

NORTHWESTERN PUBLISHING HOUSE:
Many Changes, but a Changeless Mission

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February 21, 1994

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The printed and published word is something which many people take for granted nowadays. Look in almost anyone's house and you will find some sort of book, pamphlet, tract, newspaper, or magazine lying around. This was not always the case. Five hundred years ago, few people owned books or other reading material. But that all began to change in the 15th century.

No one knows for certain who should get credit for inventing the first printing press. There is, however, a great amount of indirect and circumstantial evidence and a very small amount of direct evidence which points to Johann Gutenberg as being the "inventor of printing" (1). Starting in the 1400's, Gutenberg's printing press made it possible for much more literature to be reproduced quickly and accurately. As a result, many people, both educated and non-educated, were able to get their hands on books, tracts, pamphlets, and other printed materials. The printing press and the printed word became an important part of communication and education in the world.

We are living more than five hundred years after the death of Johann Gutenberg, but the printed word is as important as ever. Bookstores are doing very well in promoting and selling their merchandise. Public and personal libraries are overflowing with books, magazines, and newspapers. Publishing houses around the world

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are busy producing all kinds of printed materials for their readers.

The ministry of the printed and published word has always been an important part of the ministry of the Wisconsin Synod. Since its beginnings, the Wisconsin Synod's Northwestern Publishing House (NPH) has been busy producing printed materials for the purpose of spreading the good news of Jesus Christ. Its primary mission is "to spread the gospel through biblically sound material that will communicate, foster, and support the Christian faith and life through the published word and other media" (2).

The focus of this paper is to show how NPH's mission of spreading the gospel through the printed word has not changed throughout the years. Although many other things about NPH have changed, its mission remains the same. This paper will first give a brief history of the first hundred years of NPH, noting especially some of the changes which took place during those years. The major focus of the paper, however, will be on some important changes at NPH during the years 1977 to 1985. Finally, the paper will look at how the Lord has continued to bless NPH since the move to its present location.

I. Some Changes at NPH, 1876-1976

Northwestern Publishing House started as an idea to raise funds for the Wisconsin Synod's worker training school, Northwestern College in Watertown. In June of 1876, at the 26th annual convention of the German Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Wisconsin and Other States, Pastor Reinholdt Adelberg addressed the delegates (3). Pastor Adelberg, the treasurer for the Northwestern College Board of

Control, reported that the college was badly in debt.

The Wisconsin Synod realized that something had to be done quickly to raise money for its worker training institution. Other synods had accumulated funds for some of their church work by the sale and publishing of books, so the Wisconsin Synod voted to establish its own "synodical bookstore" (4). Late in the year 1876 the official synodical bookstore opened in a rented picture framing shop on Broadway in downtown Milwaukee (5).

Fifteen years later two important changes took place. One change was the location of the store. On October 8, 1891, the synodical bookstore moved to a rented building at 310 N. Third Street in Milwaukee (6). The second change was that the "synodical bookstore" began its own printing operation (7). This bookstore and print shop was beginning to carry out more effectively its mission of spreading the gospel through its own printed materials. It was also at this time when the organization was officially incorporated as "Northwestern Publishing House" (8).

The publishing house saw more changes within the next few years. By 1897, NPH was too big for its building (9). So it moved to another rented building on Third Street. Soon it had to move again to yet another rented building.

Finally, the NPH Board of Directors decided that it was time for NPH to plan for its own building. So in 1913, NPH bought a lot on Fourth Street between State and Cedar in Milwaukee (10). In the next year, NPH's first non-rented facility, three stories high and 12,000 square feet of space, was built on that lot for \$34,214.70 (11). This building served NPH's needs very well for about thirty years. By

1941, the publishing house was "a flourishing operation with over thirty employees, a modern printing and binding operation, and an ever expanding production line" (12). Throughout these years, the Lord certainly blessed NPH and its mission to spread his gospel through biblically sound material.

Northwestern's building on Fourth Street, however, was taken away soon. Late in the 1940's, the city of Milwaukee notified the publishing house that NPH would have to move once again. In December 1948, an edition of the Milwaukee Journal let everyone know why NPH had to move. The newspaper printed four large pictures showing the demolition of the NPH building. The caption underneath the pictures explained what was happening:

"Bong! The razing of the building formerly occupied by the Northwestern Publishing House got under way in earnest Wednesday as a 2,200 pound steel weight swinging from the end of a 65 foot boom pounded away at the structure. The building, at 935 N. 4th Street, covers part of the site where the new sports arena will be erected... (13)

The building on Fourth Street was gone, but mission of NPH was still present. The NPH Board of Directors searched for a new place to carry out the mission of providing printed materials to communicate and support the Christian faith. In 1949, after the search had been completed, NPH moved into an existing building at 3624 W. North Avenue in Milwaukee.

The move to North Avenue marked yet another change in NPH history. "The publishing arm, long living in the shadow of the printing phase, began to take on increasing importance" (14). During the next decade, NPH made great strides in the area of publishing. The 1950's were the years when NPH began to produce its first

professional commentary (Galatians, copyright 1957) and also the devotional series Meditations (15).

The Lord certainly enabled NPH to carry out its ministry and mission throughout the 1960's and into the 1970's. In the October 7, 1973 issue of The Northwestern Lutheran, Pastor G. Jerome Albrecht reported what was said concerning NPH during that year's Synod Convention. He wrote,

The Ministry of the Printed Word as carried on by our Synod's Northwestern Publishing House is becoming more and more important. As unfaithfulness to the Word grows by leaps and bounds, more and more concerned Christians of other church bodies are looking to Northwestern Publishing House for sound Scriptural literature... ..It was also noted that Northwestern Publishing House sales increased 21 percent during the last biennium. (16)

The Lord continued to widen the ministry of NPH to reach many more people outside of the WELS. He also made it financially possible for NPH to grow in its ministry.

In 1976, the centennial year of the NPH bookstore, Walter R. Bunge, the manager of NPH, reminded everyone how the Lord had graciously and generously continued to bless NPH. In an invitation for an "open house" to celebrate the bookstore's centennial, Mr. Bunge wrote, (At the present time)... "we produce 1.4 million periodicals, 5 million bulletins, thousands of books annually and also offer many books and materials produced by others" (17).

During its first century Northwestern Publishing House underwent many changes in location as well as in size and in prosperity. NPH's mission, however, remained the same. The small publishing house of the WELS faithfully published and printed doctrinally sound material for WELS, for other Christians, and for the public in general. At

the same time, NPH was intent on producing no product which in any way would compromise the truth of God's Word.

In the early 1970's the management and the Board of Directors of NPH thought that the publishing house would be able to grow even more and carry out its mission in an even better way. They thought that if the WELS would transfer the title of NPH's building and land to NPH itself, then the publishing house could operate more efficiently and effectively. The Northwestern Lutheran reported what happened when NPH requested this transfer at the 1973 Synod Convention:

... the delegates turned down the request. Noting the impressive progress that the publishing house has made in recent years, the delegates envisioned no great obstacle to its plans for further expansion and modernization, even though the title would be left as is. (18)

In 1973, the WELS saw no great obstacles which would hinder NPH's growth and expansion. Within four years, however, some obstacles did arise. These obstacles threatened to keep the publishing house from becoming more efficient and effective in carrying out its mission. As a result, two important decisions were made. First of all, NPH would have to move from its location. Secondly, NPH would have to stop printing its own materials.

II. Two Important Changes at NPH, 1977-1985

In the late 1970's the Wisconsin Synod asked its Commission on Christian Literature (CCL) to "engage a publishing researcher for a year" (19). The WELS wanted to answer such questions as, "What are our publishing needs?" "Where are the facilities for producing the printed products?" "When can these publishing needs be met?" and "How

can the publishing program be financed?" (20). An article in The Courier, the official publication of the WELS-CCL, reported in autumn of 1978 that work was being done to answer these questions. The author of the article, Mentor Kujath, had some thoughts about NPH's situation at the time. Kujath said, "If the resolution of the 1977 Synod convention is carried out and NPH is relocated, the potential to increase production will certainly be taken care of in plant arrangement for efficiency and expansion" (21).

The 1977 Synod convention to which Kujath referred was an important convention for the future of NPH. Part of the report of NPH to the delegates that year shows an obstacle which was threatening NPH's progress:

A major problem which has been developing for some time has now become a very serious situation. The area in which the Synod Administration and Publishing House buildings are located has recently deteriorated rapidly. Vandalism to the buildings and to the automobiles of employees has caused much damage and there is an ever present potential of the very serious destruction of property.

Furthermore, the market values of our properties are declining rapidly while at the same time the cost of property we will before long be forced to acquire is steadily rising, and suitable sites are fast disappearing from the market. The cost of the NPH land and building was recorded in 1950 at \$410,000. The market value has been estimated at approximately \$200,000 or less.

Good stewardship of the Synod's funds, proper concern for our workers, visitors and customers, and the uninterrupted flow of the periodicals, church and school materials, and services we provide for the Synod, require facing up to this emergency situation without delay. The NPH Board of Directors is therefore giving this matter prime consideration... (22)

Stories still float around NPH about some of the vandalism and robberies which happened at the 37th and North Avenue location during the 1970's. NPH employee Tom Kuehl remembers chasing down a man who

had stolen a purse from a customer. He recalls another time when a pastor stopped by one morning to pick up some materials. The pastor was in the store for no more than five to ten minutes. When he left the store, his car was gone. Linda Baumann, another NPH employee, remembers hearing of some men who took an entire display case of clergy crosses and walked out the door without paying for them. Whether these kind of stories have been embellished over the years is hard to say. But one thing is for sure: NPH was not in the best neighborhood in Milwaukee!

Pastor Gordon Snyder, a long-time member of the NPH Board of Directors (chairman of the Board at the time of this writing), remembers that the Board had intended to move NPH from the 37th and North Avenue location already before the 1977 convention. The Board of Directors looked for sites to relocate the publishing house. No relocation occurred right away, however, for two reasons. No funds were available, and although NPH was in the middle of the highest crime rate in Milwaukee, some people felt that NPH should stay in the same neighborhood (23).

The vandalism and robberies, however, weren't the only reasons that NPH was ready to move again. NPH president Jerry Loeffel tells of another reason why relocation was inevitable. He says,

The decision to move from North Avenue was a very logical decision. We had outgrown the facility, particularly in the store and distribution services area. From an operational standpoint, the North Avenue location was no longer set up to operate an efficient publishing and distribution center for the WELS. (24)

NPH was ready to move in 1977 when the WELS met for convention. After NPH had reported to the Synod about the problems which the

publishing house was experiencing, the decision was left up to the voting delegates. The Joint Report of Committees No.8 and 11 who studied the subject of NPH's relocation resolved 1) to rescind a 1975 resolution to build or remodel at the North Avenue location, 2) to have Synod authorize a relocation which would take place as soon as possible, 3) to have the Board of Trustees and the Coordinating Council program the financing of the relocation, and 4) to take necessary measures to protect the people and property connected with NPH during the interim (25). This report was adopted by the convention.

So it was decided that the publishing house would move again. The actual move to another location wouldn't take place for another eight years. But before that happened other decisions had to be made. One of the greatest decisions was whether or not to continue printing and binding operations when the relocation would take place. In 1984, the Board of Directors decided that NPH would stop its printing and binding operations. President Loeffel explains that this decision was just as logical as the decision to move from North Avenue:

The decision to cease printing was based on economic conditions. It was evident that NPH would be able to serve the church more efficiently by hiring outside printers through competitive bidding on each product. Utilizing printing vendors with the most modern equipment would enable NPH to publish more materials faster and more economically. (26)

Pastor Snyder agrees:

The fact that we dropped printing was for purely economic reasons. We simply could not do the work in house as economically as we could do it by farming it out. We really became "healthier" by making the decision. The printing

industry technology was growing just too fast for our small operation to be able to keep up. (27)

In September 1984, WELS President Carl Mischke notified pastors in the Synod that NPH would discontinue its printing and binding operations (28). President Mischke first of all wanted to explain to the members of the WELS that NPH would carry the same responsibility as it had for the last several years. Then he commended the Board of Directors for taking the steps necessary to strengthen the Synod's publishing program and commitment to the ministry of the printed word (29). Many changes were taking place at NPH, but NPH's mission remained changeless.

The last assignment for NPH's printing and binding operation was the October 15, 1984, issue of The Northwestern Lutheran (30). Two months later, on December 13, NPH auctioned off its bindery and printing equipment and paper stock for over \$200,000 (31). The relocation was starting to become a reality.

1985 was an exciting year for the publishing house. The ground-breaking ceremony for the new NPH in Wauwatosa was held on April 10 of that year. During the summer the North Avenue building was sold for a price of \$55,000 (32). It was a fair price considering the location of the building, but it was only a drop in the bucket of the \$1.5 million it would cost to build the new 40,000 square-foot facility (33).

The actual move of NPH from 37th and North Avenue to 113th Street in Wauwatosa took five days in the beginning of August 1985. On August 6, NPH reopened for business at 1250 N. 113th Street (34). A dedication service at St. John's Lutheran Church in Wauwatosa and an

"open house" at the new site were held on October 20, 1985 (35). Many came to see the new NPH and to praise the Lord for his blessings to and through the publishing house.

In the dedication service booklet, the Chairman of the Board of Directors, Pastor Snyder, reminded everyone of the changeless mission of Northwestern Publishing House:

...we rededicate ourselves to this most important ministry. It is our earnest desire to assist the various synodical boards and commissions in their work of carrying the gospel to the nations. It is our joy to "hold up the prophet's hands" by providing WELS clergy and laity with Christ-centered orthodox printed materials. Together let us implore the Lord's blessing upon our joint ministry of sharing his good news with the nations. To God alone be the glory. (36)

III. The Lord Continues to Bless NPH, 1986 and Beyond

Since NPH's move to 1250 N. 113th St., the Lord has continued to bless the ministry and mission of the publishing house. The new building itself has been a blessing in that it has helped NPH to carry out its mission. The "new building," located on 3.25 acres of land in the Tosa Business Park, has 14,500 square feet for the offices and clerical work, 5500 square feet for the retail store, and 20,000 square feet for the warehouse (37). In 1985, this amount of space was perceived to be enough room for NPH to grow and to be efficient in doing its job. In 1994, however, both Jerry Loeffel, the President of NPH, and Pastor Snyder, the Chairman of the Board of Directors, say that future expansion needs in all areas of NPH are currently being studied.

The Lord has showered many blessings on NPH. Some of these

blessings seem to flow out of the blessing of the publishing house's new facilities. President Loeffel and Pastor Snyder see that the Lord has blessed NPH in three ways over the years they have been associated with the publishing house. Those blessings include a continual supply of faithful workers, financial gains, and quality products. Pastor Snyder explains:

Since I have been on the Board (began in 1969) we have seen increase in the number of publications, thereby reaching out to more people. The Lord has blessed us with quality people. We have had a few "ordeals," but the Lord has strengthened NPH through them. The Lord made it possible for us to make the move without financial impact on Synod... (38)

President Loeffel simply says that he is "amazed" at how the Lord has blessed NPH's ministry:

(The Lord) has provided us with the personnel to carry out his work and products to continually serve his people. He has provided us with the financial means to meet the challenges of operating a publishing concern. (39)

Such blessings as these not only enable NPH to carry out its job of producing printed Christian materials. These blessings also have a definite impact on the WELS and its mission to spread the gospel.

NPH continues to be committed to working closely with the different agencies, boards, commissions and other organizations within the WELS. Currently, NPH produces the following publications for the synod: The Northwestern Lutheran, Parish Leadership, Outreach, Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly, Lutheran Educator, Book of Reports and Memorials (BORAM), Report to the Twelve Districts, Proceedings, WELS Yearbook, and WELS Herald. NPH also runs the computer bulletin board (WELSNET) and the audio/visual lending

library for the WELS.

The publishing house continues to publish quality products not only for the synod, but also for churches, schools, and individuals as well. These products include Sunday School curriculum, Christian Day School materials, the People's Bible series, Christian Worship: A Lutheran Hymnal, and much more.

Many new products and materials for the synod, churches, schools, and individuals are also being planned and worked on for the future. Some of the many products planned for the near future include a music curriculum (1996), "Christ-Light" curriculum (1997-1998), Quartalschrift Anthology (1994-1995), and Hoenecke's Dogmatics (1994) (40).

The Lord continues to bless NPH with the finances to continue to publish these new materials. One only has to look at the sales figures for this fiscal year to realize that the Lord has made NPH very healthy and very able to carry out its mission. Excluding Christian Worship hymnal sales, the dollar amount for this fiscal year will be around \$5,000,000. Hymnal sales will push that number up to \$8,000,000 (41).

Numbers like these and the long list of new products and materials suggest that NPH's ministry is growing and widening. NPH's ministry may be reaching out to more people, but its mission remains the same: "to spread the gospel through biblically sound material that will communicate, foster, and support the Christian faith and life through the published word.." (42).

NPH has seen many changes within its lifetime. Some of those changes have been small and insignificant. Others have been rather

important. In the future NPH will have to make even more decisions regarding changes. When those decisions are made, NPH will inevitably go through some changes once again. By God's grace, however, NPH's primary purpose to spread the gospel through the printed and published word will never change.

Endnotes

1. McMurtrie, Douglas C. The Book: The Story of Printing and Bookmaking. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1943 - Eighth printing, 1965) pp 138ff.
2. A "questionnaire" was given to NPH President Jerry Loeffel in February 1994. This was part of Pres. Loeffel's responses.
3. "A Century of Service." The Northwestern Lutheran. June 27, 1976, p 204.
4. Ibid.
5. "NPH: Proclaim His Salvation Day After Day." Video made for NPH's 100th Anniversary as a publisher, 1991.
6. Promotional brochure made by NPH while at 3624 W. North Ave. (1977-78?)
7. "A Century of Service." The Northwestern Lutheran. June 27, 1976, p 204.
8. Ibid.
9. The booklet which NPH made in 1991 for its 100th anniversary as a publisher says, "Rapid growth and frequent changes marked the ensuing years (after 1891). A catechism, a primer, reading books, a treasury of songs, a hymnbook, a theological quarterly, and a three-volume dogmatics soon filled the building and by 1897 forced the first of two moves on Third Street..."
10. Promotional brochure made by NPH while at 3624 W. North Ave. (1977-78?)
11. NPH booklet made for its 100th anniversary as a publisher, 1991.
12. Ibid.
13. Milwaukee Journal. Thursday, December 9, 1948. p 24.
14. NPH booklet made for its 100th anniversary as a publisher, 1991.
15. Ibid.
16. Albrecht, G. Jerome. "No Debate About Money." The Northwestern Lutheran. October 7, 1973, p 318.
17. Walter R. Bunge's letter of invitation to NPH's "open house" on October 3, 1976. His letter is dated September 1, 1976.

18. Albrecht, G. Jerome. "No Debate About Money." The Northwestern Lutheran. October 7, 1973, p 318.
19. Kujath, Mentor. "To Publish or Not to Publish." The Courier (of the WELS Commission on Christian Literature). Fall 1978, No. 4, p 1.
20. Ibid.
21. Ibid.
22. WELS Book of Reports and Memorials, 1977, pp 159-160.
23. A questionnaire was given to Pastor Gordon Snyder, Chairman of the NPH Board of Directors, in February 1994. This was part of one of his responses.
24. Questionnaire given to Pres. Loeffel, February 1994.
25. WELS Proceedings, 1977, pp 151-152.
26. Ibid.
27. Questionnaire given to Pastor Snyder, February 1994.
28. President Mischke sent this information to WELS pastors in a letter dated September 4, 1984.
29. Ibid.
30. "Publishing House Sells Equipment." The Northwestern Lutheran. February 1, 1985. p 43.
31. Ibid.
32. "Publishing House Building Sold." The Northwestern Lutheran. August 1985. p 251.
33. Spaulding, Thomas. NPH dedication service booklet. October 1985, p 3.
34. Letter from the Director of Sales and Marketing, Jerry Loeffel, (later NPH president) to "our valued customers." Letter dated June 1985.
35. Letter from Pastor Snyder, chairman of NPH Board of Directors, to WELS congregations. Letter dated September 12, 1985.
36. Snyder, Gordon. NPH dedication service booklet. October 1985, p 2.
37. Spaulding, Thomas. NPH dedication service booklet. October 1985, p 3.

38. Questionnaire given to Pastor Snyder, February 1994.
39. Questionnaire given to Pres. Loeffel, February 1994.
40. Information about new products is from informational updates given to NPH employees.
41. Questionnaire given to Pres. Loeffel, February 1994.
42. Ibid.