

**A Man and His Ministry:
A Remembrance of Pastor Kurt Koeplin**
By Matthew Natsis
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Prof. Korthals
Senior Church History



It may seem unusual to think of a Wisconsin Synod pastor following the advice of philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. While certainly spoken in a tone intended to insult, Nietzsche once commented, “*Christen sollten erlöster aussehen!*” (“Christians should look more as though they are redeemed!”). But on Easter morning in a dark church in Tecumseh, Michigan, as the pastor entered the sanctuary, the entire church lit up as he nearly shouted, “Christ is risen!” He received the enthusiastic reply, “The Lord is risen indeed!”¹ This joy of salvation was not an anomaly that occurred in this pastor’s life only for those few hours. Rather, throughout his ministry and life, this pastor made it very clear to people the joy he felt because he *is* redeemed, and so are they! It was because of this joy; this redemption; this love of God that Pastor Kurt Koeplin was the minister, father, colleague, leader, and inspiration that he was.

The follow paper is written with the intent of looking into the life and ministry of this man, Reverend Kurt Frederick Koeplin. While it is certainly not an absolutely extensive report, its goal is to show ways in which the Lord worked through this servant to affect others. Kurt Koeplin Sr. was a truly influential man in many individual’s lives; to record each account of each person whose life he touched would be insurmountable. However, it becomes clear through the words of a few just how many truly benefited through his service to the Lord.

The Early Years

Kurt Koeplin was born on August 10, 1929 to August and Bertha Köplin. Immigrants from Prussia (Pomerania, now Poland) in 1913, they had left the area for America due to the signs of the coming war. The village, even today, is secluded and small, yet quaint and pleasant. “Had it not been for the pre-war rumblings that [August] heard very clearly already in 1913, they certainly never would have left,” speculates Karla Schmidt, Kurt’s eldest daughter, “And then

¹ Karla Schmidt, e-mail interview, December 6, 2007

their son would never have been able to become a pastor. Sometimes history and the ways of God are very strange.”²

The Koeplins were members of St. John’s of Bay City, Michigan. He attended the Christian day school of St. John’s. Kurt would end up being confirmed in the same class as his future wife, Nancy Joan Giese, though they certainly had no idea of this at the time. The two were friends, but not romantically involved until years later. It was also during this time that Kurt picked up the nickname “Corky,” a pseudonym that many would call him into adulthood.³

The younger of two brothers, Kurt had a relatively normal childhood for the first 13 years of his life. His father, though unemployed for a time during the depression of the 30s, had established a contracting company with Kurt’s uncle. They built homes independently, including the home in which his family would live in Bay City. Kurt is said to have been a bit of a prankster as a boy, a trait for humor that would continue to manifest itself throughout his life. Unfortunately, this normal childhood would be severely disrupted by the death of his father in 1942. August Köplin developed stomach or intestinal cancer, which lead to his death shortly afterwards. Kurt’s mother was now forced to provide for herself and her youngest son with only an imperfect handle of the English language and no previous work experience. (Erich, the eldest son, was already 25 at this time and was financially independent, having overcome physical disabilities of the eyes and ears to become an accountant for a local hardware company.) Bertha ultimately entered into housekeeping for some of the wealthier residents of the Bay City area and Saginaw County.⁴

² Karla Schmidt, e-mail interview

³ Nancy Koeplin, live interview, November 18, 2007

⁴ Karla Schmidt, “[A Biography of] Kurt Frederick Koeplin,” August 6, 2005, <http://trees.ancestry.com>, (accessed December 6th, 2007)

The years following August's death were a rough time for the remaining Koeplin family. In addition to the trauma of losing a loved one as integral as their father, they were subject to similar troubles experienced by other German area immigrants at the dawn of the Second World War. The matriarch of the family lead in a strong way, trusting in God to provide and guide and help in times of need and trouble. One clear blessing the Lord gave to the Koeplins was a strong and reinforced family bond. Erich, 13 years Kurt's senior, stepped up to fill the void of the father-figure. Kurt would later refer to Erich as a substitute father as well as brother.⁵ Kurt also grew very close to his mother, a bond which would continue to influence his life until the end. "His Mother's Day sermons were legendary," Pastor Fredric Piepenbrink would later recall regarding his associate in the ministry.⁶ Current Atonement Pastor, Jon Hartmann, also remembers clearly Kurt's emotional remembrance of his mother: "Pastor Koeplin's soft side would always show when preaching for Mother's Day...[He] was not afraid to show his emotions even though on the outside he could appear so 'tough'."⁷ Perhaps ironically, it would be this closeness that would contribute to Bertha sending her son to train for the public ministry, beginning just down the road in Saginaw, Michigan.

As a boy, Kurt had no inclination to go into the ministry. "He had not even thought about it,"⁸ but his mother was determined to have one of her boys go into the ministry. Because of Erich's health conditions, Bertha did not feel that he would be able to face the pressures of being a pastor, and so this left Kurt.⁹ Also contributing to this decision was the fact that Michigan Lutheran Seminary, a prep school for called workers of the Wisconsin Synod, was both nearby

⁵ Dave Koeplin, phone interview, December 5, 2007

⁶ Fredric Piepenbrink, e-mail interview, November 30, 2007

⁷ Jon Hartmann, e-mail interview, December 5, 2007.

⁸ Nancy Koeplin, live interview

⁹ Cynthia Natsis, phone interview, December 3, 2007

and a boarding school.¹⁰ Bertha would have help in raising her son, but still be close enough to be a very positive influence upon his life.

By Kurt's own admission, he "ran wild" through his later childhood years, perhaps cementing his mother's decision to send him to MLS all the more.¹¹ This was not an instantaneous solution to his trouble making, though. Kurt was apparently almost "kicked out" of MLS on several occasions for pranks. The pranks themselves have been lost to time, but more than once did Bertha have to accompany her son to the offices of the MLS administrators and negotiate his continuing education there.¹² But despite these possible set backs, Kurt was able to remain a student at MLS.

It was during his years at Michigan Lutheran Seminary that Kurt realized that he *truly* wanted to go into the public ministry as a pastor.¹³ The road was being set before him, though it would not be without its bumps along the way. After graduating from Michigan Lutheran Seminary in 1946 at the surprisingly young age of 16, he continued on to Northwestern College, Watertown, Wisconsin. However, his time there would be short: during an injury while playing football, Kurt broke his leg and had to return home to Bay City for a time. Kurt was not inclined to return to Watertown for several reasons: practically speaking, he had missed too many classes to catch up to his classmates, but also emotionally, Kurt never felt very at home at the Watertown campus.¹⁴

¹⁰ Karla Schmidt, "[A Biography of] Kurt Frederick Koeplin,"

¹¹ Ibid

¹² Dave Koeplin, phone interview

¹³ Nancy Koeplin, live interview

¹⁴ Nancy Koeplin, live interview

During this time back in Bay City, he and Nancy Giese, long time friends, began officially dating. Their relationship would continue to grow over the coming years and play a part in determining the direction of Kurt's educational future.¹⁵

Nancy Giese had been born in November of 29, just after the beginning of the Great Depression. The daughter of William and Olive Giese, her mother had come to Bay City from Iowa to visit a friend and ended up staying. They owned a clothing store before the stock market crash. Nancy and her family were also members of St. John's, though Nancy would attend public school rather than the parochial.¹⁶

After recovering from his injury and still living in Bay City, Kurt worked in heavy construction. This led to a conflict: Kurt knew that he wanted to do more with his life than this, and yet he did not wish to return to Watertown.¹⁷ As a solution to the conflict, Pastor Albert Westendorf of St. John's suggested going to Concordia in Springfield, Illinois, a college/seminary campus of the Lutheran Church, Missouri Synod. At this time (1947/48), the LCMS and WELS were still in fellowship. Kurt decided to at least finish his collegiate training there. Ultimately, he would choose to also attend the seminary on the Springfield campus. One can imagine the familiarity of being in Springfield for several years helped, but one major contributing factor was that at this time, it was heavily discouraged to be married before graduating from the Mequon campus. Kurt and Nancy, having been dating for 3 years, were ready to commit to each other in marriage, to which the Springfield campus was much more favorable. Kurt and Nancy were married on July 1, 1950.¹⁸ Their first child, Karla Gayle, would be born the following year.

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Karla Schmidt, "[A Biography of] Kurt Frederick Koeplin"

¹⁸ Nancy Koeplin, live interview

Beginnings of the Ministry

An advantage to attending the Concordia Seminary in Springfield was that already at this time, LCMS was practicing the vicar year. (Mequon would not add the vicar year till much later, at the prompting of pastors who saw its value, including Kurt Koeplin.¹⁹) Kurt's vicar call was to serve in Warren, Michigan, a church named Our Shepherd. Nancy relates the experience:

When we arrived, [Kurt] had to sickle down the weeds around the church, they'd so overgrown. It was a small facility. We lived in the back of the church, down a hall, with just a curtain separating rooms. Privacy was an issue, especially when people would just walk through while I was nursing the baby.²⁰

The vicar experience was still very positive for both Nancy and Kurt. As intended, it gave the future pastor the hands on experience and a look into what being a full time minister would entail. Nancy also got a look into her future as a pastor's wife at this point as well.

"[When younger] I never thought I would be married to a pastor," Nancy casually remarks.²¹ Yet the experience in Warren did nothing to make her doubt her decision. Rather, she learned very quickly how best to contribute to her husband's ministry. "Support," Nancy cites as the key to this help, "Be willing to give up plans for his work."²² With this serving attitude, Nancy recognized that the Lord had a role for her to play in Kurt's ministry as well, and that the calling to spread the Gospel was the highest goal any family could have.

In finishing the vicar year, the Missouri Synod offered Kurt a call to Quincy, Illinois. Kurt turned down this offer, however; while he may have spent his years of training since MLS in the LCMS, he wished to remain firmly a part of the Wisconsin Synod.²³ Considering the split

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ Ibid

²² Ibid

²³ Ibid

that would happen the following decade, one can imagine he was thankful the Lord led him that direction.

Kurt Koeplin graduated from Springfield in 1953 and received a call to Williamston, Michigan to serve at Memorial Lutheran Church. That year, the second Koeplin daughter would be born: Crystal Lynn. Because of the new baby, Kurt often found himself taking young Karla along with him to work as Nancy cared for the infant Cris. Kurt would take young Karla on visits or allowed to play under her father's church office desk as he worked or made non-confidential phone calls. "We had quite a close relationship during my childhood years, which I value to this day," reflects Karla.²⁴

Again a very positive experience in Williamston, Kurt grew in his appreciation for the ministry and the importance in getting the gospel news out into the world. While in Williamston, Kurt recognized the need for the WELS to branch out into the East Coast, an area not tapped by the Wisconsin Synod. He pushed for the Synod to begin congregation missions there, and very quickly, the Synod would take his advice. They also called him to serve the mission they intended to begin. This was in 1954, not long after beginning his first call. "I was convinced we were going," Nancy recalls, "I'd practically packed my bags when he woke up one Sunday morning and told me he was returning it."²⁵ Kurt felt that it would give the wrong impression; he had not been pushing for this notion to get out of Williamston. He simply recognized the need the East Coast had, and wanted others to see the importance as well. Ultimately, while he would not serve there, this was the beginnings of a WELS presence on the East Coast.²⁶

²⁴ Karla Schmidt, e-mail interview

²⁵ Nancy Koeplin, live interview

²⁶ Ibid

Kurt also received a call to be a religion teacher in Onalaska, but returned it without deliberating it long. He had no desire to leave the parish ministry.²⁷

Kurt would serve as pastor in Williamston for 5 years, receiving and accepting a call to Grace English Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tecumseh, Michigan in 1958. Just prior to this, in 1957, Kurt and Nancy were blessed with their third child, Cynthia Lee. Kurt would spend the next decade of his ministry in Tecumseh, growing in his dedication to the spreading of the gospel.

Kurt Koeplin always had a passion for missions. Even prior to his first call, Kurt talked about going to Alaska. (While he would not actually do so himself, he did play a part in backing the first Alaskan mission church later on.) Kurt also served on various mission boards throughout his ministry, starting with his time in Tecumseh, when he became a member of the WELS Board of Home Missions. Kurt knew that the best way to encourage mission work was to get others excited about it. At Grace, Pastor Koeplin began a tradition known as “Mission Festival Weekends.” As the name implies, it was an all-weekend celebration of the work the Lord accomplishes around the country and around the world. Friday nights would consist of a congregational potluck and an emphasis to children on communicating the value of spreading Jesus’ Word. Saturday would then be an all day roster of mission-related events, including a special speaker brought in from the mission field, Bible stories, slide shows, and culminating in a “Men’s Night” supper—where the men of the congregation prepared and served the meal! Sunday, the guest speaker from the previous day would also preach, and yet another gathering for a meal would happen afterwards. It was a weekend of fellowship in the church while also showing the incredible value of ministerial work outside of the Midwest.²⁸

²⁷ Ibid

²⁸ Nancy Koeplin, live interview, and Cynthia Natsis, phone interview

Kurt Koeplin—Father and Mentor

While serving in Tecumseh, the Koeplin family would grow by two more—their fourth daughter, Karin Dawn, in 1960, and their first son, Kurt William, in 1967, just before receiving the call to the Atonement Lutheran in Milwaukee. As a father, Kurt tended to not be as attached when the children were young, though that is certainly not to imply he did not love them like a Christian father should. “When we were young, he didn’t have a lot of patience for real little kids,” Karin reflects, “So he left the raising of infants to our Mom. It wasn’t until we were talking and he was able to relate to us that he started to be interested in us.”²⁹ “He was kind of a hands-off dad,” Cynthia concurs, “Mom mostly did the day-to-day raising...He was better with older kids, so as you got older, you became more interesting to him!”³⁰

Although not as hands-on with his children in their younger years, Kurt did lead as the head of the household should. His children knew that he was the one placed over them by God, but also that anything he did was meant to help them out of love. When asked to describe his father, Kurt William replied, “Authoritative. I understood that he was in charge.” He then continued,

Understanding that leadership has come into my teaching and coaching. It’s been an asset to know that you can correct someone being wrong, sometimes very forcefully, but then help them so much more by telling them how they can improve and do better next time. It helps them be more motivated.³¹

Pastor Koeplin certainly understood what it meant to be a God-given father, raising his children as instructed by the Lord, and instructing them to know the Word and in turn use it in their own lives. “He was very supportive through high school and college,” remembers Cindy, “We could

²⁹ Karin Schrank, phone interview, December 5, 2007

³⁰ Cynthia Natsis, phone interview

³¹ Kurt William Koeplin, phone interview, December 5, 2007

always call on him. He'd straighten us out on this and that, and when I got into the ministry he told me he was proud."³²

He, of course, wasn't perfect. Many recall his temper being something to fear terribly. "He had a temper which we tip-toed around," Cindy recalls.³³ Cris called the temper a short fuse; quick to burn, but also quick to burn out. His children knew not to set him off, but they also knew that when they did, it would blow over as long as they changed their attitude. Son Kurt amusedly reflects on being the youngest of the bunch: "He was pretty mellow by the time he got to me."³⁴ But even then, the younger Kurt understood and respected his father's authority, and knew well not to push his limits.

As a pastor, Kurt was also a part of the lives of the youth of the congregation. He was involved in the Pioneer program at church, as well as coaching a city "Pony League" in Tecumseh for young baseball/softball players in their early teens. "In the earlier, 'Tecumseh years', his relationship with the youth of the congregation was intense and good."³⁵ "When you're younger and in the ministry, you have a better grasp of popular culture and things like that. As he got older, he wasn't quite as concerned with the younger people, but he was still a good teacher. He left the youth ministry dynamic to the vicars and younger ministers."³⁶ "Later on, he had the feeling that he had grown too old for youth work, which does happen to many pastors....He switched his emphasis to young adults, a focus that remained for many years."³⁷ Still, even in later years, he was not completely detached from the youth of the congregation, as youngest child Kurt relates: "Sometimes, I think he liked to picture [the kids] as the audience of

³² Cynthia Natsis, phone interview

³³ Ibid

³⁴ Kurt William Koeplin, phone interview

³⁵ Karla Schmidt, e-mail interview

³⁶ Cynthia Natsis, phone interview

³⁷ Karla Schmidt, e-mail interview

a stand up comedy routine. He was a funny guy who could make kids laugh. He'd give kids nicknames that only he would call them. He could relate and understand what was going on.”³⁸

The elder Kurt realized that while his skills may not have been as strong with the young ones, they needed to know their Savior just like everyone else. And more than that, he knew that as they grew up, it was important to teach them and have them grow in their faith.

Habits, Both Bad and Good

Like any person, Kurt have some vices or points of weakness. He was an avid smoker since the age of 13,³⁹ and never be able to fully kick the habit his whole life.

As both his wife and former associate pastor would attest, Kurt was not a man for details. “He was a great manager but poor detail person. He did not want to get involved with the nuts and bolts of a program or project. However, he brought people on board that could handle the details.”⁴⁰ Nancy did the money handling in the family. “When he complained once,” Nancy recalls with a smile, “I handed over the check book to him. He let one insurance bill lapse, and handed it to Joyce Bater (the secretary), who handed it right back to me.” While certainly a weakness, Kurt recognized that it as such, and used the help God gave him in the form of partners to work in spite of it.

Kurt was a large sports fan, rooting for many Michigan teams all his life, such as the University of Michigan, the Detroit Tigers and others. Every Thanksgiving while in Michigan, Kurt and family would drive to his mother’s house, gather with relatives, and watch the Lions game.⁴¹ “I watched sports so I could be like Daddy,” daughter Cindy Natsis reflects, a love that

³⁸ Kurt William Koeplin, phone interview

³⁹ Karla Schmidt, e-mail interview

⁴⁰ Fredric Piepenbrink, e-mail interview

⁴¹ Dave Koeplin, phone interview

carries on to this day in most, if not all, of Kurt's children.⁴² Later, when serving in Wisconsin, Kurt would always make it to the UofM/Wisconsin game in Madison to cheer on his beloved maize and blue. And despite being Packer country, he hung a Lions ornament proudly on his church office door.

The Move to Milwaukee

Pastor Kurt Koeplin would serve Grace English in Tecumseh until 1968. In late 1967, he received a call to serve at Atonement in Milwaukee, near the very heart of the Synod itself. He and his family would move just after the New Year (a very cold January in Milwaukee, as Nancy remembers). Pastor Koeplin would be a major part of Atonement for over two decades, but he was also not constrained to his parish ministry: the move to Milwaukee opened up many doors to serve and to spread that mission-minded attitude to others, both in the ministry and lay people.

With the move from Michigan to Wisconsin, some aspects of his ministry would change or be adjusted for a new area. Others—perhaps the most important aspects--stayed the same. While in Tecumseh and Williamston, Kurt had a major emphasis on counseling. With a move to a larger church (Atonement was about 1400 communicants at the time of his arrival), one might expect that personal connection to dwindle. But Kurt did not let that happen; even with more souls, Kurt took the time to give God-given counsel to all who needed it. He was there for those who came to his office. He was unafraid to rebuke those who needed it, always with the intention of showing them their error so they may repent. He led his congregation with a firm, yet loving and personal hand, just as he led his family. "There were no disputes he couldn't handle," Nancy comments.⁴³

⁴² Cynthia Natsis, phone interview

⁴³ Nancy Koeplin, live interview

Pastor Fredric Piepenbrink, who would serve with Pastor Koeplin from 1984 through 1992, had this to say of his colleague's personal focus: "He emphasized the importance of knowing the members on a personal level, which he was very good at, being the people-person he was. The first three months I was there, my only responsibility was to visit 250 families in their homes."⁴⁴ Nancy also states, "He had an uncanny ability to remember names. If he met a person and they told him their name, he would remember it immediately the next time they met, no matter what."⁴⁵ Kurt was certainly blessed with the abilities to share the gospel in a very personal manner with many people.

This was especially interesting considering his physical appearance and personality. "Pastor Koeplin had a presence," Pastor Hartmann recalls, "He was not someone that you would miss if he entered the room. He would not demand attention or respect. His presence was just one that would command it."⁴⁶ Pastor Piepenbrink also recollects,

His big body and booming voice made him somewhat intimidating. ...If you did not know him, you could be easily frightened by him. ...Members would bring their fiancés to Pastor Koeplin's office for the first time for marriage counseling and he would almost threaten them to be the husband or wife that God intended.⁴⁷

And yet both men recognized the gospel-motivated man behind the imposing gentleman before them. "Over time you learned that Pastor Koeplin was a gentle, soft, very sensitive, and caring man."⁴⁸ "That fear grew into a great respect for a big man with a big heart. You came to know him as smart, quick-witted, articulate, and very loving."⁴⁹ These sentiments are echoed by many former members and colleagues of Pastor Koeplin in comments too numerous to record here.

⁴⁴ Fredric Piepenbrink, e-mail interview

⁴⁵ Nancy Koeplin, live interview

⁴⁶ Jon Hartmann, e-mail interview

⁴⁷ Fredric Piepenbrink, e-mail interview

⁴⁸ Jon Hartmann, e-mail interview

⁴⁹ Fredric Piepenbrink, e-mail interview

That personal touch of the gospel was truly important to Kurt, as intimidating of a man as he may have seemed.

With any congregation, the younger generation needed to be instructed in the Word. Kurt may not have had the flare for the youngest of children, but it seemed that his connection to the teens was strong. “These...kids thought that my dad was a cool adult,” Cris states, “He was viewed as a neat pastor to have.”⁵⁰ More than that, confirmands appreciated their time in the classroom with him. “He was an *awesome* teacher,” Cindy shares, “He was engaging; really got into it. He made sure each of his students was participating and understood the concept.”⁵¹ Karin and Kurt William emphasize how he went about this process: “He was so down to earth. He tried to tie in sayings of the [Bible] times to colloquial sayings. Kids always wanted him [as their teacher]. He was the funny one!”⁵² “He could relate anything. His knowledge of the subject matter or of a broad range of topics really earned the respect of the kids he taught.”⁵³ Jon Hartmann, also a former student of Pastor Koeplin’s, relates his teaching style,

Pastor Koeplin’s teaching style was loose and free. You were very comfortable sitting in his class and you always knew that you were going to enjoy yourself. He loved to have fun in class with his teaching and with his students. He was very patient with my class even though most of the class was a bunch of blockheads. And as easygoing as he was in class, he was very demanding when it came to knowing your memory work passages and expected nothing less than your best when it came to the Confirmation Examination.⁵⁴

A major *change* in moving to Milwaukee was the neighborhood. At this time, Atonement’s location was still technically north of the “inner city.” However, it was clear that the area was quickly changing. That central city was expanding, and within only a few years,

⁵⁰ Crystal Sturm, phone interview, December 5, 207

⁵¹ Cynthia Natsis, phone interview

⁵² Karin Schrank, phone interview

⁵³ Kurt William Koeplin, phone interview

⁵⁴ Jon Hartmann, e-mail interview

Atonement was considered part of it. Where at one time the neighborhood could be considered primarily Caucasian, today it is primarily African-American. Kurt would be witness to this change through his time at Atonement, and certainly did not turn a blind eye.

In 1973, Pastor Koeplin conducted and recorded a Central City Spiritual Service Study. With the intent of helping local Milwaukee churches reexamine their ministry focuses and neighborhood self-awareness, Kurt went from church to church in a relatively small radius, speaking to people and pastors from 15 area churches. Pastor Koeplin himself wrote in his report, “This interviewer was impressed by...the awareness expressed that the situation in the Central City is a cross, imposed by the gracious Lord. They are willing to bear it and have already enjoyed many fruits.”⁵⁵ He was characteristically blunt, though, not hesitant to bring a problem to attention so that it could be fixed. In describing some of the problems facing central city churches, he lists that “white people are often hesitant about accepting blacks, etc; will leave if they come in; will not take Communion with them”⁵⁶ and also “blacks and other minorities are often suspicious of the whites, demand special attention, or have thought, ‘They are all against us.’”⁵⁷ His response to both sides is simply this:

This is racism. It is sin and should be treated as such...it should be clearly pointed out. It is true that [this is] a cross, but this happened even in the early Christian Church. The Lord and his Word do not consider the color of skin. All are sinners; all have been redeemed.⁵⁸

Kurt continued to be known for this kind of mission mindedness, having a genuine concern for the souls of anyone of any culture that did not know of their salvation. The sinful nature of mankind is a powerful enemy to battle, though, and Pastor Koeplin certainly had to fight these sinful attitudes even within his congregation. “Things had already started to change,”

⁵⁵ Kurt Frederick Koeplin, “Central City Spiritual Service Study 1973,” 1973, page 2

⁵⁶ Ibid

⁵⁷ Ibid

⁵⁸ Ibid

shares Nancy, “People that objected to the change had already left. [The change] was evident in school especially.”⁵⁹ Kurt did not do much canvassing himself, but rather concentrated his efforts on making this awareness of racial relations to the congregation and the universal need for the gospel. It was his goal to make the *people* aware of the importance of being mission-minded, to those in their own neighborhood and the out in the world. With the confidence in Christ’s victory, he declared from the pulpit:

[Christ] has a universal outreach. Here, he looks beyond the immediate circle of disciples...and he sees out fathers...us...and our children after us. He sees our red brothers in Christ in Arizona, our yellow brothers in Hong Kong and Japan, our brown brothers in India and Indonesia, our black brothers in Africa and here, our olive brothers in Mexico and Puerto Rico—he sees us one in him. Wherever his Word is preached, there we have brothers and sisters in Christ—united in him, following him as the Shepherd with a song of joy in the heart and lips because of the forgiveness he has granted to all.⁶⁰

Pastor Koeplin recognized that the message the Lord had entrusted to him was one that needed to be taken farther than just the borders of Milwaukee, or the United States.

Missions Around the World

In the late 70s, Pastor Koeplin was called to serve on the WELS World Mission Board, and then specifically to head up the Executive Committee for the Southeast Asian Missions. (This would be in addition to his parish pastor duties at Atonement.) A paragraph from his acceptance letter reads:

President Naumann, as God gives me strength and ability, I shall do my utmost to live up to the confidence which you have expressed in me. I deem this opportunity for service a high honor conferred upon me by my Church and my president and shall do my best not to disappoint either. Your remembrance in prayer is deeply appreciated. Yours in service, Kurt F. Koeplin⁶¹

⁵⁹ Nancy Koeplin, live interview

⁶⁰ Kurt Frederick Koeplin, sermon at Atonement, April 12, 1970

⁶¹ Kurt Frederick Koeplin, acceptance letter regarding the SW Asian Missions committee, 1978

World Missions was always a passion of Pastor Koeplin's, as evidenced throughout his ministry. Now he would have the chance to work directly with many missionaries, help to get new missions started, support those already in existence, and continue to get the word into the Synod regarding the value of the Great Commission.

“He got us into Hong Kong and opened up Taiwan,” fellow World Missions colleague, Dan Koelpin relates. “He was there on the ground floor for getting us into countries that are now flourishing. He pointed the Synod to Asia.”⁶² Dan would compare his work in Asia to the previous generation's work in opening up Africa. He qualified this statement by saying that Kurt pushed more for self-sufficient churches, which was *not* similar to the African missions,. In Africa, for various and legitimate reasons, this was a more difficult proposition. But in the different culture and environment of the Asian missions, it was not only a viable option, but the preferred one. “He had the wisdom and confidence in his missionaries to have them set up their own system....I learned the importance of self dependent churches and the complexities of operating overseas.”⁶³

Kurt would take many trips with fellow World Missions Board members to the places these missions where located, often visiting 5, 6, or 7 countries on one trip. He cared deeply about the missionaries. As in his family and congregational life, that care took the form of a firm but loving hand. He would encourage his colleagues in the mission field, and be quite supportive. “Pastor Koeplin spent much time (hours) on the phone with world mission officials and missionaries in the field. He was a great encourager to them and treated them like family.”⁶⁴ But if any where off-base or needed admonishment for wrong attitude, Kurt had no trouble delivering the necessary rebuke. Kurt also always had in mind what was best for the mission. If

⁶² Dan Koelpin, live interview, December 2, 2007

⁶³ Ibid

⁶⁴ Fredric Piepenbrink, e-mail interview

two missionaries, both quite talented in their own rights, did not work well together, he would be quick to recommend moving one to a place more beneficial to both involved. “Sometimes a missionary needed a firm hand or to be pulled out ‘for the good of the field.’”⁶⁵ Often, these tough decisions were up to Kurt.

Let this not be confused with flippant treatment of the missionaries themselves! “He fought hard for his missionaries,”⁶⁶ Dan Koelpin assures. When there was talk of closing a mission or bringing a missionary home, Kurt Koeplin would stand up for him and his work’s importance in that specific area. When the Taiwan mission was facing a difficult time and talk of shrinking it was circulating, Kurt took the time to right then-president of the Synod, Carl Mischke, to tell him just why the Taiwanese mission should remain not only staffed as is, but to call an additional missionary to the area.⁶⁷

As in other aspects of his ministry, Kurt had the ability to be both very personal and also look at the larger picture. In a letter written to missionary Ralph Jones regarding a call to begin a new mission from the ground up, Kurt had no hesitance to tell him exactly why he should *not* accept that call. He listed many of Ralph’s strengths, and then conversely his weaknesses. He concluded that the weaknesses are unfortunately tied directly to what this call was asking him to do primarily. “Brother Ralph, we have served together well for over a decade. One of the hallmarks of our joint effort has been openness, honesty, and objectivity, always with the best interest of the kingdom in mind. It is in that spirit that we say consider it seriously and then return it.”⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Dan Koelpin, live interview

⁶⁶ Ibid

⁶⁷ Kurt Frederick Koeplin, letter to Carl Mischke

⁶⁸ Kurt Frederick Koeplin, letter to Ralph Jones

Pastor Koeplin was not perfect in his world travels, though. While “he read books on the lives and cultures of the people in his mission fields,”⁶⁹ Kurt had a hard time adapting *to* those cultures when on his world trips. He would be upset at not being able to order peach cobbler, or German beer, or cold milk. “When he’d ask for cold milk, they’d bring him milk with ice cubes...which he then couldn’t drink, because the water was bad!”⁷⁰ Dan Koelpin relates. Still, despite some flaws, Kurt Koeplin is still considered to have been “an integral part of the mission minded community of WELS.”⁷¹

Kurt Koeplin—Preacher

Perhaps tied with “mission mindedness” as Pastor Koeplin’s most memorable trait was his preaching. Taking that physically imposing presence into the pulpit would seem to create obstacles for a person sitting in a pew. It is true that Pastor Koeplin was very forceful in his preaching, but that passion transferred well to the people. When he preached the Law, those raw emotions showed. When he preached the Gospel, that joy of salvation shined through. Pastor Koeplin left an impression on all who heard him preach.

Pastor Hartmann remembers:

If there was one word I would use to describe Pastor Koeplin as a preacher? Passion. Pastor Koeplin was full of passion when he entered the pulpit. He was real. He was genuine. He was serious. He had a message to share and you were going to hear it. There was nothing more important going on than what he was saying for those 20 or so minutes.⁷²

⁶⁹ Fredric Piepenbrink, e-mail interview

⁷⁰ Dan Koelpin, live interview

⁷¹ Ibid

⁷² Jon Hartmann, e-mail interview

Pastor Piepenbrink echoes:

You knew that what he was saying he believed wholly. He had a passion for preaching and especially for world missions. His humor was unmatched by any pastor I had met or heard before. He spoke to the people in ways that they could easily understand. His language was colorful. He was a master of figurative language, like describing older people as those with “snow on the roof.” He expressed frustration with the words “pish-posh.” His sermons were unforgettable, mostly because you were listening so intently.⁷³

In addition to his masterful delivery, he had way of relating the Bible truths to the people of the congregation. “He made it relevant to your life,” Nancy Koeplin sums up, “while being true to the Scriptures.”⁷⁴ “His sermons were always timely,” Pastor Piepenbrink adds, “It was as though he preached with the Bible in one hand and the morning newspaper in the other.”⁷⁵ An example of such timely sermon writing can be seen in this Law excerpt from a sermon preached in 1970:

But doesn't failure seem to mark our age? Doesn't it seem as though the World is toiling through a discouraging night? We see the hippies... We see values cast aside carelessly and casually. And we can't point to remarkable progress in any area. For example, we now have planes that can fly 3-4-5 times the speed of sound. What good is all that speed if ultimately it helps to kill people more quickly? ... We can't praise educational progress when war has been our lot almost steadily since 1941.⁷⁶

“The one thing I can say about my dad,” says Cynthia Natsis, “is if you met him or heard him preach, you'd never forget it... People still remark to me about his preaching style.”⁷⁷

A Man Who Touched Others' Lives

Throughout his life, at whatever point in his ministry he was, Kurt Koeplin influenced others. For some, it was that legendary preaching style that rubbed off on their own. For others,

⁷³ Fredric Piepenbrink, e-mail interview

⁷⁴ Nancy Koeplin, live interview

⁷⁵ Fredric Piepenbrink, e-mail interview

⁷⁶ Kurt Frederick Koeplin, sermon preached at Atonement , April 26, 1970

⁷⁷ Cynthia Natsis, phone interview

it was his compassion for people. Still others, his passion for mission work. And for some, it was all of the above and more.

“I learned to be more free in the pulpit—bringing in more humor, emotion, and human interest stories,” Pastor Piepenbrink shares, “I grew in a love for members and all people who have not heard the gospel. I learned what it means to be a kind leader who gets people to follow.”⁷⁸ Pastor Hartmann also attributes aspects of his current ministry to his former pastor:

I think in many ways Pastor Koeplin has influenced me the most when it comes to preaching. I don't think that I would be as passionate as I am about preaching if it were not for Pastor Koeplin. If a pastor cannot get excited about preaching the gospel(always being yourself, of course) then what is that a pastor can get excited about? I thank God for giving me a man and pastor like Pastor Koeplin in my life.⁷⁹

For some, it was Pastor Koeplin's influence that led them to feel more confident about entering the public ministry. Kurt's nephew, Dave Koeplin, related stories of his time at the Seminary in Mequon, not far from Atonement in Milwaukee as his uncle was serving there. “He made a big impact on other kids, too; my classmates and so forth....I was heavily influenced by his preaching style, humor, honesty...I knew I couldn't *be* him, but I wanted to be *like* him.”⁸⁰

Even prior to this, when Dave was a sophomore at MLS, his uncle Kurt showed his down-to-earth mentality when visiting for a board meeting happening on campus. Heading up into the dorms to lie down for a bit, Kurt requested a mattress be put on the floor so he could rest his back. Prof. Friedrich, a religion at Michigan Lutheran Seminary at the time, had handed out a sheet of rather difficult religious questions for his students to tackle. “I told him about the assignment and that we were stumped,” Dave recalls with a laugh, “He asked for a mattress and

⁷⁸ Fredric Piepenbrink, e-mail interview

⁷⁹ Jon Hartmann, e-mail interview

⁸⁰ Dave Koeplin, phone interview

laid down, and we just asked the questions. He would answer them no problem, and we would copy down the answers like mad!”⁸¹

Professor Siebert Becker at WLS would often encourage students to go to Atonement for church because, “‘that guy’s a good preacher.’ A lot of students would go because of that type of referral.”⁸²

Kurt Koeplin’s ministry goes far beyond what has been recorded in this paper. He served on the Wisconsin Lutheran High School board of control; he was Chairman of the Synod Public Relations Committee; He was a part of the Lutheran Radio Committee as co-director in Milwaukee; he regularly contributed to the Northwestern Lutheran. During all of this, he would become a grandfather, and “he tried to be a Grandpa as best he could...to be more around.”⁸³ His loving care shined through that intimidating exterior to the grandchildren privileged enough to know him.

Pastor Kurt Koeplin is still quoted often, whether in regards to missions (“Borrow, borrow, borrow, and on the Last Day, the Jews will be stuck holding all the notes.”), or advice for preaching (“If you are preaching over 17 minutes, you’re repeating yourself.”), or simply a humorous quip to lift one’s spirits (“Prayers are fine. But telephone calls work too. And letters.”). Again, to record all these various quotes out of their context would be both a disservice to them and a near impossible feat besides, but the point remains: people remembered what he said, and it still affects them today.

Called Home to Glory

In the autumn of 1992, while on vacation in North Carolina with his wife, Kurt Koeplin suffered a cerebral aneurysm. This was unfortunately just the beginning of a series of

⁸¹ Ibid

⁸² Ibid

⁸³ Crystal Sturm, phone interview

complications. In the funeral sermon, Pastor Piepenbrink informed those who may not have heard the details:

When the news came from Winston-Salem, North Carolina, it was serious. An aneurism was discovered in the cerebral cavity, and it needed immediate attention. The prayers of a congregation and synod flooded the throne of God. When the surgery was successful a sigh of relieve could be heard. But then complications set in--including pneumonia and spinal meningitis. Again, more prayers. The antibiotics took hold, and he was well enough to come back to Milwaukee. The doctors were predicting a total recovery in 6 months. What good news! After a short stay at Froedtert Hospital he was transferred to Sacred Heart for rehabilitation where he was ahead of schedule and just beginning to walk again. Some of our members were secretly hoping for a surprise appearance in the pulpit on Thanksgiving Day or, for sure, Christmas. But it was not to be. Pneumonia set in again, this time with a vengeance. He was taken back to Froedtert, back to the intensive care, back on the respirator, back into a semi-conscious state. He was slipping and there was nothing anyone could do about it. Finally, the blood pressure medicine was stopped and he was gone.⁸⁴

On November 14, 1992, he was called to his eternal home.

Kurt's death was a tragedy, and yet to any who were influenced by the man's intense love for the gospel, it is hard *not* to feel joy for him; experiencing that salvation in full that he preached about so passionately. The church was blessed to have Kurt Koeplin, a dedicated worker who understood that there was no more important work than that of spreading the gospel. No matter the time, no matter the place, no matter the people, the work of the Lord is to be done. As he once said to the soon to be pastor, Bill Natsis, "*This is the best time to be in the ministry.*"

⁸⁴ Fredric Piepenbrink, a sermon for the funeral of Kurt F. Koeplin, 1992

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