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Palmer Street Mission:

The W.E.L.S. Store-front Experience

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"Do you mean to say that we have a store-front mission in the Wisconsin Synod?" is a question found in the October, 1974 issue of the Northwestern Lutheran. The answer back then was, "Yes, we do, on Palmer Street in Milwaukee." Today, however, the answer is "No." The history of our store-front mission is short, only about four years. But it is interesting. The history of the Palmer Street Mission, as our store-front was called, puts you in touch with the Wisconsin Synod's early attempts in reaching into the inner-city as a mission field. To give you a clearer picture of the work and history of Palmer Street Mission a three point outline will be followed. First we will look to see what stirred our attention to see the inner-city as a mission field for the W.E.L.S. and how one answer to this new field was a store-front mission. Second, we will walk through the history of the mission itself. And third, we will take a look at the results of this so far unique mission, to see and guess at some of the blessings that God brought through this short-lived mission.

## I.

Why was a mission started in Milwaukee? It was here that the Synod was founded. Here there were dozens of congregations, some which flourished as large congregations within blocks of each other. Palmer Street Mission was started because a dramatic change occurred within Milwaukee. It is in Milwaukee where the Wisconsin Synod began to feel the realities of the inner-city life.\*

\*(The great majority of the information concerning the Wisconsin Synod's early history in the inner-city has been extracted from Pastor Rolfe Westendorf's 1982 paper entitled, "WELS IN THE INNER CITY.")

The Wisconsin Synod is not an urban church body. A recent study reported that 67% of WELS members live in towns of 50,000 or less. Thus our Synod was slow in having to face inner-city affairs. Milwaukee is the one true exception. As was stated here the Synod was founded, and grew to have dozens of churches within the Milwaukee metro area. When the churches were founded there was a large concentration of German speaking people. The concentration of houses, apartments, and homes which filled the city allowed for the establishing of large congregations very near to each other. At first the minority population of Black and Hispanic was very small in Milwaukee. But in the twenty

years to follow World War II there came a drastic change.

In the 50's and 60's a black wave swept through the north side of Milwaukee. Along with the new Black neighbors came the practice of "block busting." A white neighborhood kept out the black until the first black-owned home appeared on the block. Then in a rush the entire neighborhood usually sold its property and moved. White Lutherans evacuated their old neighborhoods in droves, leaving their churches behind. Under those conditions, the congregation seemed faced with the choice to either relocate or die. These WELS congregations are those that no longer function at their original Milwaukee locations: Bethel, Bethesda, Divine Charity, Ephrata, Saron, and St. Matthews.

This is not to say that there was a lack of concern for the new souls in the neighborhood. Serious efforts were made to win prospects from the black community. But these efforts found little success, partly because white Lutherans knew little about doing mission work among the blacks, and partly because of the social climate that prevailed at the time. In those days segregation was the norm, in housing and every other social aspect of life including congregational life. It was not considered normal for blacks and whites to attend church together. It was not that the desire to share the gospel was missing. It was just that they didn't want to share their churches with them. This was the accepted view of segregation. So it was that in the WELS prior to the Civil Rights Movement of

the 60's we were a segregated Synod. Among our 350,000 baptized members were about 500 blacks, 80 to 90% of them in our two black congregations, St. Philips of Milwaukee and Zoar of Detroit.

With the coming of The Civil Right Act together with the Civil Rights Movement drastic changes occurred in the social climate in the inner-city. White Lutherans were now free to work in earnest to win black members for their congregations. And their black neighbors could begin to believe that the white congregations really wanted them. However, there was little increase in black membership. Cultural differences still presented major barriers to inner-city evangelism efforts. The declining congregations continued to work on their own. They canvassed, made prospect calls, conducted vacation Bible schools, and employed Seminary students to assist in their neighborhood evangelism programs. But still the inner-city churches were losing strength.

The fall of 1967 perhaps marks a beginning where the Synod as a whole would become involved. That fall Pastor Richard Seeger received the call to St. Marcus, one of the congregations in the poorest part of town. Shortly after his arrival he called for and helped organize an inner-city pastors' group. This group, who called themselves the Inner-City Pastors' Council, shared their problems and encouraged each other. With this group formed Pastor Seeger proposed an intensive three-year

evangelism program to train young people in evangelism, teaching vacation Bible school, and awareness of the black culture. Funding for this was to come from AAL (Aid Association for Lutherans.) Since AAL only offered grants through authorized agencies of the Synod, the Commission on Evangelism submitted the request. For the first time the Synod was officially involved in the inner-city mission field.

One phase of this successful three year program was the perceived need for vacation Bible school materials designed for the inner-city. Instead of having all blue-eyed and blond children playing in spacious yards, the inner-city pastors wanted something to which their children could relate. Pastor R. Westendorf was commissioned to produce these materials. He prepared the new materials but a problem developed. The cost of producing these materials was beyond the ability of the inner-city council and had to wait for another grant. This time the Commission on Evangelism was reluctant to support the request, but the General Board for Home Missions (GBHM) was more sympathetic to this need. They requested and received the AAL funding for the new materials. This was now the second time the Synod was officially involved with the inner-city mission work.

The third step for the Synod's involvement in the inner-city formed around the Synod setting up a program to encourage and train black clergy. The program itself never really met with success, but it did show the Synod's greater

concern for this mission field.

The outlook for the inner-city churches at this time still looked doubtful, unless they received help from the Synod. But it was against Synod policy to assist self-supporting congregations. In 1970 these and other related problems were formerly presented to the GBHM in a paper by Pastor Kurt Koeplin. In his paper he presented the special problems faced in the inner-city and asked that the Synod recognize the inner-city as a legitimate mission field to be supported by the Synod. The GBHM appointed a committee to react to the paper. They reached the following conclusions:

1. the inner city was a legitimate mission field which demanded the attention of the Synod;
2. support should be given only to those congregations which demonstrated an ability to assimilate the people of the community;
3. support should take the form of manpower rather than money, with the intention that the manpower should assist in evangelism outreach; and
4. inner-city missions should be administered through the existing district mission boards.

These findings were incorporated into a policy statement adopted by the GBHM on August 5, 1971.

The Wisconsin Synod had officially recognized the inner city as a mission responsibility!

After some initial years (72-75) of seminars the inner-city work was turned over to the district mission board. The inner-city pastors soon followed this with a request for their own mission board, because their mission work varied from the

normal work seen by the boards. The District Board took this to the GBHM where it was favorably received and the Inner-City Mission Committee, (ICMC) was born. In the Proceedings of the 28th Biennial Convention of the S.E. District, June 1972, it reported the resolution, "That we ask the Lord's guidance and blessing upon all new mission activities and upon the efforts to arrive at some plan which will encourage and aid our inner-city congregations." (p.39.) "It was during this time of flux and initial Synod efforts that the Palmer Street Mission came into existence.

## II.

There were many ideas and options being weighed in the consideration of how to reach out to the blacks in the inner-city. In a 1970 "Position Paper" the Southeast Wisconsin District Mission Board suggested that "assistance could take the form of:

- a. Lay Evangelists.
- b. Seminarians laboring part-time.
- c. Full-time vicars.
- d. Full-time youth and Evangelism Directors.
- e. Associate "Pastors of Missions."
- f. Limited financial aid to maintain attractive practical and efficient facilities to carry out the full work of the ministry by the congregation.

By 1972, April 25, The Evangelism Team Approach had won the approval of the GBHM. ("REPORT OF INNER-CITY MISSION STUDY COMMITTEE" GBHM - 4/24-4/25/72.) This approach was to first call an experienced pastor to be salaried by Synod. He was to

be called as District Evangelist, under the control of the District Mission Board. He was to be joined by 2-4 Seminary Middlers who volunteer for this work. They would train with no pay but in June would start to receive Vicar's salaries. These 3-5 men would constitute the District Evangelism Team, which would work for four months in an inner city congregation. It was a plan, but it did not seem to want to leave the planning stage. In an October 15, 1972 Committee report to the SE District, (Committee #6 - INNER-CITY EVANGELISM/SYNODICAL INVOLVEMENT) the adoption of the plan is commended and encouraged to implement as soon as possible, but no start up seemed close. But even though this plan was hung up for the moment, the churches were implementing other evangelism efforts. One of these was the use of part-time vicars for the VBS program.

Northwestern College graduate Glen L. Thompson initially served Bethel in the 1972 VBS program and then later that summer worked following up on contacts. That work continued part-time through the fall when he entered Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary (WLS) as a Junior. The work at Bethel was terminated at the end of 1972 when Bethel had decided to move out to the suburbs. This left Pastor Westendorf with a part-time vicar without a congregation. He made use of the opportunity to have some survey work done on a new idea which he and the Inner-City Pastors' Council had come up with. That idea was to start a store-front mission.



During the winter and spring of 1973 Glen spent a lot of time searching the inner-city for the right spot. What was the right spot? First it had to have the right kind of facilities. He was looking for a suitable building at a reasonable cost that would serve as our mission. This preferably meant a building with good plumbing, good access, and visible to the public without being overwhelming. The location of the building was to be:

- a) not less than two blocks from any Lutheran church of any Synod, to avoid bad public relations;
  - b) not more than six blocks from the WELS church which should eventually receive members from the store-front operation; or
  - c) in a neighborhood where a high transiency rate makes it likely that the church-front members will move near our established churches;
- (THE STORE-FRONT CONCEPT Inner-City Pastors' Council, October 31, 1973 ,Procedures 1. Secure a suitable building)

Several locations suggested themselves. Since Bethel had ceased its active outreach in preparation of its move, there was a big opening in their vicinity. An excellent location and building were found a few blocks away, but Bethel asked that it not be so close, so that site was dropped. What looked like a better mission potential area was discovered at the front of St. John's (8th & Uliet). It had an area surrounded and cutoff by freeways and highways isolated from all other churches. The entire area had been razed and covered with low-income housing. However St. John's did not receive the idea favorably. The congregation was passive still in its outreach and was not ready to let others use their facilities to conduct a gospel outreach.

Finally the spot on Palmer Street appeared. Though it did not have the raw numbers of unchurched that the St. John's area had, it did have the advantage of being between two of our active churches, Zebaoth and St. Philips. The building contained an occupied corner bar, a small vacant store facing Palmer St. and occupied upstairs apartments. For 50.00 dollars a month rent the small store at 3470 North Palmer was rented November 5, 1973.

The store-front mission was established with these objectives and procedures.

#### Objectives

1. To reach prospects now possibly beyond the reach of our long-established churches.

a) the location would ideally be within two blocks of the prospects;

b) the prospect would not be overwhelmed by unfamiliar buildings and associates;

c) there would be no immediate obligation to learn the "Lutheran traditions">

2. To introduce the prospect to our established schools and churches after he has had the chance to meet Christ in more familiar surroundings.

#### Procedures

1. To secure a suitable building - etc.

2. Canvass for unchurched living within the two to three blocks of the store-front.

3. Use IAS approach with frequent follow up calls - (Home Bible classes).

4. Conduct Sunday School and Bible class with repeated emphasis on the essentials of sin and grace

5. Within six months begin adult instructions and simple worship services.

6. Introduce the Christian day school near-by.

7. If possible conduct confirmations in "home church".

(THE STORE-FRONT CONCEPT; Inner-City Pastors' Council, October 31, 1973).

With objectives and procedures in mind the Palmer Street Mission was opened.

The opening of the mission found the duties being shared by four Seminary Students: Glen Thompson, Tim Bauer, Randy Kuznicki, and Tom Haar. ( Later Marc Schoeder helped for a couple months.) Pastor Westendorf was their supervising pastor. The opening of the Palmer Street Mission did not come about in the way of most new missions. It was done with the hesitant approval of the District Mission Board. This approval was only granted after the Inner-City Pastors' Council had found the funds needed to start it up. The original funding then was not from Synod, but the local churches. However, the local congregations had no back up funds, so the District Mission Board did know that down the line they would have to fund it. The mission was then a joint effort between the ICPC and the SE District Mission Board.

To make the store-front into a worship and Bible study area took the work and cooperation of the Seminary students and the local congregations. The painting and clean up was taken care of mainly by the students. Then needed materials were borrowed from Good Shepherd, Siloah, St. Philips and Zebaoth. An old organ from Good Shepherd brought a little music. The old altar from Zebaoth showed it to be a little sanctuary of the Lord's. With the store-front in shape evangelism work began in earnest.

A thorough canvass was made of the surrounding two block area to introduce the mission to the neighborhood, and to find

prospects. About 700 family residences were covered during this canvass. House by house they walked offering Sunday School, Bible classes, and free counseling. All calls were done on foot, walking about the neighborhood in clerical collars so people could easily recognize them. Since all of them lived at the Seminary it was a challenge to become members of the community. But they spent as much time as possible on the streets, surveying, chatting with the neighbors, and just letting people get to know them.

December 2, 1973 was the first day of the Sunday School. The attendance grew to number between 25-30 children within the first few months. A custom started quickly where the Seminary students would walk around and gather the children on Sundays. They were Gospel Pied Pipers as each Sunday they led the children back to the mission to learn more about their Savior, Jesus. Since the store-front was very small there were times when they even had to set up chairs in the window display area. With the growth of the Sunday School, a few parents started to show up and join in. Starting January 20, 1974 a Bible class was started which developed into a simplified worship service. The order of service consisted of singing of favorite hymns, confession and absolution, the Creed, Lord's prayer and Blessing. There was no sermon but instead they had a Bible study and object lesson. In their first year the adult attendance never grew over the single digit column.

Along with the study they held in the store-front they also shared the Gospel in many homes. This was one of the first areas outside of Detroit to use an outlined evangelism Gospel presentation. Whether it was Kennedy's a little modified or Valesky's Talk About the Savior or a similar outline I'm not sure. But Pastor Westendorf trained them so each could present the Good News of the Savior in a clear and straight forward manner. They used their time walking the neighborhood to let people know of the spiritual service they offered. They witnessed at every opportunity, telling the wonderful news of the Savior. Along with their initial witness if possible they followed up with in home Bible studies. Adult instruction classes were held with those who wished to know their Lord.

In keeping with the idea of reaching out to the many unchurched, they had many different activities by which they made their presence felt. They held a couple of clothes drives, giving away clothes to whoever asked. They held a number of evening socials where they had guest speakers, discussions and other activities.

In trying to use the "feeder" idea special services were held twice at St. Philip's. February 17, and June 30 they held baptismal services at St. Philip's where they brought 18 children into the Lord's family. Also at times the Palmer Street Mission Sunday School would sing at Zebaoth or St. Philip's. These visiting Sundays worked well, bringing more

parents to church.

By the end of the 73/74 school year, the Seminary students had made a good opening in the neighborhood. The store-front idea was working in bringing the Gospel to those not before reached. But there was a problem. Summer was coming and finances looked doubtful. the ICPC could no longer fund it. Pastor Westendorf was faced with the question of what to tell the workers. Would they or would they not have summer work? The SE Distric Mission Board said they would take over the funding with only a minor change. At this time the district had a District Missionary, or mission developer, with no missions to help set up. The result was that Pastor John Raabe, the district missionary, was to take over in the month of July. This ended the mission's first stage, where it was run by the ICPC with Seminary students for workers.

In July 1974, Pastor Raabe began his work at Palmer Street Mission. Pastor Raabe brought with him many years of experience in the mission field. He worked at keeping up the same programs started by the Seminary students, and tried new ideas.

During his years at the mission, Pastor Raabe made a greater effort of reaching out with the message of the Palmer Street Mission to the rest of the WELS. In the October issue of 1974, and the April issue of 1977, Pastor Raabe informed the readers of the Northwestern Lutheran of the little sanctuary of

the Palmer Street Mission. Pastor Raabe also put together a yearbook of the Palmer Street Mission for the years 1974, 1975, and 1976. In these year books he summarized the work for the year. He also used these books as tools for mission outreach including sections on what we believe, and on the good news of the Gospel.

In the first year after the seminarians left Pastor Raabe held 8 more baptisms, that brings the total from November 1973 through November 1974 to 26 baptisms. There was also one adult confirmand that year on November 5, 1974. Also he performed one wedding during this first year.

Looking at the cost and finances of this first year reveals how economical the Palmer Street Mission was. Total receipts for 1974 were \$1553.11. Of this amount, \$350 came from Synod, \$93.48 came from donations, and \$266.44 came from the people in their offerings. The total expenses minus the salary of the workers and the initial rent and telephone bills of the first five months was \$956.07. The remaining balance on hand in December 31, 1974 was \$603.29. As we will see from these totals and from the years following, the Palmer Street Mission was not a big financial drain for the Synod.

In the period between November 1974 through November 1975 there were a few changes, but much stayed the same. Pastor Raabe continued his promotion of the mission by inviting

others to come and visit and by going to different churches and gatherings to let people know of the WELS work at the mission. (One such presentation was a slide show here at our Seminary.) His work with the people at the mission was much the same. He held or arranged for 7 baptisms. His worship and Sunday School attendance stayed about the same, perhaps a slight decline. During this time, Seminary student Robert Koester, helped with the instruction and door to door witness.

Financially the mission remained about the same. They received as gifts from others in the Synod ranging from Ladies Mission Society to a church in Africa which amounted to \$4036.40. There is no record of total receipts or total expenses, but the amounts seemed about the same with a slight increase in the remaining balance.

The period of November 1975 through November 1976, I think marked the beginning of the end for the Palmer Street Mission. There does not seem to be a record of much growth during these months. It was during this year that the Sunday school class and the service were put together. In the 1976 yearbook there is no listing of any baptisms or confirmations. Pastor Raabe was also called upon to work part time in his former call of mission developer. It seems he spent quite some time of his summer preparing a mission in Germantown. The finances also seem to show a drop in special gifts to the mission, listing only \$91.61 for offerings and \$840.19 from the Lutheran Women's



Mission Society for a total receipts of \$931.80. Their expenses remained about the same having been a total of \$1142.31. This was the first year where their income was less than their expenditures.

Pastor Raabe labored for the Lord in this field until November, 1977. At that time by mutual agreement of the SE District Mission Board and the Inner-City Pastors' Council Palmer Street Mission was closed.

There were different causes that led to this closing. First, Palmer Street was started as an experiment to reach out, it never was meant to be a permanent congregation. It led its' members to join the other area congregations acting like the "feeder" station it was planned to be. A second reason was probably the lack of manpower. It was started with four young energetic men working part time, and then switched to a one man operation. Pastor John Raabe was only 4 years from retirement when he received this call. His abilities were not the same as the younger men he replaced. The original strength of the mission was in the relationship of the children with the young men, Pastor Raabe did not share that same ability to reach out to the youth. But during his three years at the mission Pastor Raabe carried the Gospel to the neighborhood with the best of his abilities. This second reason seems to have been a dominant cause in the closing. In the report of May 12, 1976 of the Inner-City Mission Committee it was resolved that the

Southeastern Wisconsin DMB request the GBHM to establish the Store-front Mission as an ongoing program and to staff it as of January 1, 1977 with Seminary Students. The idea was to come back to the younger men. But between the May 1976 meeting and the January meeting of 1977, the decision was made to shut down the Mission.

### III.

Palmer Street Mission is unique to our Synod as being the only store-front mission started within the inner-city. During its short four year existence there resulted many benefits and blessings. The greatest blessing is the unseen blessing that is beyond our ability to record. It is of course the working of the Word in hearts of people who never had heard it before. This "success" of the mission was the joy of all who worked there. Pastor Raabe dwelt on this in his articles in the Northwestern Lutheran. The former students, now Pastors and teachers in our Synod, each listed it as the primary result over which they rejoiced. One wrote, "the opportunities to teach and reach out with the gospel were well afforded, as with the opportunity to work with many children." Another wrote, "The fruits of preaching Law and Gospel were definitely noticeable. You could see how the Holy Spirit worked in the hearts of the people we served." "We saw children grow in their faith and demonstrated a respect and hunger for God's Word." There is always success where the Word of the Lord is present.

Other visible results are listed in the final review of the mission listed in the ICMC's notes are as follows:

Contacted 700 homes in two-block radius...  
canvass...re-canvass, personally, tracts, mailing programs,  
Bibles

100 to Sunday school, 40 adults to church, 35 baptisms

Hospital calls, counseling, court appearances, social  
gatherings, recreation, clubhouse, clothing give-aways,  
food, wedding

Gave sample of sound Lutheran doctrine and practice.

Showed black community we love them.

Five families sent children to our CDS.

Two have joined churches, 4-5 pending.

Instructions completely or partly..15

5-6 families, were unchurched, joined other Lutheran and  
Protestant churches

Confirmation instruction for children

Another result which I have witnessed is the growth in understanding and desire to share the message that grew in the Seminary students. All expressed gratitude that they were able to participate at the mission. For many it was an eye opening experience and a chance to bridge the cultural gap. One wrote it gave "valuable incite to a different "lifestyle" and priceless experience in practical ministry." Another wrote," The experience was invaluable - the canvassing, witnessing, working with kids of a variety of ages, the grassroots involvement." He shared some of those experiences, telling me of the rat who used his shoelace for dental floss, the oportunties which he had to

rap with those walking past, and of the suicidal husband whom he and another helped. Each one of them answered "Yes," to the question, 'would they advocate opening another mission, based on their experiences.' The Lord blessed these men through their work at the Palmer Street Mission.

Also our Synod grew in its understanding of the inner-city through the mission. The cultural gap was examined and crossed. We learned that whenever we wanted to start such a mission, the field was ripe. We saw that the Lord especially seems to bring the children to such out reach. Much of what we learned from the Palmer Street Mission, and from all the inner-city work, I'm sure has led to the Go 87 Gospel outreach for Milwaukee this year.

The store-front is gone, but not forgotten. It has served to bring to our eyes the mission field of the inner-cities. Today we are without such a mission, but if the Lord is willing, such efforts may be come more common in our church. For further study into the rippling effects of our store-front, The Palmer Street Mission, read Pastor Westendorp's 1985 paper, "MINISTRY TO THE POOR - A NEW FRONTIER." As we go into the world to tell the good news, let us remember the world begins right here at our doorstep.