

The Influence of Philip Andreas von Rohr  
on the Early Beginnings of First Ev. Lutheran Church,  
Minnesota City, Minnesota

Bruce Mueller  
Senior Church History  
Prof. Fredrich  
May 1, 1989

Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Library  
11831 N. Seminary Drive. 65W  
Madison, Wisconsin

Some men's personality and presence are such that they can wield more influence than a person in their position normally would. People respect them and turn to them for guidance and leadership not only because of their place in society, but because of the dynamics of the individual.

One such individual was Philip Andreas von Rohr. Although he was only the pastor of a seven-family parish of twenty-one souls when he first arrived in Minnesota, he went on to become the president of the Wisconsin Synod and a respected pillar in the community of Winona where he lived and served for almost forty-two years of his life.<sup>1</sup>

The powerful influence von Rohr exerted can be seen in his various dealings with people. The members of his household felt this strong influence. By both example and instruction von Rohr the father brought up his children in the fear and admonition of the Lord, evidenced by the following glimpse of the von Rohr family's daily routine:

In their morning and evening devotions, led by the stalwart father, they worshiped Christ as the Son of the living God and willingly accepted the Gospel message of God's inspired Word. When the large family gathered together at the table for a bountiful meal, there was silence until the sonorous voice of the father had spoken the blessing; nor did anyone leave that table until the head of the family had given thanks for the benefits received.<sup>2</sup>

Von Rohr's church family at St. Martins also felt this influence. One doubts whether his members needed any more reason than "Herr Pastor sagt," even when this involved such things as the

---

<sup>1</sup>St. Martins Lutheran Church Centennial, 1856-1956, (Winona, Minnesota, 1956), p. 9.

<sup>2</sup>Philip von Rohr Sauer, "Elfrieda von Rohr Sauer," Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly, Vol. 23, No. 2 (July, 1960), p. 37.

perhaps somewhat questionable decision to split off one family from the fledgling group to start a daughter congregation<sup>3</sup> Wilson within two weeks of von Rohr's arrival<sup>3</sup>

His influence extended beyond his own congregation. Von Rohr convinced three of his neighboring pastors and former fellow members of the Buffalo Synod, J.G.M. and H. Hillemann (father and son) and A.W. Keibel to join the Wisconsin Synod in 1879 as von Rohr had already done two years earlier.<sup>4</sup> In the same year, two congregations, Trinity, Wilson, St. Martin's daughter congregation, and St. John Lewiston, an independent congregation von Rohr served as vacancy pastor briefly in 1878,<sup>5</sup> joined the Wisconsin Synod at von Rohr's urging.<sup>6</sup>

Von Rohr's influence on the synod level was widely recognized. "If ever the Wisconsin Synod engaged in the cult of personality, it may have been in connection with this man."<sup>7</sup> Under his leadership, the Wisconsin Synod made great strides forward in education, missions and membership. "He is largely responsible for the development of the synod and its missions and institutions during his term of office."<sup>8</sup> While not directly responsible for making all these things happen, they did happen under his presidency.

-----  
<sup>3</sup>Trinity Lutheran Church, Wilson, Minnesota: One Hundred Years of Grace, 1866-1966.

<sup>4</sup>Richard D. Balge, "Von Rohr: A Beloved Brother and Faithful Minister," Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly, Vol. 72, No. 3 (July, 1975), p. 211.

<sup>5</sup>Mark O. Bartsch, "A History of St. John Ev. Lutheran Church, Lewiston, Minnesota," Senior Church History paper, 25 April 1981, p. 8. St. John does not appear to have been a filiale congregation of St. Martin as Prof. Balge states in the article cited above. Organized July, 1866, St. John was a member of the Minnesota Synod before becoming independent.

<sup>6</sup>Wisconsin Proceedings, 1879, p. 54.

<sup>7</sup>Balge, p. 224.

<sup>8</sup>Erwin L. Lueker, Lutheran Cyclopedia, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1954), p. 914.

The Winona community also felt Philip von Rohr's influence. He was active as a member of the first park board and as a trustee of the cemetery association. He was friends with prominent Winona physicians, attorneys, civic and religious leaders. He served as a bridge between the elite New Englanders of Winona and the newly arriving immigrants.<sup>9</sup>

A community some six miles west of Winona, the village of Minnesota City, also strongly felt Pastor von Rohr's influence. Like Winona, Minnesota City was experiencing rapid growth in the 1870's due to the influx of settlers, among them German-speaking Lutherans.

The village of Minnesota City actually was older than Winona. In May of 1852, a group numbering almost five hundred settled in the Rollingsstone valley. This group was the remnant of the Western Farm and Village Association which had been formed a year earlier primarily of New Yorkers of foreign birth. Although the original association floundered (only twenty families remained by the winter of 1852), the core of ambitious businessmen who remained soon attracted many of the settlers that were streaming into southern Minnesota to live in Minnesota City. Far from being backward, the village soon boasted two railroad lines, two flour mills, two stores, two elevators, two hotels, a blacksmith shop, a schoolhouse, a brewery, a saloon and monthly mail delivery.<sup>10</sup>

-----  
<sup>9</sup>Philip von Rohr Sauer, "The Rev. Philip von Rohr," WELS Historical Institute Journal, Vol. 5, No. 1 (Spring 1987), p. 9.

<sup>10</sup>The details of Minnesota City's beginnings are taken from History of Winona County, Minnesota, (Chicago: H.H. Hill and Co., 1883), pp. 554-562.

Just when these German-speaking Lutherans began arriving in bustling Minnesota City is unclear. A list of names of those who worshiped in 1889 has been preserved,<sup>11</sup> but none of the names are listed either as members of the Western Farm and Village Association or as settlers filing land claims in Rollingstone township in 1855.<sup>12</sup> Perhaps exactly when they arrived is not as important as what they did once they settled in Minnesota City. The scenario unfolded as Rev. Alfred W. Sauer later described: "The pastor didn't have to look for new members in those days. The immigrants, coming from a pious background, came to town and looked for the minister."<sup>13</sup>

Since Minnesota City's only church at this time was a Baptist congregation (organized already in 1852),<sup>14</sup> the town where the Lutherans went looking was Winona. There at St. Martin congregation they found Pastor von Rohr. No doubt they had heard of his zeal for outreach and expansion and thought he could do the same for Minnesota City as he had done for the congregation at Wilson.

It is somewhat surprising that von Rohr nowhere mentions that he served this group of Lutherans in Minnesota City. In his annual reports in the Parochial Bericht he does not list any preaching stations from 1878 (his first year full year in the synod) until

-----  
<sup>11</sup>This list is recorded in a copy of the article "History of First Ev. Lutheran Church of Minnesota City, Minnesota" which was submitted to the Minnesota Centennial Committee on Churches and Religion, Winona County, Minnesota in 1958. This article, based on original church records, is the only remaining history of the early beginning since the original records have subsequently been lost. This article is the source for all facts that are not otherwise footnoted.

<sup>12</sup>These lists are found in History of Winona County, Minnesota, Franklyn Curtiss-Wedge, ed. (Chicago: H.C. Cooper, Jr. and Co., 1913), pp. 558, 559.

<sup>13</sup>Alfred W. Sauer quoted in St. Martins Centennial, p. 9.

<sup>14</sup>"Baptist Church Oldest in County," Winona Sunday News, 21 October 1962.

1888. Not until 1889 does he list a preaching station, but he gives no identification of where it was.<sup>15</sup> Although von Rohr does not speak of ever having served Minnesota City, church records mention the late 1870's as the starting date for von Rohr's holding services with these Lutherans. The details that are known of early church activity tend to support this earlier date and not the identification of the preaching station listed by von Rohr in 1889 as Minnesota City.

Von Rohr held his first services in Minnesota City in the Baptist Church. Since that building was not constructed until 1875,<sup>16</sup> that would be the earliest possible starting date for von Rohr's working in Minnesota City. The group may not have been all that large since the History of Winona County, Minnesota from 1883 makes no mention of any Lutheran services being held.<sup>17</sup>

Whatever the size of the group in the late seventies, by 1889 twenty-seven Lutherans were gathering for services, now no longer in the Baptist church, but in the Methodist church (It seems the Lutherans had an agreement with the Methodist to pay for some of the construction costs in return for use of the building).<sup>18</sup> Why this group gathered even in borrowed facilities can be linked to Pastor von Rohr's preaching and presence:

Taller than any lumberman in town and dynamic in manner, he preached sermons to his German farmers, vivid, graphic sermons that caused them to forget their weary tasks,

-----  
<sup>15</sup>Wisconsin Proceedings, 1878-1889.

<sup>16</sup>Winona Sunday News

<sup>17</sup>p. 560. The reliability of this early record may be somewhat in doubt since it also states the Baptist congregation did not yet have a church building.

<sup>18</sup>The list includes the following names: Jacob Stehn, H. Lang, H. Stender, F. Krugmeier, F. Storm, Ernest Reetz, Samuel Miller, C. Clausius, E. Hoppe, F. Schlaedt, C. Zimmerman, Peter Bong, W. Malzahn, H. Malzahn, John Schneider, Michael Schultz, Gottfried Schultz, A. Zink, L. Stein, August Malzahn, Henry Helmke, Minnie Stoss, Wilhelm Fink, William Orke, Karl Mosell, Mrs. Bachman and John Horstetler.

their aching backs, their homesickness--as they heard the glad message of salvation in their own native tongue.<sup>19</sup>

To reach out with the gospel to the Minnesota City Lutherans who no longer (or never) understood German, von Rohr preached occasionally in English, something he could do equally as well. Prof. Richard D. Balge wrote concerning von Rohr's English abilities,

It could not have been easy for people who prayed and thought in German to preach and teach in English. It is one thing to order groceries in English. It is another thing to communicate the gospel. Even among those who would have been willing there were those who could not. One who tried and did quite well was Philip Andreas von Rohr, who had not been able to speak English until he was twelve years old.<sup>20</sup>

This effective preaching was the greatest influence von Rohr had on this group of Lutherans, the glue which held them together in what must have been somewhat difficult times.

Minnesota City's early efforts in Christian education also demonstrate von Rohr's influence on this group. Von Rohr's concern for Christian education was evidenced by his starting of a school two weeks after arriving in Winona and teaching it five days a week for four years.<sup>21</sup> In Minnesota City, one of the laymen, Jacob Stehn, started German Sunday school classes. For some reason, however, these were discontinued after a few years.

When von Rohr became Wisconsin Synod president in 1889, he no longer served the group of Lutherans in Minnesota City, but his influence over the group did not end. In June of 1889, they called

-----  
<sup>19</sup>Philip von Rohr Sauer, "Elfreida von Rohr Sauer," Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly, Vol. 23, No 2 (July 1960), p. 34.

<sup>20</sup>Balge, p. 230.

<sup>21</sup>Philip von Rohr, "Ueberblick ueber mein Leben und dessen Erfahrung," Gemeindeblatt Kalender, 1910, p. 19.

Adolph Baebenroth as their pastor. This young man had already been working very closely with von Rohr as the pastor of St. Martin's daughter congregation at Wilson since his graduation from the seminary in 1881.<sup>22</sup>

Although he only served the group until November of 1890, a few incidents from Baebenroth's time show how much influence the pastor actually had and how much guidance the people needed--not only spiritual matters. In August 22, 1890, three men, Jacob Stehn, H. Lang and G. Schultz signed the deed for a lot and former saloon which the group moved and converted into a church. They signed the deed as trustees of First Ev. Lutheran Church of Minnesota City (just how and when this name was chosen is not known). The problem arose in the fact that the group had never officially organized and incorporated as a congregation, so they really had no legal standing with the state. When Pastor Baebenroth pointed this out to them, they officially organized as a congregation November 2, 1890. It must have been at this time when the first constitution in German was also adopted. For some reason, however, the trustees did not actually record this organization at the court house until January 26, 1892, over a year later. It is also somewhat surprising that the Winona newspaper did not make any mention of this organization. This perhaps illustrates how little influence this group of Germans had on their own.<sup>23</sup>

Late in 1890 when Baebenroth left to serve Salem congregation in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, Rev. J. Hering of Bethany in neighboring

-----  
<sup>22</sup>Wisconsin Proceedings, 1882, p. 65.

<sup>23</sup>Winona Republican Herald, November 1890; January, February 1892.

<sup>24</sup>Wisconsin Proceedings, 1891, p. 12.



Norton township took over pastoral responsibility for First Lutheran.<sup>24</sup> When he in turn took a call to Wilton and South Ridge, Wisconsin, four years later, President von Rohr once again was called as pastor of First Lutheran.<sup>25</sup> One wonders how he managed to conduct services in Minnesota City, function as synod president and serve as the sole pastor of St. Martin congregation (which by this time numbered at least 500 hundred families and nearly 1,400 communicants<sup>26</sup>) for the five months until M.J. Hillemann was called to serve at Bethany and also First Lutheran.<sup>27</sup>

In August of 1898, M.J. Hillemann accepted a call to Green Bay, so First Lutheran once again came under the guiding influence of Philip von Rohr.<sup>28</sup> For the next ten years, this influence was not through personal leadership of the congregation, but through his assistants. That von Rohr greatly influenced the ministry of these young men is self-evident. As gifted as they were, these young seminary graduates would have been shaped and molded under the tutelage of the respected von Rohr. Probably all of von Rohr's assistants felt the same about their time of "apprenticeship" under von Rohr as Alfred Sauer did who often alluded to this privilege in glowing terms.<sup>29</sup> First Lutheran congregation was the second-hand recipient of this guidance and direction.

William Franzmann was the first of von Rohr's Hilfspastors, serving both St. Martin beginning in 1897 and First Lutheran the

-----  
<sup>25</sup>Wisconsin Proceedings, 1895

<sup>26</sup>St. Martins Centennial, p. 8.

<sup>27</sup>Wisconsin Proceedings, 1895, p. 17.

<sup>28</sup>Wisconsin Proceedings, 1899, p. 21.

<sup>29</sup>WELS Historical Journal, p. 17.

next year when Hillemann left.<sup>30</sup> O.R. Sonnemann replaced him in both capacities in January of 1901 when Franzmann accepted a call to the Minnesota Synod.<sup>31</sup> Three years later when Sonnemann accepted a call to the Michigan Synod, Hans Moussa took over responsibility as assistant.<sup>32</sup> He served for one year from July of 1904 until July of 1905 when he joined his father at Burlington, Wisconsin<sup>33</sup>

In 1905, Philip von Rohr's health was deteriorating. That summer he vacationed in the West seeking relief. Von Rohr installed graduate Alfred W. Sauer at St. Martin July 29, 1905, before he left. Sauer also began serving First Lutheran at that time. The following summer the ailing von Rohr and his wife sailed to Germany. There the specialist he consulted diagnosed incurable cancer of the colon. Although an emergency colostomy by Dr. Will Mayo prolonged von Rohr's life for two years, he soon became too weak even to climb the stairs of the pulpit without assistance. Already prior to his death December 22, 1908, von Rohr had handed over responsibility for the leadership of St. Martin and First Lutheran to Sauer. Sauer would remain in this position for another twenty-seven years.<sup>34</sup>

Philip von Rohr exerted a very strong influence in the beginnings of First Lutheran Church, Minnesota City. He was involved directly or indirectly for all but about eight of the congregation's first thirty or so years of existence. Through his assistant Sauer, a trace of von Rohr's influence continued for almost thirty more years. One might wonder how much influence a

-----  
<sup>30</sup>Wisconsin Proceedings, 1897

<sup>31</sup>Wisconsin Proceedings, 1901, pp. 24, 27.

<sup>32</sup>Wisconsin Proceedings, 1905, pp. 25, 27.

<sup>33</sup>Wisconsin Proceedings, 1907, p. 24.

<sup>34</sup>For this entire paragraph see WELS Historical Institute Journal, pp. 16, 17.

person could have over a group with whom he met perhaps only several times a month. But when one considers the circumstances in which those first German Lutherans found themselves during those years, it would be remarkable if their pastor would not have had a strong influence over them. When one considers how dynamic and influential a leader von Rohr was, there can be little doubt that his strong guidance in both Word and example enabled this small group of Lutherans which made up First Lutheran to survive those trouble-filled early years.

At the death of Philip von Rohr, the Winona Ministerial Association resolved, "The long and beneficent life and ministry of Doctor von Rohr was, under God, a blessing not only to the church of which he was pastor, but to all our churches."<sup>35</sup> First Ev. Lutheran Church of Minnesota City, Minnesota was one of those churches which shared in the blessing of this influential man.

---

<sup>35</sup>St. Martin Centennial, p. 9.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

### Quoted

Balge, Richard D. "Von Rohr: A Beloved Brother and Faithful Minister." Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly, Vol. 72, No. 3 (July 1975).

"Baptist Church Oldest in County." Winona Sunday News, 21 October 1962.

Bartsch, Mark O. "A History of St. John's Ev. Lutheran Church, Lewiston, Minnesota." Senior Church History paper, 25 April 1981.

Curtiss-Wedge, Franklyn. History of Winona County, Minnesota. Chicago: H.C. Cooper, Jr. and Co., 1913.

"History of the First Ev. Lutheran Church of Minnesota City, Minnesota." 1958.

History of Winona County, Minnesota. Chicago: H.H. Hill and Co., 1883.

Lueker, Erwin C. Lutheran Cyclopedia. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1954.

St. Martins Lutheran Church Centennial, 1856-1956. Winona, Minnesota, 1956.

Sauer, Philip von Rohr, Ph. D. "Elfrieda von Rohr Sauer." Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly, Vol. 23, No. 2 (July 1960).

----- "The Rev. Philip von Rohr." WELS Historical Institute Journal, Vol. 5, No. 1 (Spring 1987).

Trinity Lutheran Church, Wilson, Minnesota: 100 Years of Grace, 1866-1966. 1966.

Von Rohr, Philip. "Ueberblick ueber mein Leben und dessen Erfahrung." Gemeindeblatt Kalender, 1910.

Winona Republican Herald. November 1890; January, February 1892.

Wisconsin Proceedings, 1878-1907.

### Consulted but not quoted

100th Anniversary Book, St. John's, Lewiston, Minnesota. 1966.

1856-1946: 90th Anniversary, St. Martins Lutheran Church, Winona, Minnesota. 16 June 1946.

Bunnell, Lafayette H. Winona and its Environs on the Mississippi in Ancient and Modern Day. Winona: Jones and Kroeger, c. 1897.

Burnquist, Joseph A.A., LL.D., ed. Minnesota and its People, Vol. 1,2. Chicago: S.J. Clarke Publishing Co., 1924.

Guthmiller, Mark. "Winona Memorables: St. Martins, von Rohr, and Sauer." Senior Church History paper, 20 April 1981.

"Pastor Philipp von Rohr." Gemeindeblatt Kalender, 1910.

"Praesis Philipp von Rohr." Evangelisch Lutherisches Gemeinde Blatt, Vol. 44, No. 1 (1 January 1909).

Warning, Gregg. "A History of Immanuel Ev. Lutheran Church, Lewiston, Minnesota." Senior Church History paper, 24 May 1988.