

"For to Me, to Live Is Christ"—
The Life and Ministry of Rev. William H. Lange

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God calling the universe into being out of nothing. A snake speaking. A huge boat filled with animals floating twenty feet above the tops of the highest mountains on earth. These are only a few of the countless vivid images of the Bible, which capture the imaginations of children and stay with them, even into adulthood. And, while they may not think about it often, many Christian adults still remember certain images from Bible history that really made an imprint on their youthful minds. For some it may be the image of David killing a nine-foot giant with a stone and a sling shot. For others it may be the image of two million Israelites crossing the Red Sea on dry land. For me, however, one of the most vivid images of the Bible remains the image of Jezebel just before she died.

For this rather unconventional remembrance I must thank my grandfather, Rev. William H. Lange. God gave him an exceptional gift for relating the stories of Scripture in an especially vivid way. As my grandfather told it, Jonah wasn't just spit out by the great fish. The great fish belched, and out came Jonah. And Jezebel didn't just paint her eyes, arrange her hair, and look out her window. She put on her best dress, rouged her cheeks, put on purple eye shadow and pink lipstick, and then hung out the window waving her handkerchief and yelling, "Yoohoo! Jehu!"

As one listened to my grandfather relating the various accounts of Scripture, one could not help but see the love he had both for the Word he was speaking and for the people to whom he was speaking. He knew that the words and stories he was sharing were not just fairy tales or nice sayings. They were the words of God, and therefore they deserved to be recounted in the best way he knew how. He also knew just how much those who were listening needed to hear and understand what he was saying, and so he always strove to communicate on their level, in ways they could understand. But this love for the Lord, for his Word, and for his people did not just affect the way my grandfather communicated with people. As we will see in this brief account of his life, this love was characteristic of my grandfather's entire life and ministry.

I. The Early Years, 1911-1931

^{Herman} William Henry Lange was born on July 10, 1911, to Rev. Henry and Martha Lange in Alois, Wisconsin, a small suburb of Milwaukee that later became part of the city of Milwaukee. His father, Henry, was pastor at Nathanael Lutheran Church in Alois (Milwaukee), where he would serve until his death in 1950. Already as a young child, William had aspirations to follow in his father's footsteps and become a pastor. Often he would play church in his room, conducting various services for his imaginary congregation and doing his best to preach in German, as his father did. On one occasion, his mother overheard him officiating at what, to her surprise, seemed to be her own funeral, as William began his sermon, "Liebe Leute, gute Leute, Mutter ist tot."¹

Even though she probably didn't appreciate being eulogized quite yet, Martha Lange did appreciate her son's desire to serve the Lord as a pastor in the church, and she did what she could to encourage him in that direction. She and Henry sent William to Nathanael Lutheran Day School for the first years of his schooling and then, when the school closed in

¹ Lange, Henry. Interview, April 2, 1997.

December, 1917, continued to train William in the Word of God through instruction at home and in the Sunday School, of which Henry was the only teacher.²

When the time came for William to enter the ninth grade, Henry and Martha had to decide whether to send William to the Wisconsin Synod worker training school in Watertown or to Concordia, the Missouri Synod school in Milwaukee. They chose Concordia for two reasons. First, it was closer and less expensive than Northwestern. And at this time the Protes'tant controversy was starting to heat up in the Watertown area, and Henry wanted to avoid putting William in the middle of that difficult situation.

At Concordia, William received an excellent education. In the six years he was there, he took six years of German, five years of Latin, four years of Greek, and two years of Hebrew, which was comparable to the curriculum offered at Watertown. He especially enjoyed working with the biblical languages. But when he graduated from Concordia in 1931, he did not receive a bachelor's degree, since Concordia was only a six-year school, four of those years being high school years. This caused some problems when he applied for enrollment at the Wisconsin Synod Seminary in Thiensville. Up until this time, the Seminary had accepted the graduates of Concordia, since they had received all the prerequisite courses needed for entry into the Seminary, even though they did not receive a degree as the graduates at Watertown did. However, the Seminary board was in the process of changing their policy at this time and was reluctant to accept the Concordia graduates without a four-year degree. But after many phone calls and letters from the parents of the graduates, the Seminary board accepted them. They were the one of the last classes allowed to go straight from Concordia to the Seminary at Thiensville without a four-year degree.

II. At the Seminary, 1931-1934

William arrived on the Seminary campus in Thiensville in the fall of 1931. At this time the campus was only two years old and consisted of only four professorages, a recitation hall, and a dormitory in the middle of an eighty-acre field. There were very few trees or shrubs. And so on the weekends, the dormitory students would spend their time planting trees and shrubs around campus, many of which are still in existence today and make the Seminary campus the beautiful place it is. The students also undertook other improvement projects, such as Jacob's Well, which tried to make use of the creek that ran through the campus as a supply of water for the well.

While at the Seminary, William continued to put the gifts God had given him to good use in his studies. He gained a reputation for being a good scholar and began to express an interest in doing mission work, an interest that would be fulfilled during much of his ministry. His German speaking ability, however, needed some refining. Even though William had grown up hearing German at home and could speak it rather well, Prof. August Pieper told him, "Lange, sie reden Deutsch wie ein Yankee."³ No one can do everything well.

Not everything at the Seminary was work and study, though. One of the highlights of the year was the annual Gemütlicher Abend, in which the students would dress up in costumes for an evening's entertainment. There were quartets, bands, skits, and other sorts

² Nathanael Ev. Lutheran Church, Milwaukee, WI. Fiftieth Anniversary Booklet, 1957. p. 3.

³ Lange, Lyle. Remembrances of William Lange's Ministry, 1997. p. 1

of amusement. One particularly memorable skit was of a mock faculty meeting. Rev. Otto Engel, one of William's classmates, recalls,

Here we see Orval Krei imitating Nixie Meyer with his snow-white head of hair and a white mustache. Next to him sits Al Maas with his mouth open and imitating August Zich. Then we see Norman Engel grinding his teeth as he looks in a book portraying a favorite pose of Professor Brenner. Then there is Professor Lehninger sitting there in a slouching position portrayed by "Geck" Albrecht. And finally we see Professor Pieper sitting straight and erect in a chair holding forth on Isaiah.⁴

Finally, graduation day came in June, 1934. The country was in the middle of the Great Depression, and not many congregations in our synod had the resources to call and support a graduate from the Seminary. Only five out of the twenty-five graduates received calls immediately upon graduation. Naumann, Dahlke, and Froelich received tutor calls. Otto Engel was called to serve the congregation in Bruce, Wisconsin. And Ed Krueger was called to start a mission in Mandan, North Dakota.⁵ To the rest of the class, Prof. Pieper quoted Milton and said, "They also serve who only stand and wait. Go home and wait."⁶ And so those who did not receive calls went home and waited, some for months, some for years. Some never did receive a call.

William also went home and waited. His waiting ended on November 26, 1934, when he received the call to start a mission in Valley City, North Dakota. He was ordained and commissioned by his father, Henry, at Nathanael Lutheran Church on December 30, 1934. And on the next day he took the train to Valley City, where he would begin forty-six years of service in the public ministry of the church.

III. Valley City, North Dakota, 1935

On January 1, 1935, William was installed as mission pastor at Valley City, North Dakota. One communicant member was present. The reason for this rather inauspicious beginning goes back to the events that led up to the mission board's decision to call a pastor to this mission.

Back in October of 1934, Pastor J. B. Erhart of Jamestown, North Dakota, had canvassed Valley City, investigating the possibility of starting a mission there. In his canvass he had found several Synodical Conference families and about one hundred unchurched families. And so, Pastor Erhart decided to start having services in Valley City. He rented Faust Hall in Valley City for ten dollars a month, and on November 11, 1934, the first services were held. Some of those who attended these services were members of Erhart's church in Jamestown, whom he brought along to help the mission. When Erhart submitted his reports to the mission board, he included in his numbers those members who were coming from Jamestown, thereby making the core group in Valley City seem larger than it

⁴ Engel, Otto. Letter, January 31, 1997.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Lange, Lyle. Op. cit., p. 1.

actually was. On the basis of these numbers, the mission board decided to support this mission, and called William Lange to serve the people there.⁷

However, when Erhart stopped coming to Valley City, so did his members from Jamestown. Attendance dropped dramatically and averaged from one to seven people on a Sunday. But lack of attendance wasn't the only challenge that William faced as he began his ministry in Valley City. His salary was twenty-five dollars a month, with which he also was expected to pay his rent. His housing was a room which he rented in the back of Faust Hall, where the services still were being held. There was no running water in the building, so William had to walk half a block to a service station whenever he needed toilet facilities. The only heating in the building was in another room, rented by two university students. And so, out of necessity, William got to know these two students pretty well.

But William still needed the kind of companionship and support that only a wife can give. And so he returned to Milwaukee, and on March 2, 1935, he married Margaret Fezer at Nathanael Lutheran Church. His father, Henry, was supposed to perform the ceremony. But on the day before the wedding, Henry fell down the steps of the parsonage and spent his son's wedding day in bed. Fortunately, Pastor Arnold Schultz, a neighboring pastor and friend of the family, was available that day and was able to perform the ceremony in Henry's place.

Soon after the wedding, William and Margaret returned to Valley City and moved into their back-room apartment in Faust Hall. Their furniture had not yet arrived by the time they did, so William and Margaret spent their first night together in Valley City sleeping on the floor. Later, they discovered that God's protecting hand may well have delayed their furniture for them. A gas leak had developed in the building, and had they slept higher in the room, they might have died.⁸

Even though William worked hard at trying to start the mission in Valley City, God had other plans for him. As the months wore on, the mission board decided that it could not afford to continue supporting a full-time pastor at Valley City. And so on May 2, 1935, they called William to start another mission in Marmarth, Bierman, and Ives School in western North Dakota.

After William left Valley City, Pastor Erhart reopened the mission. Eventually a congregation was organized, but to this day the congregation remains small.

IV. Marmarth, Bierman, and Ives School, North Dakota, 1935-1939

One of the first orders of business when William and Margaret arrived in Marmarth was to return to Milwaukee and purchase a car. Marmarth was a railroad town in the middle of the Badlands, thirty miles from Bierman and ten miles from Ives School. There was no way to get from town to town except by car over the rugged North Dakota "gumbo" roads. So William and Margaret borrowed six hundred dollars from William's parents and purchased a 1935 Plymouth, which would serve them well as they drove from church to church around the North Dakota countryside.

⁷ Stensberg, Lucille. Personal remembrances of William Lange's ministry, written in a letter sent Feb. 11, 1997. p. 1.

⁸ Lange, Lyle. Op. cit., p. 1.

The salary in Marmarth was seventy-two dollars a month, sixty-two dollars from the synod and ten dollars from the three congregations. The synod also had rented a house for William and Margaret in Marmarth, but when they saw how run-down it was, they declined to move in. Instead they rented a different house and paid the difference in rent themselves. After a few months, one of the synodical officials came to Marmarth to visit them and saw the condition of the first house that had been rented. He then told them that the synod would start paying the entire rent for their new house, since no pastor should be expected to live in a house such as the first house they had rented.⁹

The work in Marmarth was difficult. Through his four years there, William was unable to establish a congregation. One of his greatest challenges was a lack of male leadership. Very few men were interested in church; their wives and children could go, but the men had better things to do.

Even though the men would not come to church, the children did. And so William did what he could to minister to their needs. He had a regular young people's group that met at the parsonage for Bible study and fellowship. At these meetings, Margaret would serve canned meat sandwiches and Kool-ade, which the young people gratefully received. Even though it wasn't much, for some this would be the only meal they received that day.

The people of North Dakota, like the rest of the country, were still suffering terribly from the poverty of the Great Depression. Most of the people around Marmarth were ranchers whose livelihood had collapsed. People did the best with what they had, even if all they had was thistles. To make matters worse, this was a time of terrible grasshopper infestation. One morning, William drove past a green field on his way from Marmarth to a neighboring town. But by the time he returned that evening, the field was bare. The grasshoppers had come and devoured all that was there.¹⁰

The weather at times also could make ministry at Marmarth challenging. During a funeral one winter, the funeral party was caught in a snow storm. They had to dig the snow out of the grave in order to inter the body. And then, because of the blowing snow, everyone had to spend the night in a nearby farm house.¹¹

But not everything in Marmarth was difficult. There were many evidences of the work of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of the people there. Even though everyone was poor, they were filled with a great spirit of generosity. Whatever they had they shared with others. And God also used the tragic death of a fifteen-year-old member of the congregation to draw the boy's father to himself. After his son died in a horse accident, the man began to come to church. He had seen his son die, not cursing Jesus, but praying to him and trusting in him for salvation.¹²

While at Marmarth, the Lord blessed William and Margaret with their first child. Lucille was born on July 8, 1936, in Baker, Montana, where the nearest hospital was located.

⁹ Stensberg, Lucille. *Op. cit.*, p. 2.

¹⁰ Lange, Lyle. *Op. cit.*, p. 1.

¹¹ Lange, Henry. Interview, April 2, 1997.

¹² Stensberg, Lucille. *Op. cit.*, p. 2.

V. Gary and Altamont, South Dakota, 1939-1947

On May 4, 1939, William received the call to serve First Evangelical Lutheran Church in Gary, South Dakota, and St. John Evangelical Lutheran Church in Altamont, South Dakota. (Later on, Altamont would break from Gary and form a dual parish with Goodwin, South Dakota, leaving Gary by itself.) William accepted the call and was installed on June 11, 1939.

The parsonage was typical of the houses in Gary. It had a kitchen, dining room, living room, and study downstairs, and upstairs were three bedrooms and a bath. The kitchen had no cupboards, so William made some cupboards out of some wood he obtained from some fruit crates. The house was heated by a pipeless furnace that burned coal, wood, and corn cobs. A register between the living room and the dining room heated the first floor, and another register in the ceiling let heat upstairs. Not much heat actually made it all the way upstairs, however. Water often froze in the bedrooms in the winter. The kitchen also had a small cook stove, whose pipe went up through the bathroom and heated the bathroom.¹³

William's work at Gary was varied. He taught classes at the State School for the Blind in Gary, and confirmed some of the students there. Along with two other area pastors he produced a monthly newsletter called The Lutheran Messenger. He also served as chairman of the Dakota-Montana District Mission Board. Since it was unusual for a mission pastor to serve on his own district's mission board, a special resolution was passed to allow him to serve in this position.¹⁴ As chairman of the district mission board, William had to travel to Milwaukee four times a year for meetings. The family would drive to Renville, Minnesota, where Pastor W. Dorn would take them to the train station in Olivia. They then would take the train to Milwaukee for the meetings. Often during World War II, William would be asked why he wasn't in uniform serving his country in the armed forces.¹⁵

William also served as vacancy pastor for many of the congregations in the area. One congregation he served quite often in this way was Clear Lake. They seemed to be vacant about every two or three years. They also had a reputation for not paying their workers very well. One pastor even complained that the congregation wouldn't even pay for a new toilet seat for the parsonage when the old one cracked. One time, just after Clear Lake had lost another pastor, one of the members at Clear Lake asked William why he stayed at Gary for so long, while their pastors seemed to come and go so quickly. William simply replied that his congregation had bought him a new toilet seat when the old one had cracked.¹⁶

The people in Gary, like those in Marmarth, were extremely generous. They provided William and his family with milk, eggs, meat, and produce. They also had large farms that were home to many pheasants. In the fall William often would take his shot gun along when he made calls on the people and bring home pheasants from the farms he had visited.¹⁷ The

¹³ Stensberg, Lucille. Op. cit., pp. 3-4.

¹⁴ Lange, Henry. Interview, April 2, 1997.

¹⁵ Stensberg, Lucille. Op. cit., p. 3.

¹⁶ Stensberg, Lucille. Op. cit., p. 3a.

¹⁷ Stensberg, Lucille. Op. cit., p. 3a.

abundance of pheasants also made the Lange house at Gary a favorite place for the relatives to come and hunt during the fall.¹⁸

The people at Gary also were active in the congregation. The choir, directed and accompanied by Margaret, William's wife, would meet in the parsonage to rehearse the many cantatas that were performed in church on Sunday. Some of the blind students also participated in the choir.

This does not mean that there were no challenges to overcome. William also served as the janitor of the congregation. And in the first year of his ministry at Gary, the congregation had to call two special voters' meetings to elect a new treasurer, since the first two men elected refused to take office.¹⁹ Somewhere along the line, he even had a treasurer who could barely read or write.²⁰

But the joys of working in Gary were greater than the frustrations. One of those joys was the mission festival, which was usually held once a year. Someone would donate the use of his flatbed truck as a pulpit for the day, and the congregation would gather in the morning for a special outdoor service. At noon there would be a pot-luck dinner. And then, the festivities went into the afternoon as the area congregations joined together for an afternoon service. Such fellowship with area pastors and congregations was greatly cherished, especially since most of the pastors and congregations were too scattered to get together very often for such mutual encouragement.²¹

While at Gary, William and Margaret's family expanded once again as Lyle was born in Hendricks, Minnesota, on December 7, 1942, exactly one year after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. When he was brought home to Gary, Lyle came down with a cold. He was to be baptized in church on the following Sunday, but on the night of the choir practice before he was to be baptized, he was so sick that William baptized him at home, with two choir members serving as proxy sponsors. The next day, at the age of three weeks, Lyle was admitted to the hospital with double pneumonia. The doctors did not expect him to live. Margaret stayed with Lyle at the hospital, while everyone in the congregation prayed that the doctors' expectations for Lyle would be wrong. By God's grace, they were, and Lyle returned home to spend a sickly six months in his crib, until summer came and the warm weather helped him recover from his illness.²²

Lyle's health troubles weren't over yet, though. Later in his childhood, Lyle developed anemia and had to eat liver every day in order to build up his iron. And on one occasion he fell on the furnace register that was between the living room and the dining room and burned the squares of the metal grate into his hands. Since the nearest doctor was in Hendricks, Minnesota, William and Margaret poured some antiseptic on his hands and prayed that they would heal. Thankfully, they did, giving William and Margaret yet another reason to thank God for protecting their son from harm.²³

¹⁸ Lange, Lyle. Op. cit., p. 1.

¹⁹ Congregational Minutes, First Ev. Lutheran Church, Gary, South Dakota. July 6, 1939; July 16, 1939; and July 30, 1939.

²⁰ Stensberg, Lucille. Op. cit., p. 3a.

²¹ Stensberg, Lucille. Op. cit., p. 3a.

²² Stensberg, Lucille. Op. cit., p. 3.

²³ Lange, Lyle. Op. cit., p. 1.

One of William's dreams was to be able to build a church. Up until this time he had served congregations in rented halls, converted school houses, or small wood-frame buildings. Now, toward the end of his ministry at Gary, he received a small taste of the fulfillment of this dream. As the congregation at Gary neared its twenty-fifth anniversary, William laid the groundwork for an addition to the church that would serve as a thankoffering to the Lord for his twenty-five years of blessings toward the congregation. He would have to wait another decade, however, to see the complete fulfillment of his dream, since in September of 1947, one year before the completion of the addition to the church, he received and accepted the call to serve Grace Lutheran Church in La Crosse, Wisconsin.

Throughout his ministry at Gary, William serve the Lord and his people faithfully, and for that he is lovingly remembered by the people whom he served. As was noted in fiftieth anniversary booklet of the congregation, "Throughout the eight and a half years of his service to the congregation at Gary, Pastor Lange filled his position to his credit and to the glory of the Lord's kingdom."²⁴

VI. La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1948-1954

As was noted before, William received the call to serve Grace Lutheran Church in La Crosse, Wisconsin, in September of 1947. Since the congregation was in the process of building a new parsonage, William and his family did not move until December 28, 1947, and even then they moved into a rented house until the parsonage was completed in April of 1948. On January 3, 1948, William officially began his service as pastor at Grace.

Grace was a new mission congregation in La Crosse, the "little sister" of the older and more established congregations in town. Its church building was a small converted school house that had been moved to the property, and it only seated about forty-eight people in the benches. The work of bringing in new members was difficult, partly because there were several other Wisconsin Synod churches already in La Crosse. But another reason for the difficulties Grace faced was a lack of cooperation from the other congregations. First Lutheran in La Crosse agreed to waive the tuition fees for Grace's children if Grace would make a monthly contribution of fifteen dollars to First's school.²⁵ But the teachers at First made it very clear to the children from Grace that they were there only because of the kindness and generosity of the members at First. Sometimes, the teachers would even remind the students during class time that the children from Grace were receiving a free education.²⁶ The pastor at First also required that the children from Grace provide written excuses for each time they were unable to sing with the other children at First.²⁷

Nevertheless, Grace congregation grew. When William arrived in 1948, there were around fifty souls in the congregation. By 1953, there were three hundred.²⁸ Average attendance increased from ninety-five in 1951 to one hundred eighteen in 1952 and one hundred thirty-two in 1953.²⁹ The members of the congregation also were active in the

²⁴ First Ev. Lutheran Church, Gary, South Dakota. Fiftieth Anniversary Booklet, 1974. p. 9.

²⁵ Grace Ev. Lutheran Church, La Crosse, Wisconsin. Annual Report, 1953, p. 3.

²⁶ Stensberg, Lucille. Op. cit., p. 4.

²⁷ Lange, Henry. Interview, April 2, 1997.

²⁸ Grace Ev. Lutheran Church, La Crosse, Wisconsin. Annual Report, 1953, p. 2.

²⁹ Grace Ev. Lutheran Church, La Crosse, Wisconsin. Annual Report, 1953, p. 2.

various organizations of the congregation. In 1953, eighty-four were enrolled in the Sunday School, sixty-three attended Vacation Bible School, and twelve attended the Young People's Bible Class.³⁰

But in the midst of the triumphs there were tragedies. One that especially saddened William happened around Christmas one year. On Christmas Eve, the favorite son of a man who had been a very good member of the congregation was struck and killed by a car. Soon after this happened, the man began to show signs of emotional disturbance, and one day he blacked out. When he awoke, he was convinced that God had raised him back to life in a sinless state and had given him the mission of converting the sinners of La Crosse, starting with his old pastor. He would come into William's office and scream at him in an effort to lead him to repent of his sins. Things got so bad that Margaret, fearing for her husband's safety, would come into the office and try to coax the man to leave. The man finally did leave the congregation, and eventually he ran into trouble with the law for trying to jump the devil out of his daughters by throwing them into the bathtub. William always regarded this as one of the great tragedies of his ministry, especially when he thought of what the man had been before his son died.³¹

William's other work at La Crosse once again went beyond the immediate responsibilities of his congregation. He served as hospital chaplain for the La Crosse area and greatly enjoyed ministering to the spiritual needs of the various sick people he met in the hospitals. He served as the chairman of the area Pastors' and Councilmen's Conference. And he was in on the ground floor of plans to start Luther High School in Onalaska, Wisconsin.

VII. Sanborn, Minnesota, 1955-1956

On October 25, 1954, William received the call to serve Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church in Sanborn, Minnesota. This would be the first self-supporting congregation he served. Shortly after he accepted the call, he and Margaret travelled to Sanborn to see their new parsonage. What they saw, though, sent them back to La Crosse visibly upset. The church, school, and principal's house all were very nice. But the parsonage was in terrible shape.³² Wallpaper was hanging off the walls in sheets, the plumbing was ancient, and everything else was in an unbelievably run-down condition. The congregation in Sanborn made a few minor repairs to the parsonage before their new pastor and his family moved in. But the house was still in such bad shape when the Langes arrived that the movers asked William if he would like them to take his furniture back to La Crosse.³³ William graciously declined their offer, and he and his family moved into their new home on December 28, 1954, just six days before his installation on January 3, 1955.

As William and his family became settled in their new home, they became more and more aware of just how run-down the parsonage was. The house was huge, and yet it had no insulation. It was heated by a coal furnace that had been converted to burning heating oil, but any heat that this furnace could produce went right through the walls to the outside.

³⁰ Grace Ev. Lutheran Church, La Crosse, Wisconsin. Annual Report, 1953, p. 3.

³¹ Lange, Lyle. Op. cit., pp. 1-2.

³² Stensberg, Lucille. Op. cit., p. 5.

³³ Lange, Lyle. Op. cit., p. 2.

The warmest the house ever got in the winter was fifty-five degrees. In fact, during the first month the Langes were there, they had snow in the hallway that did not melt, and yet their heating bill for that month was ninety dollars, which in 1955 was a considerable sum.³⁴

The foundation of the house also had holes in it large enough for rabbits to crawl through. Some of these poor creatures never did make it outside again and died there in the basement. On one occasion, William found the carcass of one of these unfortunate creatures while he was getting some communion wine from the basement. Needless to say, this did not do much to help the digestion of his breakfast that morning.³⁵

The terrible condition of the parsonage in contrast to the rather well-kept teacherage did not make much sense to William until he got to know the congregation and its history a little better. He soon found out that the congregation had a history of being very hard on its pastors. The two pastors who had served in Sanborn before him both had been asked to leave by the congregation. According to the Centennial Anniversary Booklet (1970) from Zion in Sanborn, Pastor R. Schierenbeck had "served faithfully for eighteen years" at Sanborn.³⁶ But in 1947 when he received the call to serve at Charles City, Iowa, the congregation told him to take the call, even though Pastor Schierenbeck begged them to change their minds. So Pastor Schierenbeck accepted the call. But on the way to Charles City on the night before he was to preach his first sermon there, his car was struck by a train, and he was killed. This event troubled the consciences of many of the members at Sanborn.³⁷

However, their treatment of the next pastor was not any better. Pastor Walter Scheitel came to Sanborn in November of 1947, but the congregation soon decided that they didn't like this pastor either. So, even though Pastor Scheitel had a son with spina bifida, the congregation cut his salary to three hundred dollars a month and waited for him to leave. In 1954, after seven years, he finally did leave, creating the vacancy that eventually was filled by William Lange.³⁸

William tried to confront the members of Zion with their lack of regard for their called workers. But when he asked the church council how they could justify paying their previous pastor only three hundred dollars a month, one council member said, "He wasn't worth the money we paid him."³⁹ Eventually, however, through patient and loving instruction and service, William did gain the respect and admiration of the congregation. One evidence of this is the \$1600 the congregation raised to pay for two-thirds of a new 1956 Chevy for their pastor.⁴⁰

Intracongregational problems were not the only challenges William faced during his ministry at Sanborn. This also was the time when discussions regarding continued fellowship with the Missouri Synod were becoming more and more heated. Pastor Paul Nolting at Sleepy Eye was especially vocal in his belief that fellowship ties with Missouri should be broken. Eventually, Nolting and a number of other pastors in the area joined the Church of

³⁴ Lange, Lyle. Op. cit., p. 2.

³⁵ Lange, Lyle. Op. cit., p. 2.

³⁶ Zion Ev. Lutheran Church, Sanborn, Minnesota. Centennial Anniversary Booklet, 1970, p. 7.

³⁷ Stensberg, Lucille. Op. cit., p. 5.

³⁸ Stensberg, Lucille. Op. cit., p. 5.

³⁹ Lange, Lyle. Op. cit., p. 2.

⁴⁰ Stensberg, Lucille. Op. cit., p. 5.

the Lutheran Confession, when it broke away from the Wisconsin Synod over this issue. William, however, held what more and more became the minority opinion in the area. Because of his background at Concordia, he advocated more patience in dealing with Missouri and felt that Wisconsin should not break fellowship with Missouri quite yet. This difference in views contributed to some very intense exchanges at the area pastoral conferences during those years.⁴¹

On April 16, 1956, William received the call to St. Paul's Evangelical Lutheran Church in Wisconsin Rapids, Wisconsin. He was inclined to take the call, mainly because he saw that the potential for doing the Lord's work was much greater in Wisconsin Rapids. Wisconsin Rapids was a booming paper mill town. Sanborn, on the other hand, was a small farming town of six hundred that had little prospect for growth. Children were not continuing on their parents' farms, and those who still had farms were selling them when they became old enough to retire. The standing joke in the community was that when someone called the movie theater to find out when the movie started, the theater attendant would ask, "What time can you make it?"⁴² When William announced to the congregation that he had decided to accept the call to Wisconsin Rapids, the congregation begged him to stay. But William was convinced that the Lord wanted him to take up the work in Wisconsin Rapids, and so the congregation granted him a release. After the meeting, one of the members approached William and remarked that the Lord must be punishing them for the shoddy treatment they had given to their previous pastors. After they had asked so many pastors to leave, they now were losing one that they truly loved.⁴³

VIII. Wisconsin Rapids, Wisconsin, 1956-1981

The Langes moved to Wisconsin Rapids, Wisconsin, on July 2, 1956, and were greeted by a bat on their first night in their new house.⁴⁴ Six days later, on Lucille's birthday, William was installed as pastor at St. Paul's.

July 8, 1956, also had another significance, even though at the time no one realized it. At the installation service, Lucille met a young man, named Burton Stensberg, who was about to begin studying for the ministry at the seminary in Springfield. This young man, whose birthday also happened to be July 8, eventually joined the family as he and Lucille were married.⁴⁵

At Wisconsin Rapids, William finally realized his dream to build a church. In June of 1956, one month before William arrived at St. Paul's, the congregation had appointed a planning committee for the building of a new church, school, and all-purpose room. Less than a year later, in May, 1957, twenty-one lots were purchased at a cost of about \$1,100 each. By July, 1957, the congregation had accepted the resolution to build a new church, school, all-purpose room, and parsonage on the newly acquired property as soon as possible.

⁴¹ Lange, Lyle. Op. cit., pp. 2-3.

⁴² Lange, Lyle. Op. cit., p. 3.

⁴³ Lange, Lyle. Op. cit., p. 2.

⁴⁴ Stensberg, Lucille. Op. cit., p. 5.

⁴⁵ Stensberg, Lucille. Op. cit., p. 5.

And on September 8, 1957, the congregation initiated its building fund drive, entitled "Our Venture of Faith."⁴⁶

The remaining steps toward realizing this "Venture of Faith" progressed quickly. In February, 1958, the congregation engaged the architect for the project. In early 1959, the financing arrangements were made. And on August 9, 1959, the congregation broke ground on their new facility. Construction commenced almost immediately upon groundbreaking. By the time the ground froze, the foundation and footings were all in place. And, thanks to a mild winter, construction was able to continue through the winter months with very few interruptions. By the end of May, 1960, the exterior of the building was nearly completed, and on June 5, 1960, the conerstone was laid.

Work on the interior of the building continued through the summer months as the doors were hung, the walls were painted, the furnishings were installed, and the organ and bells were moved from the old church to the new church. Finally, on August 28, 1960, all things were ready to be dedicated to the glory of God and for the service of his kingdom. The design of the new building was rather unique. The church proper formed the center of the building, which was surrounded by the classrooms of the school and by the all-purpose room. In the dedication booklet, Pastor Lange explained the symbolism of the design in this way:

The symbolism of our building is unique, yet Scriptural. In the center of all is our Church, dedicated to be used for the preaching of the Word of God in its truth and purity, and for the administration of the Sacraments according to Christ's institution. On the north and east side of our Church are the eight rooms of our School, dedicated to be used for the teaching of the Word of God. On the south is our gymnasium, or all-purpose room, dedicated to be used for Christian recreation.⁴⁷

The congregation celebrated the dedication of their new church with four special services. Prof. Martin Albrecht from Dr. Martin Luther College in New Ulm, Minnesota, served as the guest organist for the day, and Prof. F. Blume from the Seminary in Thiensville was among the guest preachers for the day. This was a day of great joy for the congregation as well as for their pastor. All gave thanks to God for the innumerable blessings he had lavished on them during their building effort, and they dedicated themselves once again to the service of him who had given them so many reasons to rejoice. As William wrote in his introduction to the dedication booklet, "This day we dedicate our entire building to the glory of the Triune God. May we ever remain faithful to our Lord, who created us, who has redeemed us, and who has sanctified us!"⁴⁸

Shortly after this jubilant event, William once again had to wrestle with the difficult question of whether the Wisconsin Synod should break its fellowship ties with its long-time partner, the Missouri Synod. This time, however, the discussion was on an entirely different level as both William and his brother Henry, a pastor at Friedens Lutheran Church in

⁴⁶ St. Paul's Lutheran Church, Wisconsin Rapids, Wisconsin. Dedication Booklet for the Church, School, and All Purpose Room, August 28, 1960. p. 10.

⁴⁷ p. 2.

⁴⁸ p. 2.

Kenosha, Wisconsin, were delegates to the 1961 Wisconsin Synod convention in Milwaukee. Both William and Henry felt strongly that the Wisconsin Synod should retain its fellowship ties with Missouri for a while longer, in the hope that Missouri might be led to see the error into which it had fallen and return to the truth.⁴⁹ However, when they expressed this view in the convention debate, they incurred the displeasure of the synodical leadership. In one particularly heated exchange, William asked the delegates whether the Wisconsin Synod had become weary like Elijah sitting under the broom tree in its dealings with Missouri. This comment made President Naumann rather upset, but his displeasure with William became even more marked when the comment was printed in one of the Milwaukee newspapers.⁵⁰

As the debate progressed, William and Henry had the feeling that the synodical leadership was going to do whatever was necessary in order to sever ties with Missouri at this convention. Their feelings became even stronger when at the vote the unusual step was taken of having all the delegates stand, table by table, to vote either yes or no.⁵¹ Both William and Henry voted against breaking fellowship with Missouri, but their votes were among the minority. The Wisconsin Synod's long-standing relationship with Missouri was ended by a vote of 124-49. Even though William and Henry disagreed with the decision of the convention, they accepted it and returned to their congregations to carry out the will of the synod. And in time, as they saw the subsequent history of the Missouri Synod unfold, they came to support wholeheartedly the decision made by the 1961 synod convention.⁵²

Back in Wisconsin Rapids, William continued his ministry at St. Paul's, faithfully serving his people with the means of grace. As was noted in the introduction to this paper, William was blessed by God with an exceptional ability to relate with people. He truly loved his people and had no trouble expressing his love in the way he served them. And the people truly loved their pastor in return and relied on him for spiritual guidance and care. Every time the Lord's Supper was celebrated, William set aside the previous Friday afternoon and evening for communion registration. He rarely sat in an empty office. The people would come to visit with their pastor and express their concerns to him, and he, in turn, would use the time to establish his people's needs so that he could serve them as best he could. If any of his members became sick or shut-in, William was there to visit them and comfort them with the Word of God. If there were unchurched people in the neighborhood, William was concerned about reaching them with the Gospel. Whatever William did as pastor, he did out of love for his Lord and for all the people for whom his Lord had died. And that humble attitude of love was part of the reason why his people appreciated him so much.

William also was blessed with an extraordinary sense of humor. His joke-telling ability was such that he sometimes was asked to repeat jokes he had told at previous church gatherings, and even though the people had heard the joke before, they still laughed as if they were hearing it for the first time.⁵³

When an issue needed to be addressed, William was not afraid to address it. An example of this is a letter to the editor of the Wisconsin Rapids Tribune that he wrote in 1965 in response to an editorial encouraging the churches in Wisconsin Rapids to engage in joint

⁴⁹ Lange, Henry. Interview, April 2, 1997.

⁵⁰ Lange, Lyle. Op. cit., p. 3.

⁵¹ Lange, Henry. Interview, April 2, 1997.

⁵² Lange, Lyle. Op. cit., p. 3.

⁵³ Lange, Lyle. Op. cit., p. 4.

ecumenical services, as was apparently happening in Beloit. In this letter he lovingly, yet firmly, shows on the basis of Scripture why his church cannot go along with the unionistic practices advocated in the editorial. He writes,

St. Paul's Evangelical Lutheran Church and the parent body of which it is a member, the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, desires the unity of all churches which call themselves Christian, but sees such unity possible only on the basis of agreement in doctrine and practice on the basis of the Bible. "Then said Jesus to those Jews who believed on him, 'If ye continue in My word, then are ye My disciples indeed.'" John 8:31.

Until such agreement on the basis of the Word of God is attained, we have no choice but to follow the directive of St. Paul: "Now I beseech you brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them!" Romans 16:17. We, therefore do not engage in unionistic services in the spirit of ecumenicity.

We, however, accord to those pastors and congregations which desire to do so, and we understand why they would want to, every right and privilege to exchange pulpits and engage in unionistic services. In fact, we would fight to maintain that right for them.

By the same token my church demands the same constitutional freedom to worship God according to the dictates of its conscience. We will not be editorialized into conforming to ecumenicism, because that's what they are doing in Beloit. The Bible is our source of church practice, not what other church bodies are doing some place else.⁵⁴

As at the other congregations he served, William's work at Wisconsin Rapids extended far beyond the boundaries of his own congregation. He served as the national chaplain for the Lutheran Pioneers. He helped establish the Lutheran Girl Pioneers and served as their first national chaplain. He worked to establish the Lutheran Women's Missionary Society and served a term as their Spiritual Growth and Pastoral Advisor. He also was the chairman of the Wisconsin River Valley Conference, a circuit pastor, and a supervising pastor in the Seminary's vicar program. He was chairman of the Western Wisconsin District Stewardship Board and a secretary of the synodical Stewardship Board. And he continued to show his interest in mission work as he served as the chairman of the Western Wisconsin District Mission Board and helped found Divine Word Evangelical Lutheran Church in Plover, Wisconsin.⁵⁵

No account of a man's ministry is quite complete, however, without some mention of the service rendered by the other half of the ministry team, the pastor's wife. And as is the case with so many pastor's wives, William's wife Margaret was a great help in his ministry. Through those many years in the Dakotas and Minnesota, she was the one who provided the music on Sunday, whether from the piano, the pump organ, or the choir. She also assisted in the Christian education of countless children as she taught Sunday School for forty-two

⁵⁴ Lange, William. "Pastor Responds to Editorial on Ecumenicism." The Tribune (Wisconsin Rapids, Wisconsin), 1956. (Month and date unknown.)

⁵⁵ Divine Word Ev. Lutheran Church, Plover, Wisconsin. Dedication Booklet, July 24, 1977. p. 5.

years. She was a loving wife, and devoted mother, and a tremendous hostess. But most of all, she was a faithful Christian woman, whose love for her Lord drove her to serve in whatever capacity she could.

As William neared the end of his ministry at Wisconsin Rapids, the effects of the years began to take their toll on him. No one is really sure of the cause (the best guess is a series of small strokes), but slowly William began to lose his ability to express himself as he wanted to. He knew in his mind what he wanted to say, but for some reason he couldn't get his mouth to say it. This, of course, was very frustrating for a man who had been known for his quick wit and vivid expression. Eventually, William also began to see that it was becoming increasingly harder for him to keep up with all the duties of serving a congregation as large as St. Paul's. And so, after forty-six years in the public ministry, William decided that it was time for him to retire.

He preached his final sermon at St. Paul's on Sunday, June 28, 1981. He chose as his text 2 Corinthians 13:11: "Finally, brothers, good-bye. Aim for perfection, listen to my appeal, be of one mind, live in peace. And the God of love and peace will be with you." These were fitting words of farewell for an under-shepherd who had tended the flock in Wisconsin Rapids for twenty-five years. With many tears, the members of St. Paul's thanked God for the many years of service that the Langes had given them and sent them on their way, wishing them God's richest blessings in their retirement.

IX. The Final Journey Home, 1981-1986

On July 2, 1981, William and Margaret moved to New Ulm, Minnesota, where they would be close to their son, Lyle, who was teaching at Dr. Martin Luther College. William sorely missed the public ministry, and it took him a while to become used to the more easy-going lifestyle of retirement.

The malady that had begun to hinder William's speech toward the end of his ministry grew increasingly worse throughout his retirement. And as it became worse, William became increasingly frustrated. The jokes he wanted to tell and the thoughts he wanted to express seemed trapped in his mind, unable to reach his mouth. One wonders whether the Lord might have been preparing him to leave the troubles of this earth for the blissful perfection of heaven.⁵⁶

Finally, on June 12, 1986, the Lord called William to his eternal home. William and Margaret were on their way back to New Ulm from visiting Lucille in Schofield, Wisconsin. They had stopped at a rest area in Durand, Wisconsin, and were preparing to set out on the road again. William got into the car, smiled at Margaret who was in the driver's seat, and then suddenly slumped forward. Margaret drove to the hospital as quickly as she could, but the Lord had taken her husband home quickly with a cerebral hemorrhage.

The funeral was held at St. Paul's Lutheran Church in Wisconsin Rapids, Wisconsin, on June 17, 1986. The funeral sermon, preached by President Karl Mischke, was based on Philippians 1:21, the text that William had chosen before he died: "For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain." These words indeed were a fitting summary of the life of William

⁵⁶ Lange, Lyle. *Op. cit.*, p. 4.

Lange. For, as President Mischke observed in his sermon, they expressed his mission in life and his hope in death.⁵⁷

I would like to close this biography with the final words of the sermon that William preached for the funeral of Les Krueger, the husband of one of the school teachers at Wisconsin Rapids, on February 26, 1980. It is based on 2 Timothy 4:18: "The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom. To him be glory for ever and ever. Amen." These words, just as the words from Philippians which William chose for his funeral sermon, express the humble faith of a man who devoted his whole life to the glory of God and the good of his people. And they also demonstrate the tender care he showed toward those whom God had entrusted to him, even on the saddest occasions.

Paul concluded these words with these simple words: 'To whom be glory for ever and ever.' Always praising God for all his goodness to him. So Christians always do that. They thank God for all the goodness he has given them, and they say, 'To whom be glory for ever and ever.'

God breathed into this house of clay
The spirit that hath passed away.
A righteous mind, the noble heart,
The living faith did Christ impart.
Now hush your cries and shed no tear.
On such death none should look with fear.
He died a faithful Christian man,
And with his death true life began.

⁵⁷ Lange, Lyle. Op. cit., p. 4.

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