</sup>

Northern Michigan was rugged land in those days, and its inhabitants were rugged people. Mrs. Vertz remembers a fist-fight starting between two members just as Rev. Vertz was about to begin a worship service. Dressed in his gown, he was able to break up the fight and convince the men to shake hands. Mrs. Vertz also remembers how her husband had to battle the loud sounds of tavern music while preaching:

Across the street was a tavern which often became a noisy place, especially during the summer months when the doors and windows were open. It's a good thing the Lord endowed my husband with a powerful preaching voice because on Sunday morning he often had strong competition from the tavern. He had no alternative. It was either his sermon or the juke box from the tavern. We usually heard the sermon.<sup>32</sup>

Mrs. Vertz remembers arriving in heavily wooded and sparsely populated northern Michigan, jokingly asking her husband, "Are you going to have to make Christians out of these stumps?!" She calls her husband's work in Hale "pioneering as a missionary."<sup>33</sup>

In the summer of 1936, St. Paul's decided to move out of the Town Hall and build their own church. The members purchased lumber from the State of Michigan for \$1 per 1,000 feet – a very reasonable price, even in those days. They used steam engines to cut down the trees and plane the lumber. Everything was done by volunteer work. Even Vertz himself, together with another man, decided to build the chimney. "The chimney was up – a little crooked; but the

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<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> Helen Vertz, *Wonderful Memories*.

<sup>33</sup> Helen Vertz, interview.

smoke came out of the top, so that was a success," comments Mrs. Vertz, laughing.<sup>34</sup> The congregation's fiftieth anniversary booklet notes: "In March, the church was finished with actual expenditures being \$851.18. People donated many items such as the stove, carpet, organ, altar and pews plus many hours of labor from members and nonmembers. Reverend Vertz labored hard also."<sup>35</sup> The new church was dedicated on May 9, 1937, less than one year after the groundbreaking. Interesting to note is the fact that the morning dedication sermon was preached by Rev. Walter Voss, who was so influential in founding St. Paul's, but who also had accepted a call in 1936 to serve Salem Lutheran Church in Owosso, Mich., Vertz' future parish.

The Vertzes made many friends in Hale, and Rev. Vertz was well respected and appreciated. When he received a call in the summer of 1939, the minutes of the July 7 voter's meeting reflect the voter's response: "Rev. Schroeder, member of the mission board, was present and given the floor to discuss a call for Rev. Vertz from the Mount Olive congregation at Detroit. After a thorough discussion the congregation voted 14 to 1 in favor of Rev. Vertz declining the call."<sup>36</sup> The church's records for July 23 speak for themselves: "Rev. Vertz announced that he would accept the call he had received from Mount Olive congregation at Detroit. This congregation was sorry to hear this decision."<sup>37</sup> Vertz served St. Paul's in Hale from 1936 until 1939.

Vertz returned to Hale for various special occasions after he left. When St. Paul's celebrated their 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary on June 15, 1947, Vertz preached the sermon. He installed Rev. Adalbert Schultz as St. Paul's sixth pastor on January 15, 1956. He returned to Hale on April 15

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<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> *St. Paul's Lutheran Church: A 50 Year History*, 1985.

<sup>36</sup> Record book for St. Paul's Luth. Ch. in Hale, MI, July 7, 1939.

<sup>37</sup> Record book for St. Paul's Luth. Ch. in Hale, MI, July 23, 1939.

of the same year to preach for a dedication service of the new church building. He ordained and installed St. Paul's seventh pastor, Rev. Charles Boeder, on November 23, 1958. And on May 22, 1960, in a service celebrating St. Paul's 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary, Vertz presided at the service with Rev. Robert Mueller, his future associate at Salem in Owosso, who preached the sermon. Today St. Paul's is a member of the Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod due to the congregation's disapproval of the Wisconsin Synod's 1961 severance of fellowship with the Missouri Synod.<sup>38</sup>

### *The Detroit Years: 1939 - 1946*

On September 10, 1939, Rev. Vertz was installed as pastor at Mt. Olive Lutheran Church in Detroit, Mich. What a huge transition: from a country pastor in the north woods to a metropolitan pastor in busy Detroit! Mrs. Vertz comments on this transition:

While in Hale my husband used to study his sermons under the trees in the pasture where sheep were grazing. However, the tranquility and quiet surroundings of the pasture ended when my husband received and accepted a Call to serve Mt. Olive...What a dramatic change this was for us, especially my husband. Now instead of studying his sermons in the tranquility of a pasture, he had to learn to study amid the noises of a large city with squeaking city busses, heavy traffic noise and police and ambulance sirens.<sup>39</sup>

The members of Mt. Olive were not the rugged outdoorsmen of Hale; instead, people from a great variety of different backgrounds came together at Mt. Olive, a regular "melting-pot" of a congregation, as Mrs. Vertz calls it: "We had many nationalities in our church: Italians, Germans, Swedes, Englishmen, Frenchmen and Belgians. It certainly was a challenging Call for my husband, but he never forgot God's promise."<sup>40</sup> Even Rev. Vertz' responsibilities were different in Detroit. Instead of felling trees and erecting chimneys, he became the preacher,

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<sup>38</sup> *St. Paul's Lutheran Church: A 50 Year History*, 1985.

<sup>39</sup> Helen Vertz, *Wonderful Memories*.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

teacher, choir director, coal hauler, and janitor. And no longer would the Vertz family live in a converted wood shed; Mt. Olive provided its minister with a parsonage.<sup>41</sup> The congregation's membership was approximately 225 souls when he arrived in 1939.

A Christmas blessing, written by Vertz a few months after his arrival and published in the Sunday bulletin, describes his genuine appreciation for the warm welcome his family was receiving in Detroit:

The pastor's wife and the writer wish to thank all who helped to make this their first Christmas here at Mt. Olive one of the happiest of their lives, and in return we wish each and every one of you God's richest blessings in the New Year of 1940. May our common work in the Lord's vineyard be of such a nature that we become ever more closely knitted together in our common bond of faith and love in Jesus our Savior.<sup>42</sup>

A history written in 1952 for Mt. Olive's 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary describes Vertz' tenure at Mt. Olive in this way:

It wasn't long before the congregation began to flourish as never before. New homes went up throughout the area surrounding us. Mt. Olive still was the only church in the vicinity. The pastor's labors were crowned with success. At this time came the war years, when people were drawn to the church who had never gone before. Membership and attendance just about doubled.<sup>43</sup>

Mentioning the war years, the above cited historical account highlights the fact that Vertz' pastorate in Detroit was unavoidably marked by World War II. In 1944 Mt. Olive had nineteen of her 300 communicants enlisted in the service.<sup>44</sup> On January 16, 1944, Vertz began publishing a newsletter for Mt. Olive servicemen called *The Minute-Man Mix-Up*, which

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<sup>41</sup> Helen Vertz, interview.

<sup>42</sup> Kenneth Vertz, Sunday bulletin for Mt. Olive Luth. Ch. in Detroit, MI, December 31, 1939.

<sup>43</sup> *25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Mt. Olive Lutheran Church*, 1952.

<sup>44</sup> Kenneth Vertz, "Pastor's Annual Report," produced for Mt. Olive Luth. Ch. in Detroit, MI, 1944.

contained articles from volunteer writers hoping to send a little support to members in the military. Vertz regularly included words of encouragement in *The Minute-Man Mix-Up*:

That is still our daily prayer as much as it is yours, so that all of you can again return home to your loved ones to stay, as well as resume your place in your family here at Mt. Olive. It has been a long time, and we would be lying if we said we did not miss you, or, that we shall not need you, each and every one of you, here in our Church, in the future.<sup>45</sup>

He also printed personal sentiments in the weekly bulletin, such as, "You can help the war-effort as much on the Prayer-Front as you can on the War-Front."<sup>46</sup> On Christmas Eve of 1944, he wrote, "The message of the Prince of Peace is one needed by every single one of us. With the world at war, our lives disrupted, our hearts disturbed, our minds befuddled, our nerves unstrung, we need the peace, security, calmness, clarity, and soothing effect of the Gospel of Jesus, our Savior, who was born in Bethlehem."<sup>47</sup> Mt. Olive purchased war bonds in 1943<sup>48</sup> and 1944.<sup>49</sup> National concern is evident in a letter reminding the members of Mt. Olive of an upcoming Mission Sunday; Vertz wrote, "Due to gas rationing, the preacher heretofore announced for the evening service, will be unable to be present."<sup>50</sup> Mrs. Vertz remembers when a faithful young serviceman from the congregation was killed overseas; Rev. Vertz retrieved his ashes from the military plane and brought them to the church for the funeral. "I'll never forget that," were his words. Another member was captured and detained in a German war prison. Years had passed, and he was thought to be dead. Everyone was overjoyed at his eventual

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<sup>45</sup> Kenneth Vertz, *Minute-Man Mix-Up*, undated.

<sup>46</sup> Kenneth Vertz, Sunday bulletin for Mt. Olive Luth. Ch. in Detroit, MI, December 31, 1939.

<sup>47</sup> Kenneth Vertz, Sunday bulletin for Mt. Olive Luth. Ch. in Detroit, MI, December 24, 1944.

<sup>48</sup> Kenneth Vertz, "Annual Meeting Agenda," produced for Mt. Olive Luth. Ch. in Detroit, MI, 1943.

<sup>49</sup> "Mt. Olive Budget," 1944.

<sup>50</sup> Kenneth Vertz, letter to members of Mt. Olive Luth. Ch. in Detroit, MI, October 7, 1943.



return to his family and to Mt. Olive.<sup>51</sup> World War II certainly had a huge impact on Vertz' ministry at Mt. Olive.

One of Rev. Vertz' major accomplishments at Mt. Olive was the elimination of the congregation's debt. The Michigan District Mission Board's 1940 report, the first official report after Vertz' installation at Mt. Olive, describes the financial situation at Mt. Olive like this: "The congregation is still laboring under a debt of \$12,428.27. Regular monthly repayments are now being made on the Ch. Ext. Fund loan."<sup>52</sup> W. Bodamer, a financial representative from Synod, describes the socioeconomic situation at Mt. Olive in a report prepared for the Synod's Board of Trustees:

The members of this congregation are mostly factory workers. The employment of the factory workers in the auto cities is very irregular. They are at least laid off twice a year, each time for about two months. It is still more irregular on account of the many strikes in Detroit. The strike in the Chrysler plants was affecting this congregation quite noticeable [sic]. The average contribution of \$20.00 per communicant is to my estimation very good. The congregation pays \$500.00 a year salary to its pastor and \$10.00 monthly to the Ch. Ext. Fund.

In the same report, Bodamer endorses Mt. Olive's bold request that the trustees reduce her debt to the Church Extension Fund from \$12,218 to \$7200.<sup>53</sup> A letter from Mt. Olive's Church Council to the Synod's Board of Trustee reads, "We humbly request that our debt be reduced to \$7,200.00, and then refinanced according to Synod's plan found in the program of the 1938 Convention. We promise to abide by said plan with the ultimate goal that Mt. Olive be freed of its debt entirely and also that Synod be reimbursed for its kindness and patience, both parties

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<sup>51</sup> Helen Vertz, interview.

<sup>52</sup> *Proceedings of the Seventieth Convention of the Michigan District of the Ev. Lutheran Joint Synod of Wisconsin and Other States, Scio, Mich., June 24-28, 1940*, 26.

<sup>53</sup> W. Bodamer, "Mt. Olive Ev. Luth. Ch. at Detroit, MI," c. 1939.

benefitting thereby.”<sup>54</sup> Rev. Vertz signed his name to that letter. In January of 1942, the Synod consented to this request and cut the debt nearly in half. From then on Vertz strongly encouraged his members to promptly liquidate the remaining debt to Synod. He wrote to his members,

As you already know, we are in the process of paying off the reminder of a debt which has stood against us ever since our founding, a debt which we owe our Synod, which was good enough to advance us the money when we started as a congregation. More than that, only a few years ago this same Synod forgave us over half our debt, around \$7000.00, which was certainly a liberal gift. Now we can best show our appreciation by paying off the remainder, and as soon as possible, so that other new missions can use this money to become established...

I as your Pastor urge you NOW to do whatever your faith and conscience tell you in our common effort to get rid of our debt. WE ALL ENJOY THE PRIVILEGES OF MT. OLIVE, WHY THEN SHOULD WE NOT ALL BE WILLING TO ALSO SHARE ITS BURDENS. Remember, giving is a part of your Christian life, while its absence is a sure sign that your faith is not very active, perhaps even extinct.<sup>55</sup>

On April 8, 1945, Mt. Olive burned its mortgage and celebrated its financial freedom with special worship services and guest preachers. Vertz wrote a letter to his members the week before this day of celebration, in which he not only described his personal commitment to the debt-reduction cause but also commended his members for their faithful stewardship:

The Pastor in accordance with his vow of faithfulness, which he took when he became your Pastor, used every opportunity to show the members their Christian duty as well as their Christian privilege – “To give as the Lord had prospered them.” At times either the Chairman of the [Debt-Reduction] Committee or the Pastor were severely criticized, even condemned for their efforts. Nothing daunted, they carried on, confident that most of the members loved their Savior, and accordingly also their Church, and that their love would show itself in abundant fruits of faith. Nor has their confidence been misplaced, for this coming Sunday the entire amount has not only been subscribed but paid in full, and we stand before God and the world a debt-free congregation...

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<sup>54</sup> Mt. Olive Luth. Ch. Council of Detroit, MI, letter to “The Honorable Trustees of the Joint Synod of Wisconsin and Other States,” November 26, 1939.

<sup>55</sup> Kenneth Vertz, letter to members of Mt. Olive Luth. Ch. in Detroit, MI, c. 1944.

To all of you members, children as well as adults, who gave with a cheerful heart, and a liberal and willing hand, we say thank you from the bottom of our heart, and repeat what we have said so often: Because God loves a cheerful giver, you shall be rewarded in a far greater degree than you can ever estimate.<sup>56</sup>

Rev. Vertz preached his farewell sermon to his Mt. Olive members on March 17, 1946. He had accepted a call to serve as pastor at Salem Lutheran Church in Owosso, Mich. The Mt. Olive Records book provides interesting statistics on Rev. Vertz' six and one-half year ministry at Mt. Olive. The Lord's Supper was celebrated approximately fourteen times per year. Rev. Vertz performed eighty-one baptisms, confirmed sixty-eight youths and forty-two adults, officiated at forty-three weddings, and conducted eighteen Christian funerals.<sup>57</sup> He faithfully served Mt. Olive from September of 1939 until March of 1946.

#### *The Owosso Years: 1946 – 1978*

Rev. Vertz was installed at Salem Lutheran Church in Owosso on March 24, 1946. He had preached at Salem for a Mission Festival years beforehand, so he knew to look for a large, red-brick church. Mrs. Vertz recalls that in their move to Owosso, the first re-brick church they found was St. Paul's Catholic Church. Eventually they found the red-brick Lutheran church.<sup>58</sup>

The transition from Mt. Olive to Salem was no less thorough than the transition from St. Paul's to Mt. Olive, though much different in scope. He left a congregation of about 300 souls for one nearly three times its size. Salem was one of the larger congregations in the Synod at 850 souls. Salem also operated an elementary school, which served forty students and staffed two teachers in 1946. To effectively oversee the ministry of such a large congregation, meetings were

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<sup>56</sup> Kenneth Vertz, letter to members of Mt. Olive Luth. Ch. in Detroit, MI, c. April 1945.

<sup>57</sup> Record book for Mt. Olive Luth. Ch. in Detroit, MI.

<sup>58</sup> Helen Vertz, interview.

scheduled sometimes four nights of the week. Vertz served Salem for the rest of his ministry, a full thirty years.

One major highlight of Rev. Vertz' pastorate at Salem is his founding of the Owosso Lutheran Hour. Vertz was well acquainted with and appreciative of the radio ministry of Dr. Walter A. Maier, spokesman for the Missouri Synod's Lutheran Hour, as is evident from his complementary comments published in a 1946 Sunday bulletin.<sup>59</sup> In 1947, the manager of the Owosso radio station WOAP, who was a member of Salem, approached Vertz and asked if he would be interested in broadcasting Sunday services over the air. Vertz excitedly brought the matter before Salem's Church Council, which consented to a thirteen-week trial period. On January 4, 1948, Salem's worship service was broadcast for the very first time, and listeners not only at Salem but also throughout mid-Michigan heard Vertz preach a sermon on Romans 12:17-21 titled "A Model Christian Among His Enemies."

That Rev. Vertz saw radio ministry as an evangelism opportunity for Salem's membership to rally behind is evident from the poignant words he published in the January 4 bulletin:

Today...we will "go on the air," that is, we will begin to broadcast our entire morning service from 10:00 over our new station WOAP. We hope to do this for the entire year, so that we of the Lutheran Church in Owosso might more fully carry out our Savior's Great Commission, PREACH HIS GOSPEL TO EVERY CREATURE. Through this means we hope to bring the precious message of salvation to those people who would otherwise perhaps never come inside of a church...

To carry on this program, of course, will take money, a lot of money, not "chicken feed" money, but silent "folding" money. Since we are the ones who are putting on this program of service to our fellow-men it is up to us to pay for it. The money for this project is not in our budget for 1948. It will be up to YOU,

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<sup>59</sup> Kenneth Vertz, Sunday bulletin for Salem Luth. Ch. in Owosso, MI, October 20, 1946.

and YOU, and YOU, and I to raise that extra money, \$24.00 every Sunday, so that we can stay on the air for this entire year of 1948. Now that we are starting we certainly want to finish the job. We do not want to be stigmatized by the entire community as a bunch of "cheap skates" who are not big enough to see this thing through. And don't forget, there are plenty of people who would get a hearty laugh out of seeing us fizzle out on this. But, I for one am confident that we will not fizzle, for I firmly believe that we do have a large number of REAL Lutherans in our midst, Lutherans who take Christ's command very seriously, Lutherans who are progressive, Lutherans who are not afraid to give to the Lord, for they know by faith that whatever they give for the promotion of Christ's Kingdom comes back to them double, triple, even a hundred times over. So, let's go, beginning today...And don't forget two other very important things: if this mission is to succeed, pray for us, and tell others, your friends and neighbors, to tune in EVERY SUNDAY.<sup>60</sup>

The following Sunday, Rev. Vertz listed some congregational protocol for worshippers in a live service to follow:

- If you must cough, please cough into your handkerchief.
- Since we are on the air, if your children cry or disturb in any other way, it is imperative that you take them downstairs immediately. You will be able to hear the service down there as well as in the church auditorium.
- Since the mikes are located in the front of the church, parents with babies or small children are kindly requested to sit in the rear of the church or in the balcony. The seats in the rear of the church have been reserved just for you.
- If we hope to stay on the air, and we certainly <sup>do</sup> to, our members and radio friends are asked to remember us in their prayers and in their contributions.
- Don't forget to tell your friends and neighbors to listen in. Here is a grand opportunity for all of us to do some real mission work.
- If you like our services and want to see us stay on the air, write station WOAP; don't put it off, write today. The station is anxious to hear from you.<sup>61</sup>

The Owosso Lutheran Hour, as the weekly broadcast came to be named, survived its trial period and was warmly received and eagerly supported, not only by Salem's parishioners but also by grateful mid-Michigan listeners. Today, the Owosso Lutheran Hour is still broadcast

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<sup>60</sup> Kenneth Vertz, Sunday bulletin for Salem Luth. Ch. in Owosso, MI, January 4, 1948.

<sup>61</sup> Kenneth Vertz, Sunday bulletin for Salem Luth. Ch. in Owosso, MI, January 11, 1948.

every Sunday morning, though now on a different station, and has aired successively<sup>62</sup> for over 60 years. Owosso's *Argus-Press* featured an article celebrating the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Owosso Lutheran Hour.

On Jan. 4, 1948, Owosso radio listeners were first treated to the sounds of the Owosso Salam Lutheran Church congregation's singing of the first two verses of the hymn, "A Mighty Fortress is Our God."

Exactly 50 years later – last Sunday – the same church's congregation sang the same two verses of the same song, just as it has each Sunday since...

In 1948, the late Rev. Kenneth Vertz heard that the Owosso radio station (WOAP) would be going on the air and decided that airwaves would be a great way to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ to the mid-Michigan area.

During the station's first week of broadcasting he acquired a tube-type amplifier and contacted the radio station, agreeing to pay \$24 for one hour of air time per week. He began broadcasting his church's services right away and may have been one of the first programs the station had on the air. Because there were fewer stations saturating the dial at the time, letters from listeners came in from as far as 150 miles...

Not one dime of the money needed to fund the broadcasts has ever come from the church's general fund, says Balge [former pastor of Salem]. The tradition has been kept up by donations made specifically for the radio program. For example, the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary show was sponsored by the family of Rev. Vertz, the man who started it all...

The radio program can be credited with the founding of a daughter congregation for the Owosso church. In 1948 a group of listeners in Williamston liked what they were hearing on the weekly program and decided to start their own Lutheran church.<sup>63</sup>

Founding and preserving the Owosso Lutheran Hour is one of the most noteworthy accomplishments of Rev. Vertz' ministry. In a sermon about sharing God's Word with all people, he said, "Both the Church as well as the individual Christians that make up the church, must be a voice that will be heard. That's why I thank God every day, that we can use the

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<sup>62</sup> The only known interruption in the broadcast's history occurred in January of 2006 when WOAP went out of business. Salem's parish secretary Esther Matthies and Radio Committee Chairman Richard Lahmann (uncle of the author) set up a new contract with WJSZ in Owosso and reconfigured the technology for the transition. Only one week's service failed to make it over the air.

<sup>63</sup> Aaron Keesler, "Salem Lutheran Broadcasts Reach 50-Year Milestone," *Argus-Press* [Owosso, MI], January 7, 1998.

miracle of the radio, to make our voice heard in and around the community.”<sup>64</sup> Mrs. Vertz muses, “Only eternity will reveal how many souls were reached with the Gospel through that radio broadcast.”<sup>65</sup>

Salem underwent tremendous growth during his pastorate at Salem: in physical property, in membership, and in ministry personnel. Vertz witnessed the increase and maintenance of Salem’s real estate. Even when he arrived in 1946, Salem was completing an “extensive renovation and redecorating program at both the church and the school.”<sup>66</sup> In 1947 Salem purchased and remodeled a parsonage a few blocks from the church. “Built about 20 years ago, the residence of the bungalow type is of brick construction and has eight rooms...The Rev. and Mrs. Kenneth Vertz and family will move into their new home on or about Jan. 15.”<sup>67</sup> In 1950 a second teacherage was built near the school, along with a double garage and workshop building. “Thus within a few years Salem congregation committed itself to expenditures of over \$50,000, the clearest evidence that though Salem was old in years she was young in spirit.”<sup>68</sup> A few years later in 1956, Salem dedicated a massive \$200,000 addition to the school, which included three classrooms, offices, kitchen, and gymnasium. “Now, faculty, parents, and children alike, are all grateful to our great God that we can enjoy the excellent facilities of our new school addition,” said Rev. Kenneth Vertz, pastor.<sup>69</sup> Over seven hundred people attended the February 12 dedication services.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Kenneth Vertz, “Our Model Christ” (Eph 5:7-12) sermon preached at Salem Luth. Ch. in Owosso, MI, March 1970.

<sup>65</sup> Helen Vertz, *Wonderful Memories*.

<sup>66</sup> “125 Years of Sharing the Peace,” *1993 Anniversary Directory of Salem Lutheran Church*, 11.

<sup>67</sup> “Lutheran Church Buys Parsonage: Acquires Maskill Home On N. Park Street,” *Owosso Argus-Press*, November 28, 1947.

<sup>68</sup> “125 Years,” 11.

<sup>69</sup> “To Dedicate School on February 12,” *Owosso Argus-Press*, February 1, 1956.

<sup>70</sup> “Hundreds Inspect Building After 3 Inspiring Services,” *Owosso Argus-Press*, February 13, 1956.

Building resumed on September 13, 1964, when ground was broken for a large administrative and educational wing being added to the church. Meanwhile, a locker-room complex was being constructed at the school. These projects were part of Salem's 95<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations. Both additions were dedicated on May 2, 1965. Up until this time, Rev. Vertz held an office at the parsonage. When the wing was added to the church, his office moved to the church building. Finally, in October of 1971 another two-classroom addition to the school was dedicated. The necessity of all these building and renovating projects gives evidence of the tremendous growth with which the Lord blessed Rev. Vertz' ministry at Salem. Furthermore, Vertz was often able to enjoy using the newest of Salem's facilities. His home was newly acquired and his sanctuary newly renovated in his first few years at Salem; he was Salem's first pastor to occupy the newly built office complex at the church; and during his time at Salem, the school was enlarged three times. Salem's increase in property is an external mark of Vertz' ministry at Salem.

Membership at Salem grew exponentially under Rev. Vertz' leadership. When he arrived in Owosso, Salem was a congregation of 850 souls (576 communicants). The school served forty students. By 1977 Salem had grown to a membership of 1,735 souls (1,191 communicants), and the school had increased to 216 students. When the school's enrollment reached its record high in 1972, the local newspaper reported, "God has been good to Salem Lutheran Church of Owosso during this past year as He was in the past 102 years of its existence. Noteworthy was the necessity of calling an eighth teacher for its Christian Day School. The enrollment jumped to an all-time high of 232 students, with an even greater growth foreseen in 1973." This same article also identifies the record increase in finances: "The two



treasurers of Salem...both report the highest receipts and expenditures in Salem's history. The 1972 budget of \$145,000 was met, as was Salem's mission commitment of \$26,750 for the overall mission program of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, of which Salem is a member."<sup>71</sup>

And finally, Rev. Vertz' tenure witnessed a manifold enlargement of ministry personnel. Salem Lutheran School, of which Vertz served as superintendant, held a faculty of two teachers when he arrived in 1946. By 1977 the school was served by nine teachers and its own full-time secretary. When Vertz arrived at Salem, there was no parish secretary. So in around 1947 Vertz asked Mrs. Frances Duke to assist him with administrative duties. She volunteered as parish secretary for a few years, followed by Mrs. Marjorie Richmond. In 1958 Salem's trustees hired Mrs. Ann Bernson to serve as the church's third secretary. She worked very faithfully with Vertz from 1958 until his retirement in 1976, continuing as parish secretary at Salem through 1996. Because of Salem's rapid growth in membership, Vertz was given preaching assistance by Prof. Martin Toepel of Michigan Lutheran Seminary. Prof. Toepel preached at Salem once a month for two years, from 1958 to 1959. Then in 1967 Salem called her first <sup>5</sup> Seminary vicar to provide Vertz with a more comprehensive and full-time ministerial assistant. From 1967 through 1976, the following eight vicars served Salem, all working very directly with Vertz: Richard Warnke (1967-68), Ronald Winter (1968-69), Louis Sievert (1969-70), Dale Zwiieg (1970-71), Paul Hartman (1971-72), Juff Kutil (1972-73), Fred Adrian (1973), and David Last (1975-76). Finally in January of 1974, when Vertz went into semi-retirement and began working from his home, Salem installed a second pastor, Rev. Robert Mueller. For the first time in its history, Salem was served by two pastors at one time. During Vertz' ministry at Salem, the Lord saw fit

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<sup>71</sup> "Salem's School Has 8 Teachers," *Owosso Argus-Press*, December 30, 1972.

to bless Salem with abundant increase, not only in membership but also in physical property and in ministerial staff.

In addition to his numerous and wide-ranging responsibilities as pastor, Rev. Vertz also served the Wisconsin Synod and its Michigan District in several capacities during his time at Salem. First of all, Vertz made his attendance at the biannual Michigan District conventions a high priority, as the minutes of thirty years of conventions record. In 1944 Vertz began serving a two-year term as one of three District Visitors for Michigan's Southeastern Conference; this position is equivalent to today's circuit pastor. He held a position on the Michigan District Board of Support from 1944 through 1948, a committee which provided financial support for people in need, including the widows of called workers. And he served two terms on the Martin Luther Memorial Homes, Inc. board.

Then in May of 1948, Salem hosted the District Convention. At this convention Vertz began his service on the Michigan District Mission Board, a position he held for fourteen years. From 1952 until he stepped down from the board in 1962, Vertz also served as this Mission Board's secretary. Charged with the responsibility of starting, organizing, assisting, and supervising new and young mission congregations, Vertz' work on the Mission Board can be characterized by the extensive mission expansion efforts of the board during his tenure. As a board member Vertz oversaw the founding and supporting of many mission congregations in central and eastern Michigan, including Memorial in Williamston (1948), Our Shepherd in Warren (1948), Hope in Swartz Creek (1949), Trinity in Morenci (1950), Zoar in Detroit (1952), Peace in Livonia (1953), Bethany in Saginaw (1954), Faith in Monroe (1954), Good Shepherd in

Burton (1956), and St. Mark's in Sterling Heights (1962).<sup>72</sup> Before Vertz came to Owosso, Salem had already been instrumental in local missions. She provided pastoral support for Zion in Chesaning from 1873 through 1890; then in 1944, under Rev. Voss, she initiated the mission work that eventually led to the founding of Grace in Durand. When Vertz arrived at Salem, his Owosso Lutheran Hour rallied Lutherans in Williamston to request support from Vertz and the District Mission Board. Within a few months of its founding, the Owosso Lutheran Hour became directly responsible for the establishing of Memorial in Williamston in 1948. Of the mission congregations listed above, Vertz involved Salem directly in supporting the Swartz Creek and Montrose missions, through manpower and financial offerings. Even after his time on the board, Vertz actively worked to recommend or support new mission efforts, such as Gloria Dei in Grand Blanc, Christ in Imlay City, and Our Savior in Perry. Vertz' work on the District Mission Board produced unmistakable results for the Lutheran church in central and eastern Michigan.

Furthermore, Vertz' work on the board also bore abundant fruit in the state of Florida. In the 1950s Florida was experiencing tremendous growth in industry and population. Residents of Michigan who seasonally wintered in Florida's warmer climate noticed this growth. The 1954 District Mission Board report, undersigned by Vertz, describes Florida's socioeconomic situation in this way:

The population growth of Florida is tremendous, surpassing that of any other State in the past few years. Moreover, that growth is solid, according to an article in Time Magazine and reprinted in the Reader's Digest. New industries are springing up from one end of the State to the other. While until recently this State was considered poor in basic raw materials, today a wealth of these has

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<sup>72</sup> *Michigan District History 1833-2000.*

been and is being found. Its agriculture and animal husbandry have had an enormous growth.

All of this brings people to Florida. While tourists still go there in droves, and many of them are Lutherans, who look for their Church, while they are there on vacation, the increased opportunities for gainful employment are bringing many permanent residents. The mild climate of the State makes it the choice of many, who go there to live out their lives in retirement.<sup>73</sup>

Mr. Louis Ott, member of the Michigan District Mission Board from 1944 through 1968, was one such snowbird. He encouraged his fellow board members, including Vertz, to seriously investigate the possibility of starting a mission in Florida. Other pastors on the board were receiving similar prompting from snowbird parishioners.

So in 1954, the Mission Board decided to begin active exploratory work in Florida. The three pastors on Mission Board at that time – Rev. Alvin Baer of Adrian, Rev. Harold Zink of Stevensville, and Vertz – flew to Florida and met with Ott, who was wintering there at the time. From February 8 to 17 the four-man team accomplished a whirlwind exploratory tour of the state. Zink describes and elaborates his personal impressions of this initial tour:

I'll tell you what actually happened. One of the principle members of my congregation here moved to Florida, not too far from Orlando. He had to go about fifty miles to go to church. It was a good Missouri Synod church at that time, while we were still together with Missouri. And he wrote to me a couple of times and asked me if we couldn't do something about going down there.

So I spoke again and again to the Mission Board; "We should get on to Florida," I said, "because I think it's a good field down there. Our members are moving down there, and they have no place to go." And so that's finally when our Michigan District Mission Board decided that we three pastors on the board should go down there and explore the state. The other pastors were Pastor Alvin Baer and Pastor Kenneth Vertz. We decided that we would on our own go down to do exploratory work in Florida and see what's really cooking down there.

We didn't even ask the General Joint Synod at all whether we could at all [*sic*] go down. We just went on our own. Our own district paid the expenses

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<sup>73</sup> *Proceedings of the Seventy-seventh Convention of the Michigan District of the Ev. Lutheran Joint Synod of Wisconsin and Other States, Saginaw, Mich., June 14-18, 1954, 67-68.*

so they couldn't come back at us and say, "Well, you did something that you had no right to do." Individual congregations really gave us the money to go.

We went down there in February, 1954 – the three of us. Louis Ott, one of the lay members of the Mission Board, was living there. He drove us around the whole state that time. We travelled about 1,100 miles, going all over from top to bottom, looking over the state. And we had pretty good success, especially in St. Petersburg.

The last night, one fellow we stopped to visit in St. Petersburg was so thankful that he said, "Thank God! My prayers have been heard – Wisconsin is making some plans to come down here now," although at that time Wisconsin hadn't made any plans. Just the Michigan District Mission Board had planned its own venture down there.

After we came back we went to Milwaukee, the three of us, and we met with the Home Mission Board of Synod and sold them on going to Florida. And then at the Synod Convention that summer, Synod passed a resolution to go to Florida. The big thing was that the General Mission Board finally endorsed it. When they endorsed it, they carried the ball to the General Synod. It helped a lot that they pushed the ball.<sup>74</sup>

Until this time, the Synod's General Board for Home Missions had the standing rule that districts were only allowed to explore mission opportunities in adjacent states. Zink explains, "If we jump two states – or let's say one whole state – [the missionary would] be by himself, and he would be isolated that way. It would be kind of hard for him to carry on. That was the thinking at that time; that was the idea behind it."<sup>75</sup> Since Vertz' team needed to fund the trip to Florida without synod or district aid, they had to petition their members to support this mission effort. Salem backed up the cause and helped fund Vertz' mission trip, as the 1954 District Mission Board report commends:

After years of passing interest in Florida as a prospective mission field for our Synod, your District Mission Board was confronted with such urgent appeals that it felt constrained last fall to do something about them. No funds had been appropriated for an exploration of that State, and the matter could not wait until the next general convention might do so. After serious deliberation, the pastor

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<sup>74</sup> Harold Zink, quoted in David J. Furno, "How Synod Started in Florida," (senior church history paper, Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, 1985), 10-11.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

members of the Board agreed to approach their congregations to see if they would be willing to bear the expense of a mission survey in Florida. Without hesitation they (Salem of Owosso, St. Paul's of Stevensville, and St. Stephen's of Adrian) consented, and the exploration took place February 8<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup>. Certainly the effort of these congregations deserves recognition.<sup>76</sup>

From the initial exploration in 1954 until Vertz' retirement from the board in 1962, Florida mission work flourished. Rev. William Steih became the Florida's first Wisconsin Synod missionary. Between his work and the support of the board, four congregations were organized: Faith in St. Petersburg (1954), Mt. Calvary of Tampa (1957 – now called Northdale Lutheran Church), Peace in Bradenton (1958), and Bay Pines in Seminole (1959). The mission report of 1959 indicates the Mission Board's bold ambition to "open a new field each year in Florida."<sup>77</sup> Vertz returned to Florida several times during his tenure on the board, supporting the missionaries, investigating opportunities, and preaching in the new missions. The 1962 mission report says, "In February the Florida missions were visited by Pastors Engel and Vertz and the District president, Pastor Press. All preached sermons in various congregations...It is our hope that the Florida field can become a Mission District at the next synodical convention in 1963."<sup>78</sup> This hope became a reality a few years later. "By 1969 the synodical convention authorized the formation of the Gulf-Atlantic Mission District with a separate mission board."<sup>79</sup> Vertz' contributions to the Michigan District Mission Board from 1948 through 1962 are summarized in the board's reports, of which he was always an undersigned contributor; his influence and legacy as a pioneer missionary in Florida is unmistakable.

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<sup>76</sup> *Proceedings of the Seventy-seventh Convention of the Michigan District of the Ev. Lutheran Joint Synod of Wisconsin and Other States, Saginaw, Mich., June 14-18, 1954, 67.*

<sup>77</sup> "Michigan District Mission Board Report: Pastoral Conference – June 1959."

<sup>78</sup> *Proceedings of the Eighty-first Convention of the Michigan District of the Wisconsin Ev. Lutheran Synod, Saginaw, Mich., June 11-14, 1962, 12.*

<sup>79</sup> *Michigan District History 1833-2000, 39.*

Besides his work in missions, Rev. Vertz also served his synod as a contributing editor of *The Northwestern Lutheran*. In 1962 he joined the staff of the synod's magazine at the same time as Rev. Wilbert Gawrisch. Together the two new writers produced a series of articles under the theme "What Do You Mean?" This new series of articles explained and elaborated technical ecclesiastical terminology in a very understandable and meaningful way. The series' first article appeared in May of 1962, in which Vertz began to explain grace. The June through August issues of the magazine contained Gawrisch's articles on original sin. Then Vertz' articles on actual sin appear for a few months. Their articles were published in this alternating succession for over ten years. The topics Vertz and Gawrisch covered in "What Do You Mean?" include: grace, original sin, actual sin, conscience, law and guilt, gospel, substitute, atonement, justification, sanctification, good works, adiaphora, Jesus' "I Am" statements, what it means to be "In Christ," and alleged biblical contradictions. Not every issue of *The Northwestern Lutheran* contained an article for the "What Do You Mean?" series, but most did. Thanks to the dedication and skill of Vertz and Gawrisch, *The Northwestern Lutheran* readers benefitted from over ten years of practical, theological articles. Vertz stepped down from the editorial staff at the close of 1972.

During his ministry, Vertz' family grew, as well. The Lord blessed him and his wife with three children. Karl was born shortly before they moved from Hale to Detroit. Lynette was born during their time in Detroit. Carol was born in Owosso. Interestingly, the Lord saw fit to provide the Vertzes with one child per parish. He was blessed to become a grandfather of seven children during his lifetime. From about 1954 through 1958, Vertz' father John lived with them at the parsonage in Owosso. As John Vertz' health failed, it became impossible for him to

live alone; his wife Theresa had died during Kenneth's senior year at the Seminary. Thinking back on their family life, Mrs. Vertz describes her husband as a "good dad" who "had a lot of things to take care of. He did his work very well. I must say, he was not lazy. He loved his work. I don't think we suffered any. He was very diligent in his obligations. But we had a good family life."<sup>80</sup> Whether Vertz would agree with his long-time secretary, who said, "He killed himself working so hard,"<sup>81</sup> we cannot know. But in a sermon themed "Home – A Little Corner of Heaven," listeners heard and readers see how important his Christian family was to him:

The Christian home, and only the Christian home, is heavenly. Why? Because there Christ the Savior is always present as the invisible guest at every meal, the friend in every need, the arbiter in every dispute, the comforter in every sorrow, the forgiver of every sin. There as nowhere else, Christian love is supreme, for if we truly love Christ, we have to love each other...

Hence, the better we know Christ, the stronger our love for Christ, the greater our devotion to Christ, the more we will love and be devoted to each other, so that our homes will truly be little corners of heaven, where our children too will want to be, and where they too in turn will learn of Christ and of His great love. Oh God, for Jesus' sake, make all our homes such little corners of heaven.<sup>82</sup>

In 1972 Vertz' deteriorating health was noticeable. He was a regular smoker during his early life but by 1972 had long since quit. Nevertheless, emphysema was taking its toll on his frail body. So he recommended to Salem's voters that another full-time pastor be called to Salem. In January of 1974, Rev. Robert Mueller was installed, and Vertz went into semi-retirement, willingly yielding his office at the church. Vertz preached his last sermon at Salem on March 5, 1975. Salem's size demanded that a second full-time pastor be called to replace the

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<sup>80</sup> Helen Vertz, interview.

<sup>81</sup> Ann Bernson, telephone interview by author, November 4, 2008.

<sup>82</sup> Kenneth Vertz, "Home – A Little Corner of Heaven" (I Jn 4:11, 19), sermon preached at Salem Luth. Ch. in Owosso, MI, undated.



vicar program. Rev. Gary Stawicki was installed in July of 1976. Upon Stawicki's arrival, Vertz relinquished all ministerial responsibilities to Salem's pastors.

By 1978 Vertz' family and friends knew the end was near. His body was using all its energy just to breathe. By the end, the emphysema had thinned his feeble body nearly to the bone. Former vicar Louis Sievert recalls their last visit:

I had the opportunity to visit with Pastor Vertz several weeks before he died. He was confined to home, most of the time having to be on oxygen. While visiting, he shared with me the thought that his ministry was a failure, that he had not accomplished much. I could not help but think about the growth of Salem while he was there. He did much to promote Christian education, whether it was at Salem's school or Michigan Lutheran Seminary. I also agreed with him that his ministry was not all that successful because of what he had done. It was what Christ Jesus did through him that brought glory to our Savior's name.<sup>83</sup>

Rev. Vertz was called to rest February 25, 1978, at age 69. The obituary that appeared in *The Northwestern Lutheran* read,

During those years [in the public ministry], God enabled him to bring many souls to a knowledge of their Savior, while enjoying the fellowship of brethren in the ministry and gaining the respect of the community.

At the funeral service, a classmate and neighboring pastor, the Rev. Hans Schultz of Chesaning, used the words of Matthew 25:21 to remind his hearers that for the child of God death is but the way of entering the perfect joy and never-ending life with the Lord of heaven...

"Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord from henceforth."<sup>84</sup>

Upon his death, Salem's voters carried a motion to allow his widow to remain in the parsonage she and her husband moved into in 1947 for the rest of her life.<sup>85</sup> To date, Mrs. Helen Vertz still lives in the Park Street parsonage. She celebrated her one-hundredth birthday just a few weeks

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<sup>83</sup> Louis Sievert, "Rev. Vertz Biography," e-mail to author, December 1, 2008

<sup>84</sup> Robert Mueller, "Pastor Kenneth W. Vertz 1908-1978," *Northwestern Lutheran*, 65 (April 16, 1978), 125.

<sup>85</sup> Minutes of the Regular Council Meeting of Salem Lutheran Church, Owosso, Mich., March 17, 1978.

ago, on November 22, 2008. The publication of this biography marks the one-hundredth birthday of Rev. Kenneth Vertz, almost to the day.

### *Lasting Impressions*

Where a man came from tells you about his background. Where a man went to school tells you about his education. What a man did tells you about his occupation. But what a man wrote and said tells you about his personality. So does what others write and say about him. Rev. Kenneth Vertz wrote and said much that provides insight into his personality. Together with the sentiments of those who knew him and worked with him, these insights offer many lasting impressions of the man.

Vertz was not just a Christian pastor; he was a confessional Lutheran pastor, through and through. He introduced a sermon against the false doctrine of millennialism with these words:

On the cornerstone of our church are three small letters, U. A. C. Do you, dear member, know what these letters mean? They stand for the Unaltered Augsburg Confession, and thus they tell the people of this community that this Salem Lutheran Church adheres 100% to this ancient document of conservative Lutheranism. With this Augsburg Confession we Lutherans reject every type of millennialism...To the end that we might be reassured in our convictions concerning the millennium, which have been held by all true Lutherans ever since the Reformation era, I shall this morning endeavor to answer this question: Will there be a millennium, a thousand-year reign of Christ on earth?<sup>86</sup>

Vertz quoted Dr. C. F. W. Walther, acclaimed by many as the "American Luther," in his confirmation sermon in 1964. Speaking of false doctrine as an infectious leaven, Vertz said, "Over ninety years ago Dr. C. F. Walther, one of the greatest Lutheran teachers ever to appear

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<sup>86</sup> Kenneth Vertz, "Will There Be a Millennium?" (Rev 20:1-10), sermon preached at Salem Luth. Ch. in Owosso, MI, November 15, 1970.

on the scene of American Lutheranism, said, 'It is a settled fact that whosoever is indifferent to false doctrine is indifferent to the truth and has no right to bear the name of Luther, much less the Name of Christ.'<sup>87</sup> And in a Reformation Sunday bulletin, Vertz offered his personal praise of Martin Luther:

What made Luther great was his profound faith in God. He knew that his strength was not in himself. He had only one desire, and that was to let God use him. He was willing to go where God would lead him. That faith vitalized his many-sided genius. It endowed him with courage to face unflinchingly the fiercest opposition. It enabled his frail body to perform prodigious feats of labor. It sharpened his naturally keen and superbly trained mind to such a degree that he had no master in debate. It made him the mold of a language and the sweet singer of hymns still beloved.

Rightly we Lutherans commemorate the 31<sup>st</sup> of October and designate it as one of the festivals of the Church...We thank God that we are privileged to be the heirs of this stalwart champion of the truth. And we pray God that increasingly we may catch more and more of his indomitable spirit.<sup>88</sup>

As a Lutheran pastor, Vertz also proclaimed messages of law and gospel to his people. From his pen, Vertz' many *Northwestern Lutheran* articles on law and gospel explained these twin truths clearly. But from his pulpit, his sermons solidified these truths personally. In a Christmas Day sermon on Immanuel, he said,

What's in a name? All men love names, especially beautiful, meaningful names. Well, in this name Immanuel there is a lot, for here heaven and earth meet, here God and man are made one. First, Immanuel is the most wonderful name ever spoken or heard, because it tells us God is with us. True, this baby Jesus was only a manger child, born of a real human mother, nursed at a human mother's breast, even as you and I. But that is not all, my friends. If this were all that there is to it, then the angel could not have added: "He shall save His people from their sins." It takes more than a mere man, or any combination of men, or a man with all the genius and power of all the great men that have ever lived, to save humanity from its awful burden of sin. No, this Babe in the manger had to be Immanuel – God with us...

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<sup>87</sup> Kenneth Vertz, "What is Church Membership?" (II Pt 3:18), sermon preached at Salem Luth. Ch. in Owosso, MI, March 22, 1964.

<sup>88</sup> Kenneth Vertz, Sunday bulletin for Salem Luth. Ch. in Owosso, MI, November 2, 1947.

Understand it? Of course, we will never understand it. The longer you gaze into the brilliant sunlight, the more your eyes will be dazzled; and the more you try to penetrate with your finite, limited reason this infinite miracle and mystery, that God was with us in Jesus, the more you will become confused and confounded...

Here at Bethlehem, in that manger lowly, we have that for which the heart of humanity has ever longed. The Indian, master mystic mind, yearned for it. The Greek, master intellectual mind, sought for it. The Roman, master military mind, fought for it. The Jew, master mind in spiritual things, prayed and waited for it. Now it is here, in this straw-filled manger, not only for the Indian, Greek, Roman, and Jew, but for the world, also for you and I – God with us.<sup>89</sup>

And in one especially comforting funeral sermon, Vertz proclaimed,

Dear friends, because [the deceased] died with Christ, we believe – yes, we know – he now lives with Him! For did not Jesus, our blessed Lord Himself promise us, who believe in Him, “I am the resurrection and the life. He that believeth in Me, though he were dead, yet shall he live. And whosoever liveth and believeth in Me shall never die.”?

Now just as surely as Jesus lives, so surely your dear one lives! He is not dead, but sleeps, just as Jesus told the folks at the time Jairus’ daughter was dead. His body, of course, will rest in the grave, awaiting the glorious resurrection morning when “all who are in their graves shall come forth” at the sound of Jesus’ voice. Then he will, in both body and soul, live with Christ and all true believers in heaven forever. And you shall see him again!<sup>90</sup>

One lasting impression of Vertz is his very poignant preaching and writing style. He didn’t mince any words or leave his audience doubtful of his opinion. In an interview at her home, Mrs. Vertz shared this interchange with the author:

Mrs. Vertz     What he said was out in the open, and everybody understood every word. Once in a while it was a little...I don’t what word I should use. But anyway, it was a very definite sermon! I got home early and was making dinner, and he came in the back door. I said to him, “Do you think

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<sup>89</sup> Kenneth Vertz, “What a Wonderful Name!” (Mt 1:18-23), sermon preached at Salem Luth. Ch. in Owosso, MI, December 25, 1964.

<sup>90</sup> Kenneth Vertz, “Funeral Sermon for Carl Marowsky” (Ro 6:3-13), preached at Salem Luth. Ch. in Owosso, MI, April 10, 1967.

there's going to be anybody in church in next Sunday?!"  
 He said, "I hope so!"

Author        So a very direct preaching style?  
 Mrs. Vertz    Maybe that's a better word, a better word!  
 Author        Direct?  
 Mrs. Vertz    Direct.  
 Author        So there was no unclarity. Everybody understood exactly  
                   what he wanted to say.  
 Mrs. Vertz    Exactly!<sup>91</sup>

So to say that he lacked tact would be inaccurate, and to say that his speech was crude or coarse would be disrespectful. Yet calling his preaching and writing style direct is a kind way of capturing the urgency and poignancy of his often emotive language. In a conference paper delivered in 1972, Vertz attempted to persuade his colleagues to abandon the use of Elizabethan pronouns in addressing God with these charged words:

I am quite certain that what I have to say isn't going to change the minds of those who are set like cement against modernizing the language of the Bible as well as the use of the vernacular pronoun "You" when speaking to or about God...

Here follows the letter from Mr. Bergengren of Chicago, Illinois, who is presenting the opposite point of view, namely, that the use of these old hoary English pronouns should be continued in our churches, schools, and homes. I don't know anything about Mr. Bergengren, whether he is a Lutheran of our Wisconsin Synod variety, or some other garden variety...

Now follows the well-thought-out, clear, understandable, temperate, but firm answer of "ye olde Editor" [Harold E. Wicke, editor at Northwestern Publishing House], who obviously is not too old or hoary in his thinking...

To all of this I say a loud "Amen," and with a decidedly American accent. To put it bluntly, as brother Wicke does, it is all a matter of taste, and to do beyond that is positively silly...

To this day we are using a special type, actually a foreign type, yes, a wrong type of English when we worship...

Hence, if you still insist that you are more at home in speaking to your God with "Thous" and "Thees" and "Thines," go right ahead. But please don't try to saddle your notion on others, especially not your children, who will not be

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<sup>91</sup> Helen Vertz, interview.

helped but rather driven away from their Savior by such no longer used words.<sup>92</sup>

Lack of attendance at voters meetings always prompted Vertz' chastisement:

Dear voter:

Monday, December 8<sup>th</sup>, at 8:00 P.M. your congregation is holding its Annual Election of officers. This election is your election, since you are a qualified elector of Mt. Olive Lutheran congregation.

When you joined Mt. Olive you promised God and your fellow-Christians that you would remain faithful unto death to the Lutheran Church. This faithfulness requires of you, among other things, the God-given privilege of voting for the officers who make up the Church Council of your congregation. That, I repeat, is your privilege, and a blessed one it is, one that you cannot before God be indifferent to under any circumstances. Certainly then, you will want to attend this meeting and vote.<sup>93</sup>

A year later, the stern tone hadn't lightened up one bit:

Dear voter:

Enclosed you will find a ballot, which as a qualified elector of Mt. Olive, you are conscience bound to vote...

Study this ballot carefully and prayerfully, and then vote for the men whom you consider the best qualified for each office according to the accepted standards of Christianity. It is your privilege to write in any name of any voter who is not on the ballot...

As a voter you are expected to attend the Voters' Meeting Monday, December 14, at 8:00 P.M. You owe that to your fellow-believers. If, for a reason valid in God's eyes, you are unable to attend this meeting, then vote nevertheless, and return the ballot to the pastor or one of the members of the nominating Committee before Sunday evening.<sup>94</sup>

Summarizing the 1942 meeting, Vertz provided this report to the congregation: "Of our forty voters, fifteen were present, eight excused, and five are in the service, which would account for

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<sup>92</sup> Kenneth Vertz, "Are the use of 'thee,' 'thou,' and 'thine' mandatory in addressing the deity?" Presented to the Michigan District Northern Conference at Zion Luth. Ch. in Mt. Pleasant, MI, April 10, 1972.

<sup>93</sup> Kenneth Vertz, letter to voters of Mt. Olive Luth. Ch. in Detroit, MI, December 2, 1941.

<sup>94</sup> Kenneth Vertz, letter to voters of Mt. Olive Luth. Ch. in Detroit, MI, December 9, 1942.

twenty-eight voters. Why the other twelve failed to show up is on their own conscience and not on ours, and God will someday want to know the reason why."<sup>95</sup>

Vertz also strongly encouraged biblical stewardship among his parishioners; he didn't allow financial problems to go unnoticed. Promoting the annual Thanksgiving Day offering, Vertz wrote to his members, "As your pastor, I am putting this on your conscience: unless you have an excuse, which God will accept, I will expect you in His House on Thanksgiving Day; and I will expect you to bring an offering proportionate to what He has given you."<sup>96</sup> Vertz concluded another biting letter, which lamented the fact that mission offerings had been dwindling, with these words: "After you have read this, take your spiritual pulse. If it is slow, then it looks bad. If it is beating a little faster, then there is certainly hope."<sup>97</sup> At Mt. Olive, the financial secretary would produce a detailed annual report of all contributions made in the previous year. This report was customary in many churches and became known by the people as a "scandal sheet." Vertz defends the practice and censures negligence in stewardship :

This report is not a "scandal sheet," so that one member can point an accusing finger at another. That such an unchristian attitude may not prevail among us, who are to love one another, no names are given, only the numbers. Hence, you know what you gave, and your fellow-believer knows what he gave, which is all that is necessary. However, study the report carefully and thoroughly, in order to show yourself whether you gave "as the Lord prospered you." If you gave throughout 1942 according to this New Testament principle of giving, your conscience is clear as far as you are concerned, and you can feel proud of your record. If not, then you have every reason to be ashamed, for remember Christ once said, "The Lord loveth a cheerful giver," and "As ye sow, so shall ye reap." So ask yourself honestly, did I give as the Lord has prospered me in 1942, for the Savior's Cause, the support of my pastor, whom I called, the upkeep of my church, toward missions charities, and Christian schools, and toward our common debt?

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<sup>95</sup> Kenneth Vertz, Sunday bulletin for Mt. Olive Luth. Ch. in Detroit, MI, January 17, 1943.

<sup>96</sup> Kenneth Vertz, letter to members of Mt. Olive Luth. Ch. in Detroit, MI, undated (1).

<sup>97</sup> Kenneth Vertz, letter to members of Mt. Olive Luth. Ch. in Detroit, MI, undated (2).

Here are a few highlights of this report:...One child, mark this, a child our of its own meager income gave \$31.60; while another recently confirmed child with no income at all gave \$33.45; both of whom gave a thousand times more than many of our adult members earning high wages. Some members gave a few measly dollars for the entire year, while some members as usual gave nothing, think of it, nothing at all for their church; and yet they want a church, want a minister, and the services of the church when they get in a tight spot. Well, sad to say, such members won't be members very long, since our Mt. Olive church teaches and practices Christ-commanded discipline.<sup>98</sup>

And in a sermon on the Christian life, Vertz preached this regarding biblical stewardship:

Are you such a good steward, such a caretaker of all that God has given to you? Do you give God the firstfruits, the best of what He has given you? Do you, as Paul says, "Lay it aside for God," on the first day of the week, on Sunday, as God has prospered you? Or are you socking it away for yourself, or spending it only for and on yourself? If so, then, my friends, you have not had it happen to you [conversion]. You have not been changed by the Spirit of the living God. Then money is still your God, and remember Jesus Himself says that you cannot serve God and your money. It is either one or the other.

And lest you might forget it, on Judgment Day, the day when each one of us must give an account of himself or herself, you will have to answer to God – what did you do with your money, yes, with everything I gave to you? If you were not a wise and faithful steward, then you will have to hear the awful words, "Depart from me, you unfaithful servant, into the everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his evil angels." Do you want to spend your eternity with them? It's your own choice.<sup>99</sup>

In the days of transition from the King James Version of the Bible to more modern translations, Vertz directly and publically voiced his opinion that change was overdue. His conference paper on archaic language, cited above, demonstrates this. And in the following sermon, he speaks of the benefits of such a transition:

Do you look forward each day to spending a few moments with God as, either you alone or with your family, you read your Bible? And today, we of this 20<sup>th</sup> century are so lucky. We have the Bible in vernacular, in language we can all understand, whether we have an education or not. But, my friends, do you read your Bible, say the Living Bible, or the TEV-Good News for Modern Man, or the

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<sup>98</sup> Kenneth Vertz, Sunday bulletin for Mt. Olive Luth. Ch. in Detroit, MI, January 31, 1943.

<sup>99</sup> Kenneth Vertz, "What happened?" Sermon preached at Salem Luth. Ch. in Owosso, MI, August 11, 1974.



New International Bible, or some other modern translation? Once you start doing it, I promise you, you will keep on doing it.<sup>100</sup>

Perhaps the most famous example of Vertz' direct language came in his harsh outspokenness against the Revised Standard Version of the Bible. When he referred to this translation as a "devil-inspired version" from the pulpit, news of his comments made it all the way to a New York City newspaper, as his son Karl explains,

This information quickly got around, obviously, since it appeared in the paper in New York. He received many letters, mostly supporting his view, but a view not so nice. He also had several High Masses said for him because of his stand against this version of the Bible. He usually was not so controversial, but when he felt compassionate about something, he was not afraid to voice his opinion, especially when it had to do with protecting the truth of God's Word.<sup>101</sup>

Vertz may have had this direct style of speaking in mind when he told his wife, "You know, I'll never stay at a place for more than ten years. By that time they'll be so sick of me they'll want to get rid of me!"<sup>102</sup> Salem never threw him out, however, even after thirty-two years of direct preaching.

Vertz was also unafraid to voice his national concern in his sermons, using his direct language to connect political events to his listeners. The following sermon excerpts demonstrate this:

Our tongue, though small, is tremendously powerful for either good or evil. It can by a mere word start a fire that can become a conflagration. Yes, it can not only ruin one person's life, it can alter the entire course of a whole nation's history. We have just witnessed this this past week, when Mr. Nixon, the 37<sup>th</sup> President of our United States, resigned from his high office. Certainly all of us, whether we liked him or not, should pray for him, that he be forgiven the wrongs that he has done and that he has admitted he has done to the entire nation. We should also pray for our new President, Mr. Gerald Ford, as he

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<sup>100</sup> Kenneth Vertz, "What happened?"

<sup>101</sup> Karl Vertz, e-mail.

<sup>102</sup> Helen Vertz, interview.

urged us to do in his first speech to the nation. Also we should be careful and guard our tongues and speak well of him, putting not the worst but the best construction on everything we see or hear about him, which is what the 8<sup>th</sup> Commandment demands of all Christians. Certainly our new president is going to need all the help he can get, not only from us, his fellow-Americans, but above all, as he so well knows, from God Himself.<sup>103</sup>

As it was with the Church at Smyrna, so it is still with the church today. True, in our own free country of America as yet we are not faced with open persecution, though that too can come to us overnight, for the church today has the same enemies as the church at Smyrna. In those countries behind the iron and bamboo curtains, which are dominated by atheistic Communism, the Church has had to go underground to exist, and we know that countless thousands have already laid down their lives on the altar of sacrifice for the sake of Him, Who laid down His life on the altar of the cross...Yes, even today, in 1962, Christians who take a firm stand for Christ and for His Word of truth must expect persecution.<sup>104</sup>

Some think it is the responsibility of the government to make good citizens and thus model homes. That's Red Russia's and China's idea, and certainly we don't want to adopt their social atheistic philosophy over here in our beloved free America.<sup>105</sup>

Follow your well chosen motto: "Guide me, oh Lord." That's the same as saying, "Trust in the Lord with all thine heart and lean not upon they own understanding." Today the vast majority of our fellowmen are following big name men, in hope that these men can solve all their problems. That's why politics is such a big issue, and why all you hear today are the names of Goldwater, Romney, Nixon, Rockefeller, Johnson, etc. They are only men, like you and me. That's why I say with Joshua of old to you today, "If these men are god, follow them; but if God is God, follow Him!"<sup>106</sup>

Christian education was of the utmost importance to Vertz. In fact, Salem's school was one reason why he had accepted the call and moved his young family to Owosso. He avidly supported the work of the school and used his direct language to promote it strongly among

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<sup>103</sup> Kenneth Vertz, "What happened?"

<sup>104</sup> Kenneth Vertz, "The Persecuted but Faithful Church" (Rv 2:9-11), sermon preached at Salem Luth. Ch. in Owosso, MI, September 9, 1962.

<sup>105</sup> Kenneth Vertz, "Houses or Homes" (Prov 21:9, 19 & 22:6), sermon preached at Salem Luth. Ch. in Owosso, MI, May 13, 1973.

<sup>106</sup> Kenneth Vertz, "Walk Worthy of Your Calling" (Eph 4:1), sermon preached at Salem Luth. Ch. in Owosso, MI, June 14, 1964.

Salem's parents. Within a year of his arrival at Salem, Vertz chastised the parents who preferred to send their children to the public school:

Do you know that only 30% of the children WITHIN our congregation attend our Christian Day School? Do you know that over 28% of the pupils in our school are from homes of NON-MEMBERS? Do you know that the parents of these children are willing to pay up to \$6.00 a month or \$60.00 a year for the privilege of sending them to our school? Do you know that these parents are not compelled to pay this amount, but are willing to do so of their own free will?...

What does all this mean to us? Doesn't it put some of us to shame, who offer all kinds of excuses as to why we can't send our children to our own school? We, who spend thousands of dollars each year to maintain a Christian Day School in our midst, we, who have the pure Word of God taught in this school, refuse to send our children to our school, while we let others take advantage of it...Are you one of these that has not as yet taken advantage of this service? THINK IT OVER.<sup>107</sup>

Even from the pulpit, many years later, his strong support for the school hadn't faded:

Just look at our own congregation as evidence of the fact that Christianity pays, that training up your children in the way that they should go assures us that they will not depart from it when they are old. Our congregation is an old congregation, over one hundred years to be exact. Yet because we have maintained a Christian Day School for the training of our children for the greater part of these one hundred years, we today have a congregation <sup>comprised</sup> of hundreds of families who generation after generation have loved the Lord Jesus, and who radiate that love for Christ in their daily life, no matter where they are.<sup>108</sup>

Vertz was a strong proponent of continued education, especially at Michigan Lutheran Seminary, encouraging students both in and out of the classroom, and from the pulpit, to consider continuing their education there.

"Continue to grow in the grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ." I repeat with all the emphasis at my command: Continue to grow! Just because you have been instructed and confirmed, and now are graduating from the 8<sup>th</sup> grade of a Christian School is no guarantee that you know it all, or that your career as a Christian is secure and sure. By no means.

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<sup>107</sup> Kenneth Vertz, Sunday bulletin for Salem Luth. Ch. in Owosso, MI, October 6, 1946.

<sup>108</sup> Kenneth Vertz, "Houses or Homes."

This is only the beginning of your growth in the wisdom and knowledge of God...

As Mary, continue sitting at the feet of Jesus, and feed your famished souls on the "One Thing Needful." That's why too, both your teachers and I have been consistently urging both you and your parents, that you continue your training, if at all possible, at our Christian high school, our Michigan Lutheran Seminary, at Saginaw, where you are bound to grow in grace and go from knowledge to knowledge, from strength to strength.<sup>109</sup>

Shortly before confirmation and graduation from the school, Vertz sent a letter to the parents of the eighth graders, saying the same thing:

Since your children are to be confirmed this coming Palm Sunday, this not only means that they are about to assume the responsibility of full membership in our church; it also means that you, their parents, have to consider very carefully where your child is going to continue his or her education. As your pastor I have the responsibility to try to assist you, as much as possible, in your decision. I would urge you, therefore, to give every consideration to having your child attend our Michigan Lutheran Seminary at Saginaw, whether your child intends to be a worker in the church or not...

This question [of where to send your children] is not one which can be considered in a spirit of doubt and indecision; it is not a matter that should be weighed as to its pros and cons in a cold, intellectual, mathematical manner. We have today many successful Lutheran high schools throughout our country. Their value has been proved by those in operation.<sup>110</sup>

Vertz had all confidence in Salem's school, as he did in its principle, Mr. Albert Schleef.

Schleef arrived in Owosso in 1946 only a few months after Vertz did, so they basically started their ministry at Salem together. As superintendent of the school, Vertz worked quite closely with Principle Schleef. Mrs. Vertz recalls how the two men always resolved school related problems amicably. In reality, the two were close friends. Upon Schleef's sudden and unexpected death in January of 1970, Vertz was moved to begin his funeral sermon,

A mighty oak has fallen. Another faithful servant of our Lord Jesus Christ has gone home to receive his reward of faithfulness. Another brave captain in the

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<sup>109</sup> Kenneth Vertz, "Walk Worthy of Your Calling."

<sup>110</sup> Kenneth Vertz, letter to "Christian Parents" of Salem Luth. Ch. in Owosso, MI, undated.

army of Christ has laid down his arms. His strife is o'er, his battle's won...Of course, the sudden death of our beloved coworker was a shock not only to his family, to me personally, it was a great loss to our Salem congregation and the Church at large, which he served so faithfully and in so many ways.

The same sermon later adds, "Because of Christ's High Priestly prayer for him he was not only a true Christian, a humble believer, a loyal husband, a devoted father and grandfather, he was above all else a faithful minister of Jesus Christ...Only eternity will fully reveal how many of these lambs came to Jesus through him and his teaching."<sup>111</sup> Reminiscing on his days with Schleef in an installation service for five new teachers a few years later, Vertz still endorsed the mission of Salem Lutheran School and Christian education in general.

When I installed Mr. Albert Schleef, who came to us from New York State, and who served Salem so faithfully for almost twenty-five years prior to his sudden death, I said to him and to the congregation in his installation sermon, which by the way was on this same Text, "To criticize either the school or the teachers, especially in the presence of the children, is harmful and detrimental. Satan would love to see our school go smash. So I urge you, all of you, support your school and its teachers, pray for them daily, and cooperate with them; and then watch your school grow and increase and become one of the finest, most useful nurseries of Christ found anywhere. Yes, under God, Salem Lutheran School will then be a model, not to be envied, but to be copied by others."

Little did I realize how prophetic these words were. Today, by God's grace our beloved Salem Lutheran School is the largest in our Michigan District, no doubt one of the best equipped, and staffed by as fine and dedicated a faculty as any school in the entire Synod. How I wish that my former friend and colleague, Al Schleef, as well as some of Salem's other dedicated teachers were here to see it. So you see, dear friends, faithfulness to Christ and His Word does pay off.<sup>112</sup>

Vertz was a firm believer that faith manifested itself in activity. He wanted sanctification to be second nature to his people. He understood that a Christian well versed in God's Word

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<sup>111</sup> Kenneth Vertz, "Sermon for the funeral of Albert W. Schleef" (John 17:24), preached at Salem Luth. Ch. in Owosso, MI, January 26, 1970.

<sup>112</sup> Kenneth Vertz, "Take Heed to Your Ministry" (Col 4:17), sermon preached at Salem Luth. Ch. in Owosso, MI, September 8, 1974.

would remain faithful to the church. So with his direct language, Vertz constantly reminded his parishioners of their Christian obligation to faithful service. In a sermon titled, "The Church That is Growing Cold," Vertz warned Salem against falling into complacency.

Is Salem Lutheran Church one of these that is growing cold? Are you, a member of this church, growing cold? Remember the day you knelt before God's altar, how you loved the Savior then? You were so on fire for Christ that you were ready to do anything for Him. Do you still love Him with that same fervor, or has the love of the world and the things of the world pushed out your love for Christ?

If Christ does not hold the first place in your life, and that means every day and in every activity of your life, then, my friends, you too have lost your first love, you too are growing cold. And if the members of our church are growing cold, then our church is growing cold, then we are a dying church.<sup>113</sup>

He also reminded the people of Salem what they could do to keep themselves from growing cold, to remain a body of believers whose heart beats with the gospel of Christ.

May we, therefore, solicit your presence at every service, your frequent attendance at the Table of our Lord, your vote in the congregation's meetings, your willing service in the educational functions of the church, especially as teachers in our Sunday School, your participation in the various organizations of our congregation, and above all, your devoted heart for the great cause of Jesus Christ. We are asking much, but not any more than every Christian is willing to give, and much less than our Savior came to give us. We do not need nor do we want knocks; for a Church, like a motor, runs better without knocks.<sup>114</sup>

When Vertz first arrived at Salem, he humbly introduced himself to the people by publishing this remark in a Sunday bulletin: "Your new pastor is just a plain, ordinary fellow, who has only one aim, to serve you well with the precious Gospel of Christ."<sup>115</sup> Those who knew and served with Vertz offer their own lasting impressions of the man. His parish

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<sup>113</sup> Kenneth Vertz, "The Church That is Growing Cold" (Rev 2:1-7), sermon preached at Salem Luth. Ch. in Owosso, MI, September 2, 1962.

<sup>114</sup> Kenneth Vertz, Sunday bulletin for Salem Luth. Ch. in Owosso, MI, April 28, 1946.

<sup>115</sup> Kenneth Vertz, Sunday bulletin for Salem Luth. Ch. in Owosso, MI, May 5, 1946.

secretary, Mrs. Ann Bernson, remembers his as a happy man who kept an even keel and whistled as he worked.<sup>116</sup> Rev. William Zell, childhood friend from Mishicot, recalls,

He took me and a neighbor kid along for a weekend visit to the Seminary and Northwestern. Was a great gesture on his part. He related well to kids...

To my knowledge he was the first one [from St. Peter's in Mishicot] to enter the ministry. Four years later a second followed, then a third, then a fourth, then a fifth, then a sixth. So Spike put down the first furrow and undoubtedly was an influence in what followed.<sup>117</sup>

His first vicar, Rev. Richard Warnke, says,

I had the privilege of working with Kenneth "Spike" Vertz as Salem's first vicar in the 1967-1968 school year – absolutely a tremendous experience.

Between my father (a classmate of Spike's) and Spike, those two men probably taught me as much about being a pastor as three years in the classroom at Mequon, maybe more.

Spike Vertz was a big believer in the old adage: "A house-going pastor makes for a church-going people." His normal routine called for making calls every afternoon (Monday through Friday) from about 1-5 P.M.

Spike was not a flashy teacher. His teaching focused on Jesus, reflected a simple faith in him, and sought to instill that same faith in all in the class. An example: In the last lesson of his adult confirmation course, he would say something to the effect: "There's one thing that's more important than anything else, and the one thing I'd like you to remember for this course." Then he'd hold up a picture of Jesus.

His sermons were very personal: sin/grace in a way that allowed the hearer to realize that the message applied to him.

Spike and Helen (his wife) and I got along great. They were like second parents to my wife and me for the year we were in Owosso. We worked hard together and played hard together.

Professionally, he was the best – with an innovative mind, always seeking to find the best way to share the gospel with as many as possible.<sup>118</sup>

Former vicar, now Rev. Louis Sievert offers his lasting impressions:

Pastor Vertz was friendly. He did not leave the impression that he was above anyone. On the other hand, the office of minister was held in great respect. When someone called him, he was there to serve them.

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<sup>116</sup> Ann Bernson, interview by author, Owosso, MI, November 15, 2008.

<sup>117</sup> William Zell, e-mail.

<sup>118</sup> Richard Warnke, "Rev. Vertz Biography," e-mail to author, December 4, 2008.

Pastor Vertz was always very practical in his sermon's meaning – he brought in everyday examples in his sermons.

His devotions in the hospital were filled with Jesus Christ. There were several times when he stayed at the bed of the dying until the Lord called that person to Himself.<sup>119</sup>

Rev. Paul Hartman, another former vicar shares his lasting impressions:

He set a goal for me to visit as many families as possible during the year I vicared for him. It was excellent training – to get to know people, to appreciate that the ministry really does involve serving people, to understand the people whom we were serving.

He fit the time and location in which he served. He had a KJV Bible open on the altar with a light shining on it at night. People could see that Salem was a church of the “open Bible.” He taught me to care about people and to address their needs and concerns. He helped me become a missionary.<sup>120</sup>

### *Closing Remarks*

Kenneth Vertz was a missionary. His mission was to share Jesus. He shared Jesus as a pioneer missionary in the northern woods of Michigan's Lower Peninsula. He shared Jesus as an urban missionary in the big city of Detroit. He shared Jesus as a diligent and tireless missionary at Salem. He shared Jesus with parishioners from the pulpit. He shared Jesus with families in their homes. He shared Jesus with students in the classroom. He shared Jesus with the elderly in the nursing home. He shared Jesus with the dying in the hospital. He shared Jesus with servicemen overseas. He shared Jesus with radio listeners in central Michigan. He shared Jesus with fellow faculty members at the school. He shared Jesus with *Northwestern Lutheran* readers in every corner of the Wisconsin Synod. He shared Jesus with fellow missionaries at meetings. He shared Jesus with the many mission congregations of the Mission Board, close to home and far away. He shared Jesus with his family. He shared Jesus his whole life. He shared

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<sup>119</sup> Louis Sievert, e-mail.

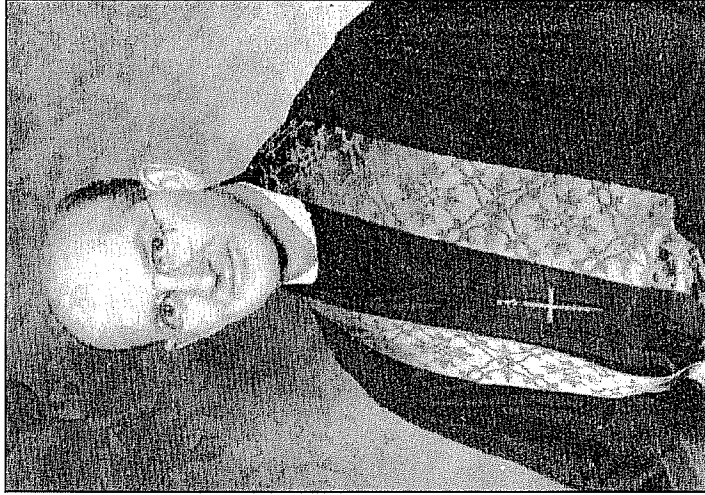
<sup>120</sup> Paul Hartman, “Rev. Vertz Biography,” e-mail to author, December 2, 2008.



Jesus as a pastor for over thirty years. Wherever he went, whatever he did, he was always a missionary.

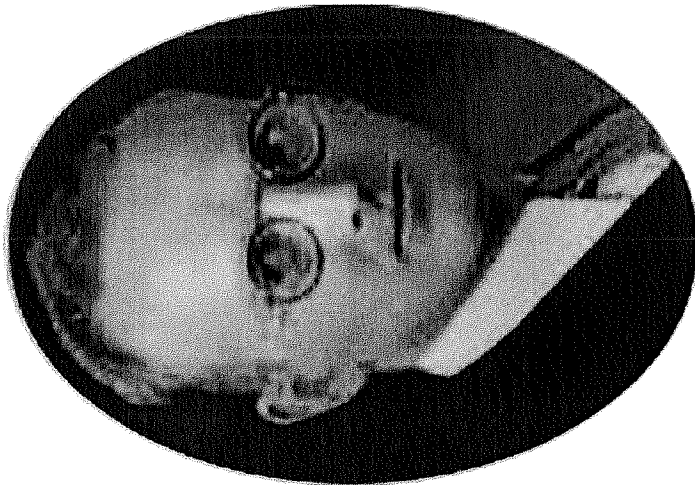
I never met Kenneth Vertz. He died four years before I was born. Yet his legacy as a missionary lives on. The work he performed for his congregations and for his synod paved the way for the gospel for generations to come. Only eternity will reveal how many souls were led to their Savior through him.

But to honor Kenneth Vertz is simply to honor the eternal God of grace, who governs all things by his merciful will, who redeemed us through his atoning death on the cross and glorious resurrection from the dead, who creates and strengthens faith in the hearts of his people, who sends missionaries like Kenneth Vertz into our lives to share Jesus with us – whomever they may be – so that we, too, can say of some missionary, “He helped me become a missionary.”



Rev. Kenneth W. Vertz

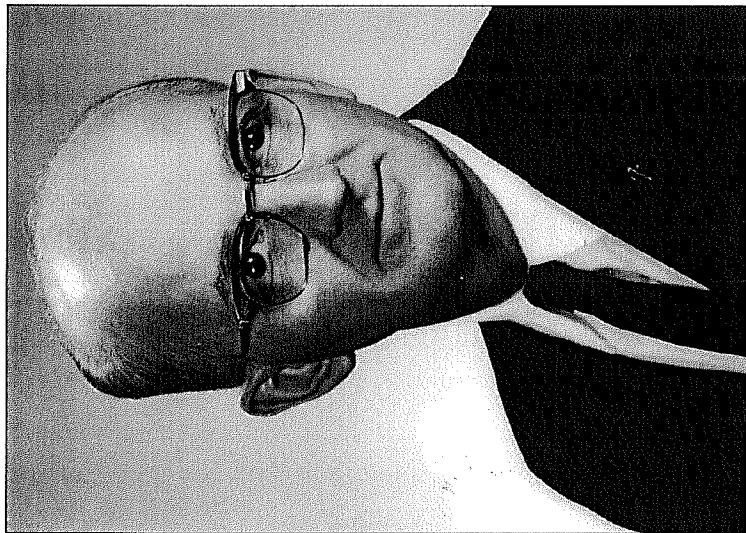
c. 1955



Kenneth W. Vertz

Seminary Graduation

1934



Kenneth "Spike" Vertz

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