

The Threefold Blessing of Northwestern
Publishing House

December 10, 2007

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Other papers have dealt with the history of our esteemed publishing house. This paper intends to review the purpose for which our synod has a publishing house, and how it accomplishes the work which it has been assigned. Article IV, section d of the WELS constitution states: "The object and purpose of the synod shall be to extend and conserve the true doctrine and practice of the Evangelical Lutheran Church: ... By printing, publishing, purchasing, selling, and disseminating literature that maintains Lutheran doctrine and practice." There are three major ways in which the Northwestern Publishing House (NPH) accomplishes this objective. Firstly, it produces and publishes materials that are more devotional in nature with the purpose of building up the lay members of our synod. Secondly, NPH makes materials available for the continued study of our pastors and others who want to pursue things in depth. These materials are more doctrinal in nature, but cover every area of the pastor's work with his congregation. Thirdly, NPH provides a way to quickly produce materials in times of doctrinal controversy, as well as to print materials which assist in preventing doctrinal controversies.

But it might help to give a brief history of NPH. NPH was begun in 1891 in a building 25 ft. by 70 ft at 310 3rd St., Milwaukee.¹ The publishing house moved its site over time to four other places in Milwaukee and Wauwatosa before erecting its own building to its own specifications at 1250 N. 113th St.² in Wauwatosa. It was at this same time that a special synodical committee recommended that the publishing house no longer print its own materials, but

¹ Northwestern Lutheran 1949 p. 196

² Ibid

contract them out to local publishers. This was a blessing in a couple of ways. The printing presses they owned were old and getting noisier all the time. But also the process of bidding out the printing has saved the publishing house a tremendous amount of money, while getting the work done faster and more efficiently. The printing presses were sold at an auction. The new building has worked out extremely well for the publishing house, having been built to its own specifications. It has the necessary room for all the tasks, which the first four did not. Even though the 5th building had room, the property values around that area had fallen dramatically. But there has been a benefit to these six different buildings which have housed our publishing house. They have kept it on the mind of our members. It has reminded both pastors and lay members of the blessings that our Lord has given us in the ability to publish and produce our own materials, and not have to rely on materials of those who have only similar beliefs to ours.

Even though NPH has these blessings, their methods are changing. 16 years ago, NPH still used artists to draw, and then had to scan the pictures. Now the artists use computer programs to make the art. In the past 16 years, NPH has gone from paper to digital, which one can imagine what kind of a change that is. They have available music downloads from their website, as well as some choir pieces and Bible studies. NPH is self-supporting, and uses whatever money they “make” (NPH is a not-for-profit organization and does not make profits) they reinvest into producing new materials.

However, the work of the publishing house is not limited to simply publishing and printing its own material. The Northwestern Lutheran divides the work of the publishing house up into four areas. These four areas are: editorial, production, finance, and sales and marketing.³ The editorial department does edit manuscripts for books. But they also read and examine books from other publishers to see if they are worthwhile to stock in the store. However, only less than 10% of these are recommended for sale.⁴ They have also helped on the hymnal and worship materials. The production department works on the layout and design of the books, and also works with printers. Part of the work they do with printers is to take bids on a publishing project. By doing this, the local printers compete for the business of our publishing house, and that keeps the price of printing cheaper for NPH. The finance department works with the finances of the publishing house. But their work is by no means limited to that. They take care of the subscriptions for all the periodicals that come through NPH. Those would include, but not be limited to Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly, Meditations, Forward in Christ, Parent's Crosslink, Mission Connection, and Lutheran Educator. The sales and marketing department takes care of the order services and the distribution of those orders. They maintain the retail store at the publishing house, which operates normal business hours. They also deal with sales inside and outside of the WELS.

Every once in a while they do take "calculated risks" by trying something that hasn't been done before. One example of a calculated risk is their Bible

³ Northwestern Lutheran '91 p. 312

⁴ Ibid

study kit which they have sold. Those have done well. Another example is the debate currently going on regarding how much people are still going to use books, and how quickly they are going to transition to electronic materials. Because of this, NPH has made the effort to produce some of its materials in a Logos/Libronix format. The materials available so far in that format are the recently finished People's Bible series, 50 years of Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly, the Concordia Triglotta, the NPH sermon study series, and Franzmann's Bible History Commentary. Currently, the publishing house is waiting to see how much interest there is in these books in this type of format. If they see sufficient interest, then they will produce more books in the same type of electronic format. More than half of the Concordia Triglotta in this Libronix format has been purchased by LC-MS pastors.

Another "calculated risk" NPH is taking, is working on a Bible study that is actually hosted off of their own website, to be used by congregations from the internet. This idea is not yet completed, but still in the process of developing. NPH does its best to "keep up with the times," while still providing the sound doctrinal material that our pastors and our lay members need. There are also plans in the works to look into making PDF files of out of print books available to purchase for download online. However, this project needs people willing to make the investment of time to scan those books, and also the funds to do it. We can look forward, God willing, to seeing this option be available for purchase in the future from our beloved publishing house. That being said, it is time to look at the blessings of the work which NPH does for the lay members.

The Blessings of NPH for the Lay-members

NPH has a number of materials that are widely used by lay members of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod. These materials are more devotional than doctrinal, but they are still doctrinal as well. Forward in Christ is one of them. Now, NPH is not responsible for editing Forward in Christ. However, it is responsible for the layout of the magazine as well as taking care of subscription and the mailing of the magazine. This magazine is more devotional in nature, but has a number of departments to appeal to people of all ages, gifts, and intellects in our synod. In each magazine there is a chance to hear from the President of our synod, a Bible study, a place for teens to read what other teens have written (and also for them to write in if they so desire), devotions, a place to ask questions, and others. Those were only the departments. There are also articles specific to each issue. In other words, this magazine is beneficial for pastors, and lay members for a way to keep in touch with our synod, but also grow devotionally in their faith as well as doctrinally in their understanding of the scriptures.

One publication that is surprising by quantity is Meditations. Meditations is a devotional book that is printed quarterly, and includes a devotion for each day of the year. In the 50 years since its inception, Meditations has sold more than 10,000,000 copies to members of our synod. Meditations has just celebrated its 50th anniversary as well. In celebration of that 50th anniversary, NPH published a devotional book with one year of devotions from favorite meditations over the years.

When asked the question, “What are the titles that have come out of NPH over the years it has been around that have had the biggest impact on our synod?,” Curt Jahn replied,

...To look at quantity. In 50 years we have printed and sold 10,000,000 copies of Meditations. That’s a lot of impact. 400,000 copies of Christian Worship. That has been around now, for 13, 14 years. And the other is we have sold 400,000 copies of People’s Bible...If I were to choose one of the three, hands down it would be the hymnal. You think about it, when it comes to published word, God’s word comes to people, more people more often in our synod through the hymnal they pick up in church every Sunday than any other kind of published material, more than Bibles, because a lot of people are not regular Bible readers, even though they’re regular church goers, and in church, the printed, or the published medium by which God’s word comes to their hearts and minds is the hymnal. We kind of take hymnals for granted because we’ve always had them and we’re used to them and their always there. The hymnal has done more as a published medium to shape and form people in our synod than any other kind of publication. You can’t emphasize that enough how important a hymnal has been for us.⁵

However, John Braun, Vice President of Publishing Services and Editor of Forward in Christ said that he thought the title, What’s Going on Among Lutherans has had the biggest impact. He said that this title had the largest circulation because every Lutheran congregation was supposed to get one (Note: Every *Lutheran* congregation, not every WELS congregation). The original circulation of this book was more than 20,000 copies.⁶ This was quite critical, for both WELS congregations, and for others because it made known how far gone many churches were, even though they still called themselves Lutheran. Pastor Braun also mentioned the Christlight series as having great impact. It has had a major impact on our congregations because it is our curriculum, written by

⁵ Taken from interview with Pastor Curt Jahn

⁶ Taken from interview with Pastor John Braun

WELS, and accepted by WELS congregations and grade schools. The last big item of impact mentioned by pastor Braun was that of the Impact series.

Another point to be made in regard to Meditations and Forward in Christ is that their impact isn't truly reflected by the numbers printed. There are numerous congregations that recycle these devotional materials, collecting them after they have been read, and sending them to prisons or foreign countries to be used by people there. Even the massive number of 10,000,000 doesn't reflect the impact that Meditations have had on members of our synod and those we are trying to reach with God's word.

But so far The People's Bible has really been left out. The statistic of 400,000 copies being sold was cited earlier. But that doesn't quite do it justice. In fact, a more accurate number would be 615,000. The reason for this is NPH has licensed Concordia Publishing House to print them as well. NPH receives a small royalty from Concordia. To date Concordia has sold 215,000 copies of The People's Bible. But these numbers are only for the commentaries, and not People's Bible Teachings, a series which briefly discusses doctrines taught in the Bible. This series has done well too, and is of tremendous benefit to lay members who desire a little deeper understanding of specific teachings of the scriptures. On average, 4,000 volumes of each new People's Bible Teachings are sold. Currently there are about 3,000 people who have a subscription to this series.⁷

The Blessings of NPH for the pastors

⁷ All statistics in this paragraph are taken from interview with Pastor Curt Jahn

In the second area of this paper, the books for pastors will be discussed. This is important, then, that as a conservative Lutheran church, our synod have its own publishing house so that it doesn't have to rely on merely what other semi-conservative Lutherans (and Christians) have published. No, instead, we constantly prepare new material that presents topics in the way that best represents the "whole counsel of God" and is not influenced by other hermeneutics. This is a tremendous blessing, because even though there are some other Lutheran churches that are still conservative, nevertheless "a little yeast works through the whole batch of dough" (Galatians 5:9).

First, a periodical that NPH prints for pastors is Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly. NPH does not edit this periodical. That is done by the faculty of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, with a Managing Editor of Dr. John Brug. This periodical includes educational and exegetical articles for pastors to benefit them in their ministries. NPH does do the layout for this periodical, as well as take care of the subscriptions and mailing of it.

There are numerous books to mention in this area of the paper, which NPH has blessed our pastors with. The continual effort at keeping these books in print, and constantly working on updating books for dogmatics, and others is the work that NPH does to fulfill its responsibility to our synod, to fulfill the purpose for which we have NPH. These books vary widely, covering every area in which pastors serve and carry out their work in their parishes.

What is a pastor to do when he is not sure how to witness to someone? When he doesn't know much about their faith? Well, a couple of books have

come out from NPH within the last few years to help in those situations. 14 years ago Pastor Mark Cares wrote Speaking the Truth in Love to Mormons. This book was a tremendous blessing for pastors in our synod and others to learn some ways to begin conversations with Mormons. This has benefited many pastors in our synod. Since then, another book along the same lines has been published. Speaking the Truth in Love to Muslims was written by Roland Cap Ehlke for the same reasons, so that pastors could benefit from the study of one man on how to approach the doctrines of Islam to individual members of that church. For the same general purpose as these two, Professor Mark Paustian wrote some books about apologetics. Prepared to Answer is a way in which every Christian can become someone who witnesses about their faith. This book (as with many others) is not just a book for pastors, but is written in a way that benefits pastors greatly, and at the same time is very useful for every lay member. In this book, Professor Paustian uses bible stories that the majority of people have known since their Sunday School days, and using these simple stories he witnesses to people about his faith, and about solutions to their problems.

Another area that NPH has been working on for years is translation. In recent years a number of books have been translated specifically for the publishing house in order to be printed. However, before that it is necessary to explain some things about translation. It is very time consuming. Usually the men who work on the translation do not get paid very much. It is more a gratuity than a payment. But that is beneficial, because it keeps the cost of these already expensive books cheap. In talking to one translator, Pastor James Langebartels,

he said that a rough number for the time it takes to translate an average book is one year. That is a lot of time, on top of other pastoral duties. However the blessings are great. The chance to sit and learn at the feet of other men who were blessed by God with the gift of writing is great and worthwhile.

In 1997, NPH published 3 volumes of The Wauwatosa Theology. This is a compilation of essays written by three men, J.P. Koehler, August Pieper, and John Schaller. These three men defined the early part of the 20th century for our synod, and provide encouragement for us as well to stick to God's word in times of change and go to it as our source. Some of these essays have previously been printed in English, but the ones that haven't were translated. It is a tremendous blessing that gives our pastors more good material to read and keep sound doctrine in front of them and on their minds. A 4th volume to this series is already translated and is in the process of being prepared to be published. If the current plan is followed, this 4th volume of The Wauwatosa Theology should be published about 3 years from now.

The following year, another book was published. This one was translated after a pastor heard some Pietism from another pastor. The Complete Timotheus Verinus gives a great background to Pietism. The reason for the translation of this book was an increased interest in Pietism in America. And actually, only this year, another book was translated and published to give background to many of the historical names in The Complete Timotheus Verinus. The title of this book is The History of Pietism. All of these books give pastors

the opportunity to keep themselves involved in studying and continuing their educations on their own. They keep sound doctrine on their mind and heart.

There are currently no more books planned for these translation projects. That does not mean that more will not happen, but just not at this current time.

The Blessings of NPH in Times of Controversy

As we move into the third area, there will be some repeat in this area from what was said about the books published by the publishing house for the pastor. However, think back to the split between WELS and LC-MS. There were numerous things that were written leading up to this split. There were the pamphlet wars of the 1950s, some of which are reproduced for us in Essays on Church Fellowship, published in 1996 by NPH. These pamphlets were able to be done because of the blessings we have in our publishing house. Professor Brug quickly came out with a book and Bible study on the roles of men and women when that was talked about in our synod. Again now he has developed a book entitled Ministry of the Word, which is not available yet, but should be available in the near future on the topic of the church and ministry. Pope wrote a book titled Feminism. There is currently a Bible study entitled Deadly Desires by Richard Starr, and he is in the process of turning that Bible study into a book. These are only a few examples of the blessing the publishing house has been to our synod when issues come up.

Do we still need the publishing house? I don't think you would find many people answering "no." The benefits of NPH are wide-reaching. The fact that it is self-supporting is an even greater benefit at this time of other financial crises in

our synod. The blessings to the lay members are great. They only have to have the desire to read, and there is a plethora of material available from NPH on every topic. They print materials for pastors to continue in their studies, and also to help them with their duties as pastors. Both of these things help prevent controversy in our synod, because then everyone is closer to the same page on current issues. When a new issue arises, it is quickly talked about. Without the publishing house, the work of the spread of the pure gospel would be much more difficult. Without having our own publishing house, books such as Speaking the Truth in Love to Mormons, Speaking the Truth in Love to Muslims, Prepared to Answer, More Prepared to Answer and many others perhaps never would have been published. President John Brenner summed up nicely the blessings of the publishing house in his sermon at the dedication of the publishing house in 1949,

From the outside the Publishing House looks like every other business concern. Goods are sold over the counter; printing presses hum; parcels go out by mail or express; and orders and checks are constantly flowing in. There are those who see in it only another publishing house. Yes, some may even look to it for aid to the synodical treasury.

...Books for which we have to rely on other publishing houses are read very critically before they are offered to our people. Its own publications are controlled by one ideal, that of glorifying our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and placing all things under the feet of Him whom God has given to be the head over all things to the Church.

By the periodicals issued through the Publishing House, ...our synod reaches out to all of its members, young and old.

...These periodicals aid in the work of indoctrinating our membership and acquainting it with the history of the Church. They offer brotherly admonition, comfort, and counsel concerning our common task. Through them we are warned against dangers threatening the individual Christian and the Church. They fearlessly combat error of every kind. The reports in them keep our work before the eyes of our members and rally the brethren around the projects on which we have agreed in our conventions. In doing all this, they serve to maintain in our Synod the true unity of faith and the love that makes the many one in the edification of the body of Christ.

We love our missions and want to foster them. But let us not forget that our Publishing House maintains contact with more souls than [than] we can reach through many missions.⁸

To conclude, the impact of our publishing house does not extend only to our synod. There have been a couple of titles widely used by people from other churches. Vogel's Cross Reference to Luther's Works has been an invaluable tool for many Luther scholars, enabling them to where the various editions (American, St. Louis, Erlangen, Weimar) have the same material, and also then what still needs to be translated. Another book that has been extensively used is the Concordance to the Book of Concord. Two other books which were already mentioned apply to this area as well. What's Going on Among Lutherans and The People's Bible. It is a blessing from the Lord to have a publishing house that consistently for over 100 years has produced sound, doctrinal material which not only builds up the pastors, but builds up every member in our synod as well.

⁸ Northwestern Lutheran 1949 p. 194, 205

Bibliography

Oral interview with NPH editor Pastor Curt Jahn

Oral interview with Vice President of Publishing Services and Editor of Forward in Christ, Pastor John Braun

Northwestern Lutheran 1949 and 1991.